

Reed Myrtle

The Shadow of Victory: A Romance of Fort Dearborn



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CHAPTER I THE PROPHECY

It was a long, low room, with a fireplace, roughly built of limestone, at one end of it. The blazing logs illuminated one corner and sent strange shadows into the others, while the winter wind moaned drearily outside. At the right and left of the fireplace were rude counters, hewn from logs, resting on stumps of unequal height, and behind them were shelves, packed with the sordid miscellany of a frontier trading-post. A closed door on either side seemingly led to other apartments, but there was no sound save the wind and the crackle of the flames.

A candle, thrust into the broken neck of a bottle, gave a feeble light to a little space around one end of the counter on which it stood. The rafters were low – so low that a tall man, standing on tiptoe, might easily unhook the smoked hams and sides of bacon that hung there, swaying back and forth when the wind shook the house.

Walls, ceiling, and floor were of logs, cut into a semblance of smoothness. The chinks were plastered with a bluish clay, and the crevices in the floor were filled with a mixture of clay and small chips. At the left of the chimney was a rude ladder which led to the loft through an opening in the ceiling. Fingers of sleet tapped at the glass, swirling phantoms of snow drifted by, pausing for a moment at the windows, as if to look within, and one of the men moved his chair closer to the fire.

"You fed the cattle, didn't you, Chan?" The half-breed grunted assent.

It was the eldest of the three who had spoken. His crouching position in his chair partially concealed his great height, but the firelight shone full upon his iron-grey hair and the deep lines seamed upon his kindly face. His hands were rough and knotted, his fingers straight and square at the tips – hands without beauty, but full of strength.

The hand which rested on the arm of the chair next to him was entirely different. It was fair and smooth and slender, with tapering fingers, and with the outer line of the palm delicately curved; instinct with strength of another sort, yet gentle almost to the point of femininity. The hand accorded ill with the deep, melodious voice of the man, when he said:

"Uncle, you don't know how glad I am to be here with you and Aunt Eleanor. I feel as if I had come home at last, after many wanderings."

"You're welcome, my boy," was the hearty answer. "I'm glad you got through before this storm came, 'cause travellin' 'cross country isn't good in February, as a rule. Things will be closed up now till Spring."

"And then – what?" asked the young man.

"Trains of pack-horses from Rock River and the Illinois. Canoes and a bateau from Milwaukee, in charge of Canadian *engagés*. Then the vessel from Fort Mackinac with goods for the trade, and Indians from all over creation. The busy season begins in the Spring."

Chandonnais, the half-breed, was audibly asleep in his warm corner, and the guest arose to walk nervously about the room. He was clad in rusty black broadcloth, which had seen all of its best days and some of its worst, and clung closely to his tall, lank figure, as though in fear of the ultimate separation. His hair was black and straight, his eyes deep brown and strangely luminous, his mouth sensitive, and his face very pale. He was not more than twenty-five or six, and looked even younger.

John Mackenzie quietly watched him in his uneasy march back and forth. At last he came to the fire, stopped short, and put a questioning finger upon the limestone. "Here's some initials," he said. "J. B. P. D. S. – what does that stand for?"

"Jean Baptiste Pointe de Saible, I reckon," replied Mackenzie. "He built this cabin. The Indians say that the first white man here was a negro."

"P. L. M." – continued the young man. "Who was he?"

"Pierre Le Mai, I guess – the French trader I bought the place from."

"You should put yours here, too, Uncle."

"Not I, my boy. I have come to stay – and my children after me."

"That reminds me of my young charge. Shall we begin to-morrow?"

"As you like. The sooner the better, I suppose. You brought books, didn't you?"

"All that I have; not many, I regret to say."

"Johnny has a spelling-book that came from Mackinac in a chest of green tea, when the vessel touched here last year. He was very anxious then to know what was inside of it, but I don't know how he feels now."

"Have you any special instructions for me?"

"No," answered Mackenzie, rising. He put his hand on the young man's shoulder and looked down into his face. "I never had much book-learning," he said, "'cause I ran away from school, but I want that my son should have it. Teach him everything you know that he can learn; it won't hurt him none. Teach him to tell the truth, to be afraid of nothing but dishonour, and to be kind to women. You look like your mother, boy."

The door opened suddenly, and the gust of wind that came in with it put out the candle and filled the room with the odour of burning tallow. "How!" grunted a stalwart Indian, in general salutation.

"How!" responded Mackenzie. "What is it to-night?"

The savage was more than six feet in height, and looked like the chief that he was. He was dressed from head to foot in buckskin, cunningly embroidered and beaded by a squaw. He wore nothing on his head, but a brilliant blanket was draped over one shoulder. A powder-horn hung at his side and a hunting-knife gleamed in his belt.

The squaw came in behind her lord and master, and shut the door, three grey wolf skins falling to the floor as she did so. "Shaw-ne-aw-kee," commanded the Indian, pointing to Mackenzie.

The woman obediently laid the skins upon the counter, and Black Partridge began to bargain for flour and bacon, speaking his own tongue. An animated conversation ensued, with many gestures on the part of the Indian. Mackenzie answered quietly, in the harsh Pottawattomie dialect, and stood his ground. The chief finally yielded, with a good grace which might or might not have been genuine, and the transfer was accomplished.

The Indian picked up one of the skins and pointed to a blood stain near the top of it, then began to talk rapidly. Mackenzie listened till he had finished speaking, then turned to his nephew.

"Look here, Rob," he said, "this will interest you. He says he had no trap, so he took his last piece of bacon and his hunting-knife and went up into the north woods. He sat down under a tree and waited, with the bacon in his left hand and his knife in his right. Presently the hungry wolf appeared, and, after due investigation, came near enough to stab. He says he waited from midnight till almost sunrise. A white man never could do that."

"Hardly," returned the young man, fingering the skin curiously. "What monumental patience!"

This speech, with a little additional compliment, was translated for the benefit of Black Partridge, whose stolid features gleamed momentarily, then relapsed into impassive bronze.

A cheery whistle was heard outside, then a stamp upon the piazza, a merry and prolonged tapping, reinforced by a kick, at which the door burst open, and a young soldier entered.

"Evening!" he shouted to Mackenzie. He pounded the Indian familiarly on the back, saying, "Hello, Birdie," tweaked the squaw's ear and tickled her under the chin, and reached the fire before any one else had time to speak.

"Ronald," said Mackenzie, "this is my nephew, Robert Forsyth, from Detroit. Mr. Forsyth, Ensign George Ronald, of Fort Dearborn."

Ronald drew his heels together, saluted with mock solemnity, then wrung Forsyth's slender hand in a grip that made him wince. "Proud to know you, sir. Third in command, at your service, sir. Have you come to enlist?"

Chandonnais awoke, muttered an oath, and ran to the door, shutting it noisily. "Your pardon, sir," continued Ronald. "Wind's from the south this evening. Thought I'd let a little warm air in. Never appreciated in this world. Hope I may be in the next. Do I speak to a soldier, sir?"

"No," laughed Forsyth.

"Who's the lady you have with you, Birdie?" asked the Ensign, turning to the Indian. "Am I mistaken in supposing it to be Mrs. B. Partridge?"

"Me no spik Ingleesh," answered the chief, with great dignity.

"Neither do I, Birdie, neither do I," continued the soldier, genially. "Devilish language with all kinds of corners in it to hurt yourself on. I was pitched into it headlong the day of my arrival, and have been at sea ever since. Don't fool with it, Birdie. You're getting on all right with signs and pictures and grunts, and if Mrs. B. P. doesn't speak it, why, so much the better. Vast resources in the language known to women only. What, going? Bye-bye!"

Another breeze from the south entered the room as Black Partridge and the squaw made a stately exit, the woman carrying the provisions for which the wolf skins had been bartered.

"Ronald," began Mackenzie, drawing another chair from behind the counter, "I'd advise you to be more careful with the Indians. They're a treacherous crowd."

"I am careful," answered the Ensign, hurling a very shabby overcoat across the room, and sinking comfortably into Mackenzie's chair. "That's why I asked about Mrs. B. P. You see, I was skating on the river this morning, before this little snow flurry struck us, and I met this lady. She seemed to want to go, so I took her with me. She slid along on her moccasins, hanging on behind, and had a fine time till we struck a snowdrift, just around the bend. The woman tempted me, and I did throw her into it. Lord, how she squalled! It may have been ungallant, but it was fun."

Mackenzie laughed, in spite of his well-meant efforts to keep his face straight, and Forsyth's eyes were bright with new interest. Chandonnais was asleep again.

"It was quite natural to make inquiries, wasn't it?" resumed Ronald. "I wouldn't want to throw another man's wife into a snowdrift, especially when the gentleman in question is a six-foot savage with a tomahawk, and peculiar ideas about fair play."

"Your manner of speech is not suited to the Indians," said Mackenzie, soberly.

"There you go again – always criticising, always finding fault. Criticism irks me. That's why I left the Fort this evening. Fussy lot, over there."

"What was the matter?" asked Forsyth.

"Nothing at all. Captain and his wife reading last month's papers, and taking no notice of visitors. Lieutenant and his wife writing letters, likewise oblivious of visitors. All inhospitable – nobody asked me to sit down. Barracks asleep. Doc and I played solitaire, because it's the only game he knows – to see who could get through first, and he kicked up a devil of a row because I cheated. Hasn't a man a right to cheat when he's playing solitaire? No law against cheating yourself, is there?"

"That's a mooted question," Forsyth answered.

"Maybe so, maybe so. I mooted it awhile with the Doc, and then quit. Coming over, I managed to get into the hole I broke in the river for this morning's bath, but it was all slush and ice – no harm done."

His garments were steaming in the generous warmth of the fire, and perspiration beaded his forehead. He stood a little over six feet in his stockings, and his superb muscle was evident in every line of his body. His thick, yellow hair was so long that he occasionally shook it back, like a mane. He had the face of a Viking – blue eyes, straight nose, red and white complexion, and a mouth and chin that in some way suggested steel. One felt the dynamic force of the man, his power of instant and permanent decision, and the ability to put that decision into immediate action.

"Sorry you're not going to be a soldier, Mr. Forsyth," he continued. "I knew you weren't, as soon as I saw you – you're altogether too young. The barracks are full of old ladies with the rheumatism. The parade ground is bloody with red flannel when the troops limp out, which is seldom, by the way, the Captain having a tender heart. Me and the other officers are the only ones under the age limit, if there is any age limit. When a man gets too old to be of use in the army, the President says: 'Don't discharge the poor cuss – send him out to Fort Dearborn, where all his old friends are. He'll be well taken care of, and won't have anything to do.' When you see an old man in a tattered uniform, bent and wrinkled and gummy-eyed, who puts his hand up to his ear and says, 'Hey!' when you speak to him, don't step on him – he's a soldier, stationed at the Fort.

"Had a wrestling match with one of the most sprightly, this very morning, and took the skin off the poor, tender old devil in several places. Doc made a surpassingly fine seam at one of the places afterward – Doc's pretty good with a needle and thread. The patient is in his bunk now, being rubbed with hot things by one of the rheumatics. I've tried to get the Doc to prescribe a plunge in the river every morning for the barracks, and I've urged the Captain to order it, but it's no use."

"Peculiar treatment for rheumatism," smiled Mackenzie.

"It's the only thing they haven't tried, and I'm inclined to think it would work a change."

There was a brief silence, during which Forsyth studied the young officer attentively, but Ronald was never still very long.

"What are you going to be, if not a soldier?" he asked, curiously. "You're – you're not a missionary, are you?"

"Do I look like one?"

"Can't say – missionaries are deceiving; but I hope not. The Pottawattomies tomahawked the last one and fried the remains. They're not yet ready for the soothing influences of religion."

"I have come to teach my young cousins," said Forsyth, slowly, "and to help my uncle as I can. I graduated from college last year, and went to Detroit to teach, but I – I didn't do very well." His pale face reddened as he made his confession. "Uncle John and Aunt Eleanor have kindly offered me a home with them," he went on. "They're the only relatives I have."

"They are relatives enough," remarked the Ensign. "Mrs. Mackenzie is the kindest woman and the best cook that ever lived, isn't she, Chan?"

The sleeper made no reply, so Ronald strode over to him and shook him roughly. "Wake up!" he bellowed. "Is Mrs. Mackenzie a good cook, or isn't she? Answer!"

The half-breed was frightened for a moment, but quickly realised the situation. "What?" he asked.

The question was repeated, with sundry shakes for emphasis. "Yes," grunted Chandonnais, sheepishly, "she good cook."

"Sit up straight, then, and look your prettiest. You can't sleep all day and all night, too." The restless visitor made a rapid tour around the counters, carefully examining the goods upon the shelves. "Nothing here I can use," he announced, returning to the fire.

"What was that silver thing the Indian had on?" asked Forsyth. "It looked like a coin of some kind."

"That was his precious medal. Captain Wells gave it to him, and he prizes it more than he does the hair of his lordly top piece. When Birdie dies, you'll find that sacred medal nailed to him, and

if it doesn't accompany him to the happy hunting-grounds, his ghost will haunt the miserable mortal who has it. Don't mind a plain ghost myself, but a ghost with a tomahawk might be pretty bad."

"I make silver things for the Indians, sometimes," Mackenzie said. "They call me 'Shaw-ne-aw-kee,' meaning 'The Silver Man.'"

A face appeared at the window for an instant, and peered furtively within. It was so silent and so white, in the midst of the swirling snow, that it might have been a phantom of the storm. Then the door opened slowly, creaking ever so little on its hinges, and was softly closed. They felt, rather than heard, a presence in the room.

Forsyth, turning, saw a wisp of a woman, bent and old, in a faded blue calico dress which came scarcely to her ankles. Her shoes were much too large for her, and badly worn. A ragged shawl, of uncertain colour and pattern, was her only protection from the cold.

It slipped off as she came toward the fire, moving noiselessly, and Forsyth saw that her hair was snow white and her face finely traced with wrinkles. Mackenzie looked also.

"Mad Margaret," he whispered to Forsyth, in a swift aside. "Don't say anything."

The half-breed's eyes had a wolfish glitter which no one saw. Forsyth rose, bowed politely, and offered her his chair.

If she saw him, she made no sign. Coming closer to the fire she crouched on her knees before it and stretched her frail, delicate hands toward the grateful warmth. Ronald's flood of high spirits instantly receded.

For a long time they sat there in silence. Mackenzie and the Ensign were looking into the fire, thinking, perhaps, of things a thousand miles away, while Forsyth and Chandonnais narrowly watched the woman.

Unmistakable madness, of the dumb, pathetic kind, was written on her face. Her unseeing eyes were faded blue, her cheeks were sunken, and her chin delicately pointed. Solitude went with her always. She might have been alone, in the primeval forest, before a fire some unknown hand had kindled, among wild beasts of whom she was not afraid. Some eerie influence was upon her, for, after a little, she moved nervously, and peered into the flames, muttering to herself.

"Oh, Lord," groaned Mackenzie, "she's goin' to have one of her spells!"

How often the poor, crazed creature had sought him, when the tempests swept her soul, only he could tell. He leaned forward and took hold of her hand. "Margaret," he said; "Margaret."

The touch and the voice seemed to quiet her, but she still looked searchingly into the flames. Chandonnais rose, reached up to the chimney-shelf, and took down a violin. With the first touch of the bow upon the strings, she left Mackenzie and went to him, kneeling at his feet, with her eyes fixed hungrily upon his face.

Strains of wild music filled the room – music which no man had ever heard before. A tender, half-hushed whisper, the tinkle of a brook, a twilight subtleness of shadow, then a low, crooning note, as if the brook had gone to sleep. Strange sounds of swaying branches came from the violin, with murmurs of a mighty wind, then, of a sudden, there seemed to be dawn. The tinkle of the brook began again, with a bird note here and there, at the beginning of a great crescendo which swept on and on, as the music of the river was woven in. Question, prayer, and mating call, from a thousand silvery throats, rioted through the tapestry of sound, then merged into a deep, passionate tone of infinite sweetness, as if the river had found the sea, or a man's tortured soul had come face to face with its ultimate peace.

"Play," said Mad Margaret, brokenly, "play more."

Once again the bow swept the strings, bringing forth a melody which breathed rest. It was quiet and hushed, like the woods at twilight, or the shore of a sea that knows no storm. Through it ran a haunting cadence, with the rhythm of a lullaby, and Margaret rocked her frail body back and forth, unconsciously keeping time. When it was finished, she sat quite still, but on her face was the rapt look of the seer.

"I see blood," she said, very distinctly. "Much blood, then fire, and afterward peace."

It was the old, old prophecy, which she had made a thousand times. "Much blood," she repeated, shaking her head sadly.

"Where, Peggy?" asked Ronald, suddenly.

"Here," she answered, making a wide circle with her arms.

"What else do you see?" he asked again, looking at her intently.

She drew her hand wearily across her forehead and closed her eyes for an instant, then went to him, and put her hands on his knees.

"I see you," she said, meaningly.

"Where, Peggy?" His voice was low and very gentle, as if he were speaking to a child.

"Here, with the blood. You shall have many sorrows, but never your heart's desire."

"Never my heart's desire?"

"No. Many sorrows, at the time of the blood, but not that."

"What is my heart's desire?"

"It has not come, but you will know it soon." She looked at him keenly for an instant, then laughed mockingly, and almost before they knew it, she had darted out into the night like the wild thing that she was.

No one spoke until after Chandonnais had put the violin in its place on the chimney-shelf and clambered up the ladder which led to the loft.

"Who is she, Uncle?"

"Nobody knows," sighed Mackenzie. "She appeared, unexpectedly, the very day we came here. Sometimes months go by without a glimpse of her, then, for a time, she will come every day."

"How does she live?"

Mackenzie shrugged his shoulders. "We give her things," he said, "and so do the Indians and the people at the Fort. Black Partridge says he has seen her catch a gull on the lake shore, strangle it, and eat it raw. At the full of the moon, when her rages come on her, she speaks very good English. At other times, she mutters something no one can understand, or else she does not speak at all. She is harmless, I believe. She is only one of the strange things one finds in a new country."

"How did you come to settle here, Uncle?"

"I hardly know. It's a good place for trading, and the Fort is near by. I like the new places, where a few make their own laws, and I like the prairie. I can breathe here, but the hills choke me."

"Never my heart's desire," mused the Ensign. He was sitting with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, gazing into the fire. He did not know that he had spoken aloud.

"Do any of us ever find it?" asked Forsyth.

"Not often, I guess," answered Mackenzie. "When we do, we are disappointed and begin to seek for something else."

From across the river, muffled by the storm, came the deep, sonorous notes of a bell. "Taps," said Ronald. He hurried into his overcoat, without a word of farewell, and bolted.

Forsyth followed, to close the door after him, and then went to the window to look at the dark, floundering figure silhouetted dimly against the snow.

"Breezy young man," commented Mackenzie.

"Yes," answered Forsyth, after a moment's silence, "I like him."

CHAPTER II

NEW ACQUAINTANCES

The next morning was cold and clear. The sun shone brilliantly, revealing unsuspected diamonds set in the snow. Forsyth woke late, wondered sleepily where he was, and then remembered.

His room was at the western end of the house, which faced the south, and from his window he could see the Fort and the Agency on the other side of the river. A savoury suggestion of frying bacon, penetrating the rough log partition, impelled him to dress hurriedly. As he broke the ice in his water pitcher, he wondered whether the Ensign had taken his regular plunge, and shivered at the thought.

When he reached the large room which served as kitchen, dining-room, and parlour, he found the family already assembled. Chandonnais was just leaving the table, and Mrs. Mackenzie sat at the head, pouring coffee from a quaint and battered silver pot which had been her grandmother's.

"Good-morning," she said cheerily, "I thought most likely you were beat out from travelling, and I told John to let you sleep."

She was a large, fair woman, matronly in every line, and her face was delicately pink. Her abundant hair was ashen blonde, escaping in little curls at her temples, and at the second glance one saw that it was rapidly turning grey. She had a wholesome air of cleanliness, and her blue eyes mirrored the kindness in the depths of her motherly heart.

Her brood was gathered around her, and every face had been scrubbed until it shone. The baby sat at her right and pounded the table madly with his pewter spoon, to the evident delight of his father. Maria Indiana was sipping warm milk daintily, like the four-year-old lady that she was, and Ellen and Johnny conducted themselves with more dignity than is common to people of seven and nine.

Forsyth had made friends with the children the evening before, and, of his own accord, had extended the schooling to all but the baby.

"It's going to be a sight of comfort to me," said Mrs. Mackenzie, "to have the young ones out from under foot half the time. The baby don't bother much. I tie him in his chair, give him something to play with, and he's all right."

"Where am I to teach, Aunt Eleanor?"

"In the next room, I guess. There's a fireplace in there, and you can have it all to yourselves. Just wait till the breakfast things are out of the way and I'll see to it."

At this juncture the Ensign appeared, smiling and debonair. "Morning! Am I too late for coffee?"

"You've had some already this morning, haven't you?" asked Mackenzie.

"Well, now, that depends on what coffee really is. Of course they called it that, but it isn't to be mentioned in the same breath with Mrs. Mackenzie's." Robert noted that there was an extra cup on the table, and surmised that the delicate hint was not infrequent.

"Thank you," continued the visitor in a grateful tone; "you've saved my life."

"I wish I had a dollar for every time I've saved your life," laughed Mrs. Mackenzie.

"So do I, for you are a good and beautiful woman, and you deserve a fortune, if anybody ever did."

"Go away, you flatterer. You remind me of a big, motherless chicken."

"Gaunt and chicken-like I may be, but never motherless while you live. A little bread and butter, please, to go with the coffee."

"Wouldn't you like some bacon?" asked Mackenzie, hospitably.

"Well, perhaps – a little. Mrs. Mackenzie cooks it beautifully."

"Ellen," said her mother, "get another plate."

"You're so good to me," murmured the Ensign, drawing his chair closer to his hostess. "Are those doughnuts?"

"They are."

"I remember once, when you gave me a doughnut, just after drill. I can taste it yet."

"Is that so? I'd forgotten it."

"Now that I think of it, you didn't, but you said you would, some time."

She laughed and pushed the plate toward him.

"Ye gods!" he exclaimed, sinking his white teeth into a doughnut, "what cooking! What a woman!"

"I think I'll ask to be excused," said Mackenzie, rising and pushing back his chair.

"Certainly," responded the soldier, with a gesture of elaborate unconcern. "Don't stay on my account, I beg of you. Think of real cream in your coffee!" he sighed, scraping the pitcher with a spoon. "I could drink cream."

"You're not going to," put in Mrs. Mackenzie, pointedly.

"I know it," he answered sadly; "I only wish I were."

When the last scrap of food had disappeared from the table, he stopped eating, but not before.

"That makes a man feel better," he announced, "especially a suffering and dying invalid like me. Come on, Forsyth, I'm going to take you over to the Fort for a bit."

It did not occur to Robert to question the mandates of this lordly being. "All right, wait till I get my coat and hat. I'll be back in a few minutes, Aunt Eleanor, to open school."

"The devil you will," observed Ronald, as they left the house. "What a liar you are!"

The path which led to the gate was well trodden, early morning though it was. "Indian tracks," said the Ensign, pointing to a narrow line on the snow; "you can always tell 'em. They keep their feet in single file – no company front about their walking."

An unpainted fence surrounded the Mackenzie premises, and at the right and left of the gate were four tall Lombardy poplars, two on each side. Brown sparrows chattered and fought in the bare branches, scorning to fly away at their approach. The house had been built on a point of land which projected into the river and turned it sharply from its course. Between the patches of snow the ice glittered in the sun.

"Salubrious spot," commented George, as they struck the frozen surface of the stream. "Don't get too near that hole. It's my bath-tub and it's weak around the edges."

Near the middle of the river was a large, jagged space in the ice and on the snow around it were finger-marks and footprints.

"Rather looked for you out this morning," Ronald continued. "Was disappointed."

Robert shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply.

"That happy architectural combination which we now approach," his guide went on, professionally, "is Fort Dearborn. Intoxicated party drew the plans and other intoxicated parties followed 'em. I could improve it in several places, but I'm obliged to make the best of it. The flag-pole, in the middle of the parade-ground, is seventy-five feet high, though you wouldn't suspect it, on account of the heroic proportions of the other buildings, and it interferes most beautifully with everything.

"Regular fort, though. Officers' quarters, barracks, offices, guard-house, magazine, and other modern inventions. Commanding officer has a palatial residence to himself. The Lieutenant is supposed to live in half of it, but he doesn't. Those warts at the south-east and north-west corners are block-houses, made after a Chinese diagram. The upper story overhangs to give a down range for musketry and keep the enemy from setting fire to the Fort. The double stockade is where the genius comes in, however. See how it slants and balances to corners. Makes the thing look like a quilt pattern. Would wear on the mind of a sensitive person.

"Hello, Charley! Here's where we get in. You see there's a sunken road to the river and there's a subterranean passage also, with a well in it, which insures the water-supply in case of a siege. We've got three pieces of light artillery – six-pounders – and our muskets, bayonets, and pistols. That's the Agency House outside. Your uncle is Government Indian Agent and sutler for the garrison and trader on his own account. This is where the Captain lives."

He pounded merrily at the door, then entered unceremoniously, and Robert followed him, awkwardly, into the room where the Captain and his wife sat at breakfast.

Captain Franklin was a grave, silent man on the sunny side of forty, who never spoke without cause, and his wife was a pretty little woman, with dark, laughing eyes. She brightened visibly when Robert was presented to her, for guests did not often appear at the Fort.

"Coffee?" remarked Ronald, with a rising inflection. "You're a lucky man, Captain, to have such coffee as Mrs. Franklin makes, every blessed morning of your life. I only wish I were as fortunate," he added impersonally.

Robert bit his lips to keep from smiling as the Ensign's wants were promptly supplied. "Won't you have some too, Mr. Forsyth?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Franklin. I've been to breakfast."

The emphasis on the personal pronoun caused George to look at him meaningly, as he asked if he might have a bit of toast and an apple. While he ate, Mrs. Franklin talked with Forsyth and the Captain listened in silence.

"Are you going to stay?" she inquired.

"Yes, I hope so. I am going to teach my young cousins and help my uncle in any way I can. I graduated from Yale last year and went from there to Detroit, but as soon as I heard that Aunt Eleanor was willing to take me in, I started and got here yesterday, just before the storm."

"Did you have a pleasant journey?"

"Yes, fairly so. I came by way of Fort Wayne, with Indian guides and relays of horses."

"Any news?" asked the Captain.

"No, only the usual symptoms of discontent among the Indians. The officers in Detroit think there may be another outbreak soon."

"I don't – there's no earthly reason for it."

"Indians aren't particular about reasons," put in Ronald. "Come along, Robert, we're going over to the Lieutenant's."

When they entered, Mrs. Howard was clearing away the breakfast dishes, and after the introductions were over, Ronald did not hesitate to express his disappointment.

"Get that starving kid some coffee, Kit," said the Lieutenant, and Ronald gladly accepted the steaming cup, with polite regret at the trouble he was causing and with profuse praise of the beverage itself.

"Sugar?" asked Mrs. Howard.

"No, thank you – just put your dainty finger in for a moment, if you will be so kind. Your hand would sweeten the bitterest cup man is called upon to drink. Seems to me I smell pancakes."

He grinned appreciatively at Forsyth as Mrs. Howard went to the iron griddle that swung in the open fireplace. "Not many," he called to her, "six will do very nicely. I don't want to be a pig."

"You are, though," Forsyth assured him in an undertone.

"Shut up!" he replied concisely.

Acting upon the suggestion, Robert turned his attention to his host, and they talked until the pangs of hunger were somewhat satisfied. The Lieutenant and his wife followed them to the door.

"Tell my mother I'm coming over to see her this afternoon," said Mrs. Howard.

"All right," answered Robert. "Who's 'mother'?" he asked, when they got outside.

"Mrs. Mackenzie, of course. Don't you know your own relations when you see 'em? Mrs. Howard is your aunt's daughter and your uncle's step-daughter, so she's your cousin."

"Cousin-in-law, I guess," said Robert. "My father was Uncle John's half-brother, so we're not very closely related. She's nice, though. I wish she were my cousin."

"Coffee doesn't come up to her mother's," soliloquised George, "but it's pretty good. Hello, Doc!" he shouted, to a man on the opposite side of the parade-ground. "Had your breakfast?"

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Forsyth, "you aren't going to eat again, are you?"

The Ensign turned upon him a look of reproach. "My rations aren't meant for full-grown men," he explained. "If I couldn't get a bite outside occasionally, I'd dry up and blow away. There's a squaw down in the hollow who cooks a pretty good mess, and you can get a bowl of it for a fist of beads. It isn't overly clean, and it's my private opinion it's yellow dog, stewed, or perhaps I should say, curried, but a starving man can't afford to be particular."

"Take me some time," Forsyth suggested carelessly; "I've never eaten dog."

"All right," was the jovial answer, "we'll go. Come on over and meet the Doc."

Robert was duly presented to Doctor Norton, whom the soldier characterised as "the pill roller of the garrison," and soon seized an opportunity to ask him the exact capacity of the human stomach.

"It varies," answered the Doctor, wrinkling his brows in deep thought. "Some people" —

"We must go," George interrupted. "It's time for school."

They parted on the bank of the river, Robert studiously avoiding an opportunity to shake hands. When he entered the house, his pupils were waiting for him.

The room set aside for educational purposes was just off the living-room and a bright fire was burning on the hearth. He found it difficult to teach three grades at once, and soon arranged alternate study and recitation for each, dismissing Maria Indiana in an hour with the first three letters of the alphabet well learned.

The window, like the others in the house, commanded a view of the river and the Fort, and gave a glimpse of the boundless plains beyond. Soldiers went in and out of the stockade, apparently at pleasure, and one or two of them came across, but he looked in vain for the stalwart young officer whom he was proud to call his friend.

At dinner-time he inquired about the neighbours.

"Neighbours?" repeated Mrs. Mackenzie, laughing; "why, we haven't any, except at the Fort."

"Are you and Uncle John really the only people here?" he asked, seriously.

"No, not that. There are a few houses here. Mr. and Mrs. Burns live in one — they are our nearest neighbours — and away up beyond is Lee's place. They don't have anything to do with us, nor we with them. Two or three men and a boy live there, I believe, but we don't see much of them. They're part French and part Indian. Chandonnais used to live with them, and when we came here, he came to us. I guess that's one reason why they don't like us, for Chan's a good boy."

"And Margaret?"

Mrs. Mackenzie's face changed. "Poor old thing," she said sadly, "no one knows where or how she lives. We are not afraid of her, but the Indians are. They wouldn't touch a crazy person under any circumstances."

"Is there a regular Indian settlement here?"

"Yes, there are wigwams all along the river. They are all Pottawattomies and very friendly. The Chippewa and Winnebago tribes are farther north. John has a gift for dealing with the Indians. He has learned their language and their ways, and they treat him as if he were one of them. Did George show you the Fort this morning?"

"Most of it," smiled Forsyth. "We called on the commissioned officers and that young giant ate a hearty breakfast at each place."

"He is the life of the settlement, and I don't know what we'd do without him. I never saw anybody with such an inexhaustible fund of good spirits. Nothing is so bad that George can't get a joke out of it and make us laugh in spite of our trouble. Did you see Doctor Norton?"

"Yes, but only for a moment."

"He's jolly too, and very good to all of us."

"I forgot to tell you when I first came in," said Robert, "but I met Mrs. Howard and she asked me to tell you that she was coming over to see you this afternoon."

"Bless her heart," said Mrs. Mackenzie, tenderly, "she never forgets her old mother."

"You'll never be old, Aunt Eleanor. I believe you have found the fountain of eternal youth."

"What, another flatterer?" she asked, but the heightened colour in her cheeks showed that she was pleased.

During the afternoon, while Johnny struggled manfully with digits and addition, Robert saw Mrs. Howard coming across the river. She was a fair, tall woman, very blonde, with eyes like her mother's. The Doctor stood at the entrance of the stockade, watching her, with something akin to wistfulness in his attitude.

"Poor soul," thought Robert, "I expect he's lonesome."

The afternoon sun stole into the room, marking out patches of light upon the rag carpet which covered the floor, and touched the rude logs kindly as if to gild, rather than to reveal. In the next room women's voices sounded, indistinct, but pleasant, with here and there a low, musical laugh, and the teacher fell to dreaming.

"How many are two and two, Cousin Rob?" Johnny asked, for the third time.

"Four – don't you remember? You learned that this morning."

"Can I go now? I want to see my sister."

"Yes, run along."

The patter of feet died away in the distance, but Robert still looked out upon the river with a smile upon his face. Presently he saw Mrs. Howard going toward the Fort, with two of the children capering along beside her. Something stirred in the dreamer's pulses, indefinite, but none the less real. What man can place it, or knows it when it comes – that first vague longing for a home of his own?

The minutes went by and the light faded until the blood-red sunset fired the Fort and stained the snowy reaches beyond. A door opened, a kettle sang, and some one came in.

"Asleep, dear?"

"No, Aunt Eleanor." He went to her, put his arm around her, and touched her cheek lightly with his lips. "I was only thinking that my lines have fallen in pleasant places."

CHAPTER III

THE SECOND IN COMMAND

"Kit," said the Lieutenant, pacing back and forth moodily, "I wish I were in command."

"I wish so, too, dear," responded Mrs. Howard, dutifully.

"Anybody with half an eye can see what is going to happen here, if there isn't a change."

"What change do you mean, Ralph?"

"Any kind of a change," he snapped angrily. "We've got a figure-head for a Captain and the men haven't the faintest idea of military training. There's no reason for postponing drill on account of bad weather – the men haven't been out for over a week now, just because it's cold. The Captain sits by his fire, studying tactics and making out imaginary reports, while his men are suffering for discipline – and clothes," he added as an afterthought.

"What can Captain Franklin do about their clothes?"

"What can he do? Nothing, it seems; but I could. I'd send a man to President Madison himself, if there was no other way. Look at us! We look like Washington's army at Valley Forge!"

The Lieutenant brushed away an imaginary speck on a very shabby uniform. "I'm sorry I entered the army," he went on. "Look at this post, on the edge of nowhere, with about forty men to defend it. I doubt if we have more than thirty in good fighting trim – the rest are worse than useless. All around us are hordes of hostile savages, ready to attack any or all of us on the slightest provocation, and we cannot make even a display of force! No target practice, for fear of wasting ammunition; no drill, because the Captain is lazy; clothes like beggars – idleness, inaction, sloth! Three six-pounders and thirty men, against thousands of bloodthirsty beasts! Things were different at Fort Wayne!"

"Ralph," said Mrs. Howard, quickly, "please don't say that to me again. I have told you twenty times how sorry I am that I asked you to arrange to be transferred. I tell you once more that we will go wherever and whenever you please, to Fort Wayne, Detroit, or even Fort Mackinac. If there is an army post in the United States where things are run to suit you, please get a transfer to it. You will hear no complaints from me. I wanted to be near my mother – that was all."

"Was that all?" he sneered. "I have thought otherwise. You talk like a fool, Kit. You seem to think it's the simplest thing in the world to get a transfer. Do you expect to see a messenger ride in at the gate, with an order from the War Department, or shall I go over and tell the Captain that we leave for Fort Wayne this evening?"

Mrs. Howard moved her lips as if to speak, then thought better of it and remained silent. He stood at the window for a long time, with his back to her.

"You don't seem very sociable," he said at length, "so I guess I'll go out for a bit, especially as I see your friend coming. I never like to intrude." With this parting fling, he left the house, carefully avoiding Doctor Norton, who was crossing the parade-ground.

From where she sat, Mrs. Howard could see her husband, erect and soldierly, making his way to the offices. During the first two years of their married life, she had been very happy, but since they came to live at Fort Dearborn, he had been subject to occasional outbursts of temper which distressed her greatly.

Her face, always expressive, was white and troubled when she opened the door for the Doctor. He understood – he always did. He was one of the few men who are not dense in their comprehension of womankind.

They talked commonplaces for a little while, then he leaned forward and took her cold hand in his.

"Something has bothered you," he said kindly. "Tell me and let me help you."

"You couldn't help me," she answered sadly; "nobody can."

Doctor Norton was not more than thirty-five, but his hair was prematurely grey, and this, together with his kindly manner, often impelled his patients to make unprofessional confidences. Like many another woman, too, Mrs. Howard was strong in the face of opposition, but weak at the touch of sympathy.

"It's nothing," she said. "Ralph is cross nearly all the time, though I don't believe he means to be. He has been that way ever since – ever since the baby died."

She turned her face away, for the little grave in the hollow pulled piteously at the mother's heartstrings when the world went wrong.

"He has always blamed me for that," she went on. "One of the reasons why I wanted to live here, instead of at Fort Wayne, was that I might have my mother to help me take care of the baby. She knew more than I did; was wiser and more experienced in every way, and I thought the little lad would have a better chance. Instead, as you know, he took cold on the way here and did not get well, so his father has never forgiven me."

The tears came fast and her white lips quivered. "Don't, Katherine," he said. It was the first time he had called her by name, and she noted it, vaguely, in the midst of her suffering.

"Don't, Katherine," he repeated. "All we can do in this world is the thing that seems to us the best. We have no concern with the results, except as a guide for the future, and sometimes, years afterward, we see that what seemed like a bitter loss in reality was gain. Some day you may be glad that you lost your boy."

"Glad? Glad I have lost my only child? Doctor, what are you thinking of!"

"Of you. Whatever troubles you troubles me, also. You know that, don't you?"

For an instant she was frightened, but his calm friendliness reassured her. "Thank you," she returned, "you have always been good to me."

"I shall always try to be. Nothing that comes to you is without meaning for me, and you will always have at least one friend." There was an eloquent silence, then the tension of the moment snapped, and he released her hand.

"I'm silly," she laughed hysterically, wiping her eyes. "Have you any medicine for silliness?"

"If I had, I should keep it for those who need it worse than you do. I wish you would go outdoors more. Walk on the parade-ground and across to your mother's, – those two places are certainly safe, – and when you get tired of that, go over to Mrs. Franklin's. She's a nice little woman and she needs cheering up, too. I have a suspicion, Mrs. Howard, that the temperament which urges a man to be a soldier is very seldom elastic enough to include the domestic hearth."

Katherine's face brightened, for she had not thought of that, and the suggestion that others had the same trouble was not without its dubious consolation.

For an hour or more he talked to her, telling her bits of news from the barracks which he thought would interest her, and offering fragments of philosophy as the occasion permitted.

"You're a tonic," she said lightly, as he rose to go; "the blues are all gone."

"I'm glad of that. Now remember, when anything goes wrong, tell me. Perhaps I can help you – at least I can try."

Half-way across the parade-ground he turned back to smile at her as she stood at the window, and she waved a friendly hand in response. It was at this unlucky moment that the Lieutenant left the offices, having had high words with the Captain about the condition of the garrison and the possibility of a war with England.

She was vaguely uneasy when he went out of his way to meet the Doctor, but, though he spoke to him, he paused for scarcely an instant in his rapid stride. He was pleasant enough when he came into the house, and she thought that all was well.

He made no reference to their earlier conversation, but talked easily and indifferently, with a mild desire to please, as is the way of a man who is ashamed of himself.

"Wouldn't you like to go across the river?" he asked.

"Why, yes," she replied wonderingly, "I don't mind."

"Come on, then."

His dark, handsome face was still pale, and the lines of weakness were distinct around his mouth, but Katherine's heart, leaping to meet its desire, turned newly toward him, as a flower lifts its face to the sun.

"Poor boy," she said affectionately, putting her hand on his arm, "you have lots of things to bother you, don't you?"

"That I do, Kit. I suppose you think I'm a brute sometimes."

"No, indeed," she answered, generously.

"You've been hard to get on with lately," he observed.

"Have I, dear?" She was surprised and conscience-stricken; the more so because the possibility had not occurred to her. "I'm sorry," she said after a little. "I'll try to do better."

"I don't think it's altogether your fault," he rejoined. "I've noticed that you get cranky after Norton has been to the house, and I think he has a bad influence over you." The Lieutenant tried to speak jauntily, and failed.

"So, naturally," he continued, clearing his throat, "I've done as any other man in my position would do. I've told him not to come unless he's asked in his professional capacity, and to make those visits when I'm at home."

"Ralph!" It was the cry of a hurt child, and every vestige of colour fled from Katherine's face. She pressed her hands to her breast and leaned against the stockade at the entrance to the Fort.

"Well?" he asked ironically, "have I broken your heart?"

"To think," she said slowly, "that you could be so discourteous to any one, and especially to a friend who has been so kind to us as Doctor Norton. I'm ashamed of you."

"Your actions, Katherine, only prove that I have taken the right course. If I had any doubt before, I am certain now. You will oblige me by avoiding him as much as possible."

He never called her "Katherine" unless he was very much displeased with her, and they crossed the river without speaking. Howard hummed a popular air to himself, with apparent unconcern.

At Mackenzies', all was bustle and confusion. Indians hurried in and out of the house, talking and gesticulating excitedly. The snow on the path was worn as smooth as ice and Chandonnais was running to the Agency building on the other side of the river.

"What is it?" asked Katherine.

"Dunno," said the Lieutenant, laconically.

When they entered, John Mackenzie was, as he expressed it, "pretty nigh beat out." Robert had dismissed school, and was helping him as best he could, though he was heavily handicapped at the start by his ignorance of values and of the Indian tongue.

The space behind the counters was heaped high with furs. Deer hide and moose leather, grey wolf, red and silver fox, muskrat, beaver and bear skins were stacked waist deep around Forsyth and Mackenzie. Unwonted activity was in the air, and the place was full of odorous Indians.

Black Partridge came in, bringing the skin of a gigantic black bear, and a murmur ran through the room. Members of other tribes fingered it enviously, and the Pottawattomie squaws openly boasted the prowess of their chief.

Chandonnais came in from the Agency, with a huge ham under either arm. He went back, laden with peltries, and when he returned, he was rolling a fresh barrel of flour before him. His face was set in an expression of extreme displeasure, for he was constitutionally opposed to work.

"Can I help?" asked Lieutenant Howard.

"Wish you'd go over to the Agency, Ralph," replied Mackenzie, "and bring over as many blankets as you can carry. Chan will go with you – he's got to bring more bacon."

Mrs. Howard had long since retreated to the living-room. The door was closed, but the tumult of the trading station resounded afar.

"Be careful, Rob," said Mackenzie, "that's a sheep skin dyed with walnut juice. He tried it on you 'cause you're green." Turning to the Indian, the trader spoke volubly, even after the would-be cheat had grabbed his sheep skin and started for the door.

"This jawbreaker talk is tellin' on me," Mackenzie resumed. "This is the first time they've ever come on me all at once this way. Mighty sudden, I take it. It's early, too. Usually they do their tradin' on the Q.T., one and two at a time, weeks before. They say this is the last day of Winter and that to-morrow will be Spring."

Chandonnais and the Lieutenant returned, laden with bacon and blankets. The half-breed wiped the sweat from his swarthy face with a very dirty sleeve, and Howard made no further offers of assistance. Instead, he went over to Forsyth, and began to talk with him.

"What's going on?" asked Robert, "do you know?"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders. "They haven't taken me into their confidence," he replied, "but I suppose it's the annual pilgrimage."

"Where? What for?"

"Didn't Father John tell you? Every year they go up into Canada to get their presents from the British. Damn the British!" he added, with unnecessary emphasis.

"Oh," said Robert, thoughtfully. "In case of trouble, then, the Indians are on their side."

"Exactly. Quite a scheme, isn't it?"

"It's a devilish scheme!"

"Be careful," warned Mackenzie, "some of 'em understand more English than they let on."

The trading fever rapidly spread to the squaws. Those who were not bringing furs for exchange and carrying provisions back to the camp offered moccasins and baskets for sale. Mackenzie shook his head – he had no use for anything but the skins.

Under cover of the excitement, much petty thieving was going on, and it was necessary to keep close watch of the peltries, lest they be exchanged again. The squaws kept keen eyes on the counters, making off with anything desirable which was left unguarded. Chandonnais took a place at the door, finally, to call a halt upon illegal enterprises.

Without the least knowledge of why he did it, Robert bought a pair of moccasins. They were small, even for a woman's foot, and heavy with beads. The dainty things appealed to him, suddenly and irresistibly, and the price he paid for them brought other squaws, with countless moccasins.

"Uncle John," he shouted above the clamour, "please tell them I don't want any more moccasins!"

A few rapid words from Shaw-ne-aw-kee had the desired effect. "Don't see what you want of those things," he observed; "they won't fit anybody."

"Pretty things," remarked Howard, sauntering up. "Whom are they for?"

"I – I – that is, I don't know," stammered Robert. "I just wanted them."

The Lieutenant laughed. "Oh, I see," he said. "Another case of Cinderella's slipper?"

"Yes, we'll let it go at that," returned Forsyth. He had regained his self-possession, but the colour still bronzed his cheeks.

When every possible exchange had been made, and every Indian had been given a small additional present, the room became quiet again. Black Partridge received a small silver ornament which Mackenzie had made for him during the long winter evenings, with manifestations of delight and gratitude.

"What's he saying, Uncle?" asked Robert.

"He's swearing eternal friendship for me and mine."

"Much good that does," said Howard, nonchalantly. "I'd trust a dead Indian a damn sight sooner 'n a live one."

Black Partridge may have caught the gist of what had been said, but he repeated his expressions of gratitude and his assurances of continued esteem. The room, by contrast, was very silent after he went out.

"Lord!" sighed the trader. "What a day!"

Mrs. Mackenzie's voice sounded clearly in the next room. "Yes, dear," she said, "I'll tell him, and I'll explain it all. Don't you fret one mite about it." Then the door opened and Mrs. Howard came in.

She talked with Forsyth for a few minutes, then turned to her husband. "Shall we go home?" she asked, "or do you want to stay here for supper?"

"Better stay," suggested Mackenzie, hospitably.

"No, we'll go," said Ralph. "Good-bye, everybody."

Neither spoke until they entered their own house again, then Katherine put her hands on his shoulders and looked straight into his eyes. "Ralph," she said, seriously, "can't you trust me?"

"I hope so," he returned, drawing away from her, "and as I've fixed it now, I think I can."

"Ralph!" she cried, "you hurt me!"

"Look here," he exclaimed roughly, "I don't want any more of this. I have trouble enough without your pitching into me all the time. This is my house and you are my wife – please remember that."

"There's no danger of my forgetting it," she answered hotly.

"Come, Kit, do be reasonable. I don't want to quarrel."

She smiled cynically and bit her lips to keep back the retort that struggled for utterance. "Whatever you do," her mother had said to her, "don't quarrel with your husband. It takes two to make a quarrel."

Later, a semblance of peace was restored, but long after the Lieutenant was asleep, Katherine lay, wide-eyed and troubled, with bitterness surging in her heart.

From the window of her room she saw the late moon when it rose from the lake, and soon afterward the clock struck three. Then a ghostly pageant passed the Fort. Black Partridge was ahead – she knew his stately figure in spite of the blanket in which he was enshrouded. Behind him came more Indians than she had ever seen at one time, silently, in single file.

The squaws brought up the rear, laden with baggage. The last one was heavily burdened and was far behind. As she straggled along, the pale moonlight revealed something strange upon her head and Katherine recognised her own discarded summer hat of two seasons past. The implied comparison made her laugh in a way which was not good to hear – but no one heard.

Across the river another watcher was taking note of the departure of the Pottawattomies, for Robert had found it impossible to sleep. Physically, he was too tired to rest, and his mind was unusually active. The dainty moccasins hung on the wall of his room and something obtrusively feminine in their presence was, in a way, disturbing, but not altogether unpleasant.

The young man was somewhat given to analysis and introspection, and had endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to solve the freakish impulse which led him to buy moccasins too small for any woman he knew. Further questioning of self brought out the astounding fact that he would not give moccasins to any woman he had ever met, even though these might fit her.

The Indians passing the Fort were a welcome diversion, and he, too, laughed at the one who followed the procession with more than her share of baggage, but he missed the fine point in the matter of millinery. "She looks like the one I bought them of," he said to himself, "but I won't be sure."

The moon faded and grey dawn came up out of the inland sea. A ribbon of light lay across the Fort and the pulses of the river stirred beneath the ice. The blood came to his heart like the sap mounting in the maples, and he felt a sudden uplift of soul. A bluebird paused over the river for an instant, the crimson of its breast strangely luminous against the sky, then from a distant thicket came the first robin's cheery call, and he knew the Indians were right – that it was Spring.

CHAPTER IV

RONALD'S VIEWS OF MARRIAGE

Mrs. Howard was trying to sew, but seemed to lack the necessary energy. The Lieutenant paced the room in his favourite attitude – hands crossed behind his back – and gave her his views upon various topics, from the mistakes of the War Department at Washington to the criminal mismanagement of Captain Franklin. He became so interested in this last subject that he spoke as if addressing a large audience, happily unmindful of the fact that his single listener was preoccupied.

"Upon my word, Kit," he was saying, "there isn't a man in barracks who wouldn't make a better Captain than the one we've got."

"His wife is coming," remarked Katherine, impersonally.

"I don't care if she is. Somebody ought to tell him where he stands in the estimation of the officers and men."

His disapproval of his superior officer was reflected in his cool response to Mrs. Franklin's cheery greeting when she came in with her sewing. "I've got something for you," she said to Katherine; "guess what it is!"

"I couldn't guess – what is it?"

"A letter," she answered brightly, "from Doctor Norton! You aren't jealous, are you?" she asked playfully, turning to the Lieutenant.

He made no reply, but gnawed his mustache nervously. Katherine's face blanched as she took the note and tore it open with trembling hands.

There was neither date, address, nor signature. "I understand," it began, "and everything is all right. I beg of you, do not distress yourself about me, and, if I can ever serve you in any way, command me."

The words danced before her eyes as the Lieutenant approached and held out his hand, silently, for the letter.

"It's nothing that would interest you, dear," she said, tearing it straight across.

"Pardon me, I think it would." He quickly possessed himself of the note and fitted the two parts of the page together, laughing as he did so. Only Katherine noticed that his voice shook.

"If you're through with it, I'll burn it," he said quietly, after what seemed an age. Without waiting for an answer, he threw it into the open fire and hurriedly left the house. Then something dawned on Mrs. Franklin.

"Kit," she cried, "can you ever forgive me?"

"What did you think?" retorted Katherine, fiercely. "Would he have sent a note to me if he had meant it for my husband? Why didn't he come over instead of writing?"

"I don't know," murmured Mrs. Franklin. For the moment she was afraid, and as the inevitable surmise forced itself into her consciousness, she gazed at Katherine, horror-stricken and dumb.

"I know what you're thinking," said Mrs. Howard, with forced calmness. "It's very charitable of you, but I'm glad to be able to tell you that you're mistaken."

"You poor child!" exclaimed the Captain's wife. She slipped a friendly hand into Katherine's cold one and was not surprised when the overwrought nerves sought relief in tears.

Little by little, Katherine made a full explanation. "It's too small and too silly to talk about," she sighed, "but I haven't been well lately and the slightest thing will worry me almost past endurance. I don't know what's the matter with Ralph – he is not at all like himself, and that troubles me, too."

"Funny," observed Mrs. Franklin, irrelevantly.

"What's funny?"

"Men in general and husbands in particular. Wallace isn't inclined to be jealous, so I've never had that to bother me, but he's as stubborn as a mule, and I guess that's just as bad. Anyhow, I'd like to trade his stubbornness for something else. I'd appreciate the change for a little while, no matter what it was."

"I wouldn't mind that," said Katherine, with the ghost of a smile hovering around her white lips. "I think I could get along better with a stubborn man than I can with a savage."

"Be careful what you say about savages," put in the other, lightly; "you know my aunt is a full-blooded Indian."

"I've often wondered about that. How do you suppose it happened?"

"It is rather queer on the face of it, but it's natural enough, when you think it over. You know Captain Wells was stolen by the Indians when he was a child and he was brought up like one of them. Even after his people found him, he refused to go home, until his two sisters came to plead with him. Then he consented to make them a visit, but he didn't stay long, and went back to the Indians at the first opportunity. Their ways were as impossible to him as his were to them. I'm glad he married the chief's daughter, instead of a common squaw. He and Little Turtle are great friends."

There was a long silence, then Katherine reverted to the original topic. "I never thought of Captain Franklin as stubborn," she said.

"Didn't you? Well, I just wish you could talk to him a while after he gets his mind made up. Before that, there's hope, but not afterward; and you might just as well go out and speak to the stockade around the Fort. He's contrary, too. Yesterday, for instance, he told me he thought he'd have drill, as the men hadn't been out for a long time. I asked him if some of them weren't sick, and he said they were, but it wouldn't hurt the others any. Just then your husband came in and suggested drill. 'Haven't thought about it,' says Wallace, turning away, and the Lieutenant talked ten minutes before he discovered nobody was listening to him. After he went away, George came in and asked about drill. 'We won't have it to-day,' said Wallace, and that was the end of it."

"Was he like that before you were married?"

"Yes, only not so bad. I mistook his determined siege for inability to live without me, but I see now that it was principally stubbornness. He made up his mind to get me, and here I am. He gets worse as he grows older – more 'sot' in his ways, as your mother would say. I don't see how anybody can be that way. He explained it to me once, when we were first married, but I couldn't understand it."

"How did he explain it?"

"Well, as nearly as I can remember, he said that he dreaded to have his mind begin making itself up. It's like a runaway horse that you can't stop. He said he might see that he was wrong and he might want to do differently, but something inside of him wouldn't let him. It seems that his mind suddenly crystallises, and then it's over. A crystal can be broken, but it can't be made liquid again."

"Is his mind liquid?" inquired Katherine, choked with laughter.

"No – I wish it was. I'm glad you're amused, but I'm too close to it to see the fun in it. Wasn't your husband ever stubborn?"

"No; I don't think so – at least, I don't remember. I suppose he can't help being jealous any more than the Captain can help being mulish. I guess they're just born so."

"Marked," suggested Mrs. Franklin.

"Yes – marked. I hadn't thought of that. Before we were married, Ralph was jealous of everybody who spoke to me – man, woman, or brute. I couldn't even pet the cat or talk to the dog."

"Matrimonial traits," observed the Captain's wife, sagely, "are the result of pre-nuptial tendencies. If you look carefully into the subject before you're married, you can see about what you're coming to."

"I guess that's right. I needn't have expected marriage to cure Ralph of jealousy, but, like you, I supposed it was love."

"My dear," said Mrs. Franklin, with feeling, "many a woman mistakes the flaws in a man's character for the ravages of the tender passion – before marriage."

"Well, I never!" said a soft voice behind them. "Kitty and Mamie talking scandal!"

Both women jumped.

"How did you get in?" demanded Mrs. Howard.

"Came in," replied Ronald, laconically.

"Don't you know enough to rap?" asked Mrs. Franklin, angrily. Like others who have been christened "Mary," she was irritated beyond measure at that meaningless perversion of her name.

"Did rap," answered George, selecting the most comfortable chair, "but nobody heard me, so I let myself in."

"How dare you call me 'Kitty'?" exclaimed Mrs. Howard.

"Soldiers aren't afraid of anything except the War Department."

"How long have you been here?" they asked simultaneously.

"Don't all speak at once. I've been here a long, long time – so long, in fact, that I'm hungry." He looked past them as he spoke and gazed pensively out of the window.

Mrs. Franklin's cheeks were blazing and her eyes snapped. "You're the very worst man I ever met," she said.

The Ensign sighed heavily. "And yet I've never been accused of mulishness," he remarked, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling, "nor of jealousy," he added. His mouth was twitching, and the women exchanged glances.

"I admit an enormous appetite," he continued. "Wonder if it's the ravages of the tender passion?"

Mrs. Howard brought in a plate of cookies and set it ostentatiously within his reach. "Lovely woman!" apostrophised George. "She feeds me! Radiant vision, will you be mine?"

There was a dead silence.

"Queer, isn't it," observed the guest, between mouthfuls, and apparently to himself, "that women should look so pretty when they're mad?"

"Your wife will be pretty all the time, then," said Mrs. Franklin.

"I trust so. She'll have to have a good start at it, or she won't get me, and with the additional stimulus which living with me will give her, she'll be nearly as lovely as the wives of the other officers at Fort Dearborn. I could give her no higher praise. These cookies are all gone."

"I know it," replied Mrs. Howard. "I gave you all I had left."

"If I might presume," said Ronald, "I'd like the prescription they were made by, to give to my wife, when I get one. I suppose it's more in the making than in the prescription, and though I'll undoubtedly like 'em, my native love of truth will oblige me to tell her that they don't come up to those Kitty – pardon me, Mrs. Howard – used to make for me. I always think of you by your first name," he went on. "I know it's wrong, but I can't help it. You're so good to me. Isn't there one more cooky?"

"No, there isn't."

"Your mother makes surpassing doughnuts. Did she ever teach you how?"

"Oh, yes," responded Mrs. Howard, coolly; "but I don't make them very often. I haven't made any for months."

"I have the plan of 'em all written down, in case you should forget how. I'm saving it for my wife. Can I go and look in the pantry?"

"No, you cannot."

"Why don't you get married, George?" asked Mrs. Franklin, by way of a diversion.

"I've never been asked."

"Didn't you ever ask anybody?"

"Oh, Lord, yes! I've asked every girl I've ever met. Say, do you know that I've got so now that I can propose off-hand, as easily as other fellows can after they've written it out and learned it? If there was a girl here at the Fort who suited me, I'd ask everybody to my wedding inside of two weeks."

"Charming diffidence," murmured Katherine.

"Modest soul," commented Mrs. Franklin. "What kind of a girl would suit you?"

"I like the domestic variety. The faithful kind, you know. One who wouldn't gad all the time. Good cook, and that sort of thing."

"Some Indian girl" – began the Captain's wife.

"I know," interrupted George, pointedly; "that runs in some families, but it never has in ours. Wouldn't mind an Indian aunt, maybe, after I got used to her; but a mother-in-law – Lord!"

Mrs. Franklin was angry for an instant, then she laughed. It was impossible for any one to harbour resentment against Ronald.

"I don't think I could ever love an ordinary girl," that intrepid youth resumed, with a dare-devil light in his eyes. "She'd have to be very superior. Lots of girls get married without any clear idea of what it means. For instance, while I was working day and night, trying to earn board and clothes for a woman, I wouldn't like to have her trot over to her friend's house to discuss my faults. If that's marriage, I won't enlist."

"You haven't any faults," put in the Captain's wife, sweetly. "There would be nothing to discuss."

"True, Mamie, I had forgotten that. Thank you for reminding me of my perfection. But you know what I mean. As soon as I got out of sight of the house, she'd gallop over to her friend's, and her friend would say: 'Good-morning, Mrs. Ronald, you don't look fit this morning. What has that mean thing done to you now?'"

Throwing himself thoroughly into the part, the Ensign got up and proceeded to give an elaborate monologue, in falsetto, punctuated with mincing steps and frequent rearrangement of an imaginary coiffure. Mrs. Howard clasped her hands at her waist and the tears rolled down Mrs. Franklin's cheeks.

"And then she'd say," Ronald went on, "Just suppose you had to live with a mulish, jealous man who wouldn't give you more than nine dresses and eleven bonnets and four pairs of shoes. Yes, that's just what the horrid thing has done. And this morning, when I asked for money to get a few clothes, so I could look more respectable, he gave me some, but I caught him keeping back fifty-two cents. Now, what do you think of that? Do you suppose he's going to take a lot of men out and get 'em all drunk?"

The entrance of Captain Franklin put an end to the inspired portrayal of wifely devotion. As Katherine had said, he did not look stubborn. On the contrary, he seemed to be the mildest sort of a man, for he was quiet and unobtrusive in manner. His skin was very white, and the contrast of his jet-black hair and mustache made him look pale.

"Did you tell them the news?" he asked Ronald.

"Pon my word, Captain, I haven't had time. They've been chattering so ever since I came in that I'm nearly deaf with it. You tell 'em."

"I don't know as you'd call it news," said the Captain; "but we can't afford to ignore any incident out here. A Kickapoo runner has come in from the Illinois River, and he says the pack-trains are about to start from there and from the Kankakee, and that they will be here soon."

"It's an early Spring," remarked Mrs. Franklin.

"I'm glad," said Katherine; "I love to be outdoors, and the Winters in this lonesome little Fort are almost unbearable."

"What?" asked Ronald, "with me here?"

"Drill to-morrow," said the Captain, turning to his subordinate. The Ensign saluted gravely, but made no reply.

The Captain lingered a few moments, listening while the others talked. "Are you going home, Mary?" he asked.

"Yes, after a while. I'll go now if you want me to."

"No; never mind. I've got some things to see to."

"Now that," observed Ronald, as the Captain closed the door, "is what I call a true marriage."

"In what way?" asked Mrs. Franklin.

"This deference to a husband's evident wishes. It might have happened to me. Lonesome George comes into the sewing circle and his glad eyes rest on the wife of his bosom. Talk to the crowd a little while and get everybody to feeling good, even though I'm on the verge of starvation. Then I say: 'Darling, are you going back to our humble little home?' and she says: 'Yes, George, dear, when I get good and ready – bye-bye!'"

Mrs. Franklin was eager to ask Katherine how much of their conversation she supposed he had overheard, but he seemed very comfortable where he was, and at last she folded up her work and went home, the Ensign bidding her an affectionate farewell at the door and extending a generous invitation to "come again."

"There, Kitty," he sighed, "at last we are alone. It has seemed so long!"

Katherine turned upon him a look which would have frozen a lesser man than Ronald. "Please call me Mrs. Howard," she requested, icily.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Well, some way, it makes me feel as if you were married, and I can't stand it to be constantly reminded of my loss. 'Mrs. Lieutenant' is better, 'cause I'm a lieutenant, in a way, myself, but it's too long. I suppose I can say 'Mrs. Loot,' if you insist upon formality. I came to you with a message, and that is why I have braved your unjust wrath. Your mother sent me to ask you and your husband to come over to supper. I've seen him and he's willing. She's been making doughnuts all the afternoon, and I think there's a pie or two, so get your bonnet and come along."

"Come along!" repeated Katherine.

"Yes, come along. I'm going, too."

"Does she know it?"

"I think she suspects it. If she doesn't, the pleasure will have the additional charm of a surprise. There's the Lieutenant now. We'll all go together."

They met on the parade-ground and she put her hand on her husband's arm timidly, but he did not draw away from her as she had feared he would, and she became intuitively conscious that he had determined to say nothing about the unlucky note.

The sun shone brightly and the March wind swept the cobwebs from her mental vision. Ralph said very little; but Ronald, who never required the encouragement of an answer, talked unceasingly, and it seemed to Katherine that the world was sunny and full of friends.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST FLOWER OF SPRING

There was a report like a pistol shot from the ice in the river, followed by others at short intervals. "That means for us to get out the boats," said Mackenzie to Chandonnais.

Only one of the boats stored in the trader's barn was worthy of the name. It was a large bateau, capable of accommodating a dozen people and a small amount of baggage. The others were pirogues, or logs trimmed at the ends and hollowed out in the centre. One person might be negatively comfortable, but two crowded the small craft to the danger-point.

A pirogue furnished the ordinary means of communication with the Fort, and two or three were fastened to a sapling on the other side of the stream. There was also a good boat, belonging to the Fort, which would hold five or six people. The bateau was used for carrying freight between the Fort, the Agency House, and Mackenzie's.

The river was a narrow, deep, weedy channel, with a very slight fall, and a large sand-bar stretched across the mouth of it. In Summer, one could stand at the end of the broad piazza in front of the house and see the Indians in their light canoes pass the sand-bar at will, go down into the lake, and return up-stream.

Gradually the river filled with great masses of ice, which moved lazily in a circle at the whim of some concealed current, or drifted gently toward the mouth of the stream. For several days there was no communication with the Fort; then Mackenzie broke the ice-jam at the bar, and by the middle of March a boat could easily cross.

Seemingly by preconcerted arrangement, the pack-trains arrived during the last week of March. Twenty horses came from the Illinois and Kankakee districts, and seventeen from the Rock River, loaded with skins. For a year the Indians in the Mississippi valley had exchanged peltries for provisions, beads, and liquor. Five Canadian *engagés*, with rude camping outfits strapped to their backs, walked in leisurely fashion beside the horses.

The skins were stored in the Agency House, awaiting the schooner from the American Fur Company at Fort Mackinac. The horses were tethered on the plains near the Fort, and business was carried on there, except at meal-time, when eight hungry men and four children taxed Mrs. Mackenzie's strength to the utmost.

Three days later the schooner was sighted, bearing down from the north, and, as it was practically the only event of the year, the settlement went in force to the lake shore to see it come in. A corporal's guard, bitterly complaining, was left at the Fort.

With the wind filling her sails, the ship steered south-west until she reached a point exactly opposite the mouth of the river, then turned swiftly, like a bird, and came toward the cheering crowd on shore. The waves broke in foam upon her keel, and amid the shouts of command and welcome and the clatter of the rigging, came the song of a *voyageur*, in a clear, high tenor, which won a separate recognition.

"More men to feed," sighed Mrs. Mackenzie.

"Never mind, Aunt Eleanor," said Forsyth, "I'm going to help you."

"Me, too! Me, too!" cried the children.

Mrs. Howard and Mrs. Franklin promptly offered their services, and Ronald put an affectionate arm about her waist. "Don't bother, Aunt Eleanor," he said; "you've got me."

Forsyth was surprised at the speech, and still more astonished when the Ensign made it good during the hard days that followed. He tied a big blue apron under his arms, unmindful of its ridiculous flapping about his knees, set his cap on the back of his head, rolled up his sleeves, and announced that he was ready for work. Forsyth helped him split wood, bring water, make fires, and wash dishes until

his head swam with weariness; but through it all, Ronald was serene and untroubled, keeping up a cheery whistle and a fusillade of comment and observation which lightened the situation exceedingly.

Mrs. Mackenzie found herself taking orders from the young soldier who was the self-constituted master of the cuisine, and learned to obey without question, even when she was sent to her easy-chair early in the morning and kept there during the greater part of the day.

Mrs. Howard and Mrs. Franklin were unceremoniously put out. "Kitty and Mamie," pleaded the Ensign, in an aggravating falsetto, "will you please run home? Your mother has enough to feed without your trotting in to meals." He accompanied the request with a threatening wave of a spoon filled with pancake batter, which had the desired effect.

"There," he said, "I've finally chased 'em out. I do hate to have women bothering around me, don't you, Rob?"

"I've never been bothered," laughed Forsyth; "at least, not in that way."

Swiftly upon the heels of the schooner came the boats from Milwaukee. The cargoes were landed on the lake shore and taken to the Agency by the pack-horses. All day the patient beasts plodded to and fro, carrying furs to the shore, and provisions, blankets, calicoes, prints, and a thousand other things to the storehouse. The small boats from the ship plied back and forth, landing the cargo and taking back peltries, and the men worked from sunrise to sunset.

An unusual amount of friction developed between the several *engagés* and *voyageurs*, and various disputes were settled on the spot with bare fists. Chandonnais had a rare talent for getting into trouble, and few indeed were the fights in which he did not eventually take a leading part.

"Chan," said Mackenzie, at length, "you ain't paid to fight, but to work; and if there's any more of this I'll send you to one of the other posts." This threat was always effectual, for some reason which the trader did not seek to know.

At last the tired horses finished their task and every skin was in the hold of the schooner. The Agency House was filled to bursting with the materials of trade, and a small but precious horde of gold pieces, representing the balance in his favour, was hidden in Mackenzie's leather belt.

There was a day of rest for everybody except Mrs. Mackenzie and her assistants; then Chandonnais surprised the trader by a demand for his year's wages.

"Why, Chan!" exclaimed Mackenzie, "don't you want me to keep it for you as I've been a-doing?"

The half-breed shook his head sullenly.

"Well, it's yours, and you can do just as you please with it, but I guess you'll be sorry for it later. Mind, now, this is all till next year – you don't get any advance."

Chan agreed, and Mackenzie called Robert to witness the transaction. Five shining ten-dollar gold pieces were counted out into a grimy paw that closed upon them quickly, as if in fear.

"Fifty dollars and found," Mackenzie explained to Robert as Chandonnais went away. "I don't grudge it neither, for he's a good boy when he ain't fighting."

The schooner was lying by for a favouring wind, and the pack-trains were waiting to give the horses a needed rest. Mackenzie had made an equitable division of the stores at the Agency, and each of the *engagés* knew exactly what he was to take back with him, and the approximate value of each article in terms of peltries. During the day liquor flowed freely, and at night there was a barbecue on the lake shore.

A young ox was roasted whole, in front of a huge fire which could be seen for miles around. Forsyth and the Mackenzies, with their four children, and the officers and men from the Fort with their wives and families, sat around on the sand and took part in the celebration. A single sentinel patrolled the Fort, cursing his luck, and a few stray Indians watched the festive scene from afar.

Chandonnais had his violin, and the fine tenor of the *voyageur* was lifted in song – old French *chansons* and garbled melodies of the day. The strings of the fiddle were twanged in delicate

accompaniment until the singer struck up Yankee Doodle, which, owing to the French accent and the peculiar distortion of the tune, was taken by the company as a humorous performance.

The men ate hungrily, and at last even Ronald was satisfied. Then a sudden thought struck him, and he went over to speak to Captain Franklin. "Good-bye, everybody," he shouted.

"Where are you going?" asked Forsyth.

"I'm going back to relieve that poor devil at the Fort."

In spite of a chorus of protests, he went, and the lone sentry appeared presently, grinning from ear to ear, to feast and revel while his superior officer kept guard with a bayonet over his shoulder. It was such trifles as this which endeared Ronald to the soldiers. There was not a man in barracks who would not have followed him cheerfully to certain death.

The fire died down and some of the men slept peacefully on the sand, while others yawned openly. Chandonnais improvised a weird melody which was strangely out of keeping. There was something uncanny in the air which accorded ill with the festival, and it seemed only fitting and proper when Mad Margaret materialised from the outer darkness and came into the centre of the group.

A hush came over the company and some of the newcomers, who had heard wild tales of Margaret, were secretly afraid. Chandonnais kept on playing, and she watched him with wide, wondering eyes. For a long time the magic of the strings kept her quiet, then she began to mutter to herself uneasily.

"Margaret," said Mackenzie, gently, "come here."

Chandonnais threw down his violin with a gesture of impatience, beckoned to the singer, and walked away rapidly. The *voyageur* rose lazily, yawned, and followed him with seeming indifference.

Margaret's eyes were shining like the live coals which gleamed in the ashes. She leaned forward and picked up the violin, stroking it and crooning to it as if it were a child.

"Margaret," said Mackenzie again, "come here."

She went to him with a dog-like, unquestioning obedience, and sat down in front of him. Mrs. Mackenzie was next to her husband, with the baby in her lap, and Mrs. Howard sat on her mother's left. The Lieutenant was talking with Forsyth and the Captain, and at a little distance, on Mackenzie's right, sat Doctor Norton.

A sharp cry came from the violin, where Margaret's fingers tightened on the strings. "I see blood," she said, – "much blood, then fire, and afterward peace."

No one spoke, and Margaret mumbled to herself, then pounced upon Katherine. She took her by the shoulders and shook her roughly. "You will have your heart's desire," she cried, "at the time of the blood, but sorrow will come with it!"

Before any one else had time to move, Doctor Norton caught Margaret and pulled her away.

"Oh," she shrieked, shaking her fist in his face, "the Red Death has its fingers at your throat!"

Mackenzie picked up the violin, found the bow in the darkness, and began to play – rudely enough, it is true, but in some semblance of rhythm. Margaret quieted almost immediately, and sat down in front of him, rocking back and forth in time with the faltering tune.

"Aunt Eleanor," said Forsyth, over her shoulder, "don't you think I'd better take the children home?"

"Yes, please, if you will."

She put the sleeping baby into his arms, woke Maria Indiana, and directed Ellen and Johnny to go with "Cousin Rob." The procession moved slowly, for the baby was heavy, and the other children were inclined to linger. Mad Margaret had a terrible fascination for them.

As they passed a grove of cottonwoods, angry voices came from the thicket, in a mongrel French which had but little in common with that Robert had learned at Yale.

"It is abominable," cried Chandonnais. "It is too much!"

"So?" laughed the other, mockingly; "and only last year you told me you would pay the price!"

"A year's wages for a common crucifix!"

"It is no common crucifix. It is of solid silver, and it is from the old mission, where it was blessed by Père Marquette himself."

"How do you know?"

"The good Father told me so. It has been blessed by Père Marquette and by all the holy men who have come after him. It will cure disease and keep from all harm."

"Well," sighed Chandonnais, "I'll take it."

Robert heard the clink of the half-breed's hard-earned gold, and wondered whether he had spent the whole of it for a cross.

The next day the prevailing wind of Summer blew warm and strong from the south-west, and the sails of the schooner filled as if in anticipation. Robert thought of the hardy Romans in the *Æneid*, when "the breezes called their sails," as once again the people gathered on the shore.

Letters and messages to friends at Fort Mackinac, together with many trifling gifts, were pressed upon the crew. A long line of foam lay upon the turquoise water when out in the sunlit distance the ship turned to the north, and hands were waved in farewell long after the others had ceased to see. The Mackenzies were glad it was over, even though a long year was to pass without communication with the outside world, but others were sorry. Chandonnais was non-committal and hummed to himself the song of the *voyageur*.

The pack-trains were loaded, the patient horses bending under a heavier burden than they had brought; the boats started to Milwaukee after all of the *engagés* had been given another round of liquor, and a pack-train followed them north on land. The others, silhouetted against the setting sun, went west over the unbroken prairie; the drowsy tinkle of the bells died away in a silvery murmur, and peace lay on Fort Dearborn.

At the end of the week there was a diversion which was entirely unexpected – as most real diversions contrive to be. Mrs. Mackenzie was in the garden, planting flower seeds, when soft footsteps sounded on the bare earth beside her, and a sweet voice said, "How do you do, Aunt Eleanor?"

"Why, Beatrice!" exclaimed Mrs. Mackenzie, kissing her warmly. "Where did you come from?"

"From Fort Wayne, with Captain Wells – he's across the river. I rowed over by myself. I was so afraid you'd see me coming and wouldn't be surprised."

"My dear! I'm so glad!"

"Maybe you won't be, when I tell you. I've come to live with you, Aunt Eleanor."

"That makes me happier still," said Mrs. Mackenzie, in her stately way. "You are welcome."

"Thank you, Aunty; but I haven't come to be a burden to you, and I trust I never shall be. If I'm ever a trouble, I want you to tell me so and send me away. In the first place, I have fought most terribly with my aunt and uncle at Fort Wayne. They don't know I've come."

"Why, my dear! How could you?"

"Oh, they know it now," said Beatrice, laconically, with her head on one side. "If they don't, the suspense will do them good. Anyhow, they know I'm not there, and that's enough. You know I have a little income of my own, Aunty, so I'm not dependent upon any one, and I'm going to pay my board. If you won't let me," she continued, warningly, seeing disapproval on Mrs. Mackenzie's kindly face, "I'm going back with Captain Wells to-morrow, so now!"

"I'll let you do anything you want to, dear, if you'll only stay with me. I have needed a grown daughter ever since Katherine was married."

"Then it's all arranged, and I'll stay with you for ever. I know I never could fight with you."

"Here comes your uncle."

The trader beamed with delight when Beatrice cast herself upon him and kissed him twice. "I've come to live with you," she said, "and I've just fixed it with Aunt Eleanor. Captain Wells is over at the Fort with the soldiers. We brought ten with us – it was quite an army, and the Captain kept up

military discipline all along the trail, with me for First Lieutenant. They're going to stay at the Fort, and I'm going to stay here." She pirouetted around him in high spirits.

"You're welcome, Bee; but how did it happen?"

"I fought," explained Beatrice, carelessly. "They told me what I should do and what I shouldn't. Nobody ever says 'must' to me. If you ever want me to do anything, you'll have to say 'please.' Would you mind going over to the Fort after my things, Uncle? I've got a big box with all my worldly goods inside of it."

Mackenzie went, for men always did as Beatrice suggested.

"Come in, dear," said her aunt. "You can have the east room, so you'll get the morning sun."

"How sweet you are, Aunt Eleanor," murmured the girl, with her arm thrown around the other's shoulders, for she was even taller than Mrs. Mackenzie. Her face had the deep, creamy tint which sometimes goes with violet eyes and brown hair with auburn lights in it. Beneath a short nose, tilted ever so slightly, was the most bewitching mouth in the world – small and perfect in shape, dangerously curved, and full of a daring coquetry. When she smiled, one saw that her teeth were small and white and absolutely even, but soon forgot that minor detail. At first glance, no one would have called her pretty; she was like something beautiful which must be studied before it is appreciated.

The arrival of the visitor had effectually broken up the school. "Tuzzin Bee! Tuzzin Bee!" crowed Maria Indiana, delightedly.

"You darling," cried Beatrice, catching the child in her arms; "have you remembered me a whole year?"

Robert was introduced as "a cousin on the other side of the house," and he bent gravely over the girl's hand.

"Are we truly cousins?" she asked.

There was a confused silence, then Robert found his tongue. "I trust we are," he said, with the air of a gentleman of the old school, "for you are the first flower of Spring."

The door burst open and Ronald entered. "What do you think," he shouted; "we've got troops! Captain Wells has brought ten soldiers to the Fort!"

"Miss Manning," said Mrs. Mackenzie, "let me present Ensign George Ronald, of Fort Dearborn."

Beatrice bowed, but he stared at her for an instant, then brought his heels together and raised his hand to his forehead in military salute. There was an awkward instant, then the deep crimson dyed the Ensign's face. He turned – and bolted.

From the window Beatrice saw him, in a pirogue, pulling back to the Fort as if his life depended upon it, then she laughed – a deep, sweet, vibrant laugh, that thrilled Robert to the very depths of his soul.

CHAPTER VI

COUSINS

"Aunty," said Beatrice, at breakfast the next morning, "do you think I scared him to death?"

"What do you mean, dear?"

"Why, that young man – yesterday. Mr. Ronald is his name, isn't it?"

Mrs. Mackenzie laughed at the memory of the Ensign's scarlet face. "I think he'll get over it," she said; "don't you, Rob?"

"I certainly do. He's the last man in the world to be afraid of a woman."

"Oh, yes, he'll recover," put in Mackenzie, significantly.

"I think it's lovely here," observed Beatrice, irrelevantly, "and I know I'm going to like it."

"We're going to try very hard to make you happy," said Forsyth, with evident sincerity.

"I've wanted to live with Aunt Eleanor ever since last Spring, when they all came to Fort Wayne. Otherwise, I wouldn't have fought. That is, perhaps I wouldn't."

Rising from the table, she went out on the piazza, and Robert instinctively followed her. If the long journey on horseback had tired her, she showed no sign of it, for she might have been a part of the morning as she stood there, smiling, with the sunlight on her wind-blown hair.

The heavy brown coil, with auburn lights and black shadows in it, had a strange fascination for Forsyth. He liked the way her hair grew around her forehead and temples, and the little curl that escaped at her neck. She was looking away from him, and he thought her unaware of his scrutiny till she said quietly: "Well, how do you like your new cousin? Do you think I will do?"

"Yes," he stammered, dimly grateful for the impulse that kept her face still turned away; "that is, very much."

"How am I going to get my horse over here," she demanded suddenly.

"What horse?" asked Robert, stupidly.

"The one I rode from Fort Wayne, of course. Did I understand you to say you had been to college?"

"Yes; I graduated."

"Really?" Beatrice turned upon him a dazzling smile. "I never should have thought it," she added pleasantly.

"Where is your horse?" he asked, crimsoning.

"You don't see it anywhere, do you?"

"N – no."

"Then, obviously, it's at the Fort, isn't it?"

"I – I suppose so."

"Well, then, we're making progress. Now, how do I get it over here?"

"Swim," said Robert, helplessly, at his wit's end.

Beatrice stamped her small foot upon the piazza. "Uncle John," she called, "come here! How is Queen coming across the river?" she asked, when he appeared.

"Well, now, Bee, I don't know. There's no bridge and no way to go around. She'll either have to come in a boat or swim."

Robert flashed a grateful glance at him, but said nothing.

"She won't get into a boat," said Beatrice, with a puzzled little frown on her face. "We swam a river together once, but she didn't like it, and we both got wet."

"Go down near the bar and come across," suggested Forsyth, having partially recovered his self-possession. "It can't be very deep there."

"No; but the sand is soft. Better leave her at the Fort, Bee, and you can go over there when you want her. It's safer," he added. "The Indians might get her out of my barn, but she'll be all right in the garrison stables."

"That settles it," replied Beatrice. "Here comes Captain Wells."

An erect, soldierly figure came up the path with the characteristic walk of the Indian. His eyes were small and dark, and his face was bronzed like the people among whom he had lived; but when he smiled at Beatrice and bowed with mock humility, all traces of the savage were instantly effaced. He wore the rough garb of the plainsman, and the only suggestion of vanity was in the black ribbon that tied his queue.

"Mackenzie," he said, "I warn you. You have a tyrannical commander-in-chief."

Beatrice pouted prettily. "I'm sorry for Uncle John," she said; "but it's too late to help him now. I've come for keeps."

All the time he was speaking, Captain Wells's piercing glance was fixed upon Forsyth, to whom he had just been introduced, but of whom he had heard at the Fort, and the young man grew vaguely uncomfortable.

"Your pardon, sir," said Captain Wells. "I fear the manners of the prairie seem strange to a gentleman of culture. My only excuse is that your face interests me."

"Come on over to the Fort, Cousin Rob," suggested Beatrice, with ready tact, "and I'll introduce you to Queen. They don't want us here, anyhow."

Together they climbed into the pirogue in which Captain Wells had crossed the river, and with some difficulty reached the opposite shore. Ronald was standing at the entrance, talking with the sentinel, and when he saw them coming he went toward the barracks with more haste than dignity. Forsyth laughed, but Beatrice held her head high, and a faint flush stole into her cheeks.

"Where are the stables, Cousin Rob?"

"This way."

Robert's involuntary gasp of admiration at the sight of Queen instantly placed him high in his fair cousin's favour. "Isn't she a beauty?" she asked.

The little black mare whinnied joyously at the approach of her young mistress, prancing and curvetting prettily in spite of her halter.

"Poor dear," said Beatrice, "you aren't used to being tied, are you?"

She led the horse out on the parade-ground and exclaimed with pleasure at the satin smoothness of the glossy coat. The grooms had done their work well and stood around, grinning broadly, while she praised them. The mare might have hailed from the blue grass country, so perfect were her lines. She was built for speed as well as beauty, and the small black hoofs pawed the ground impatiently, as she rubbed her velvet nose against her owner's cheek by way of a caress.

"There isn't any sugar, Queen," laughed the girl, "and I just came to say good-morning."

"We'll have some rides on the prairie together," said Robert. "My horse isn't much, compared with yours, but he used to get along pretty well on the roads back East."

"Aren't there any roads here?"

"I haven't discovered any, but the prairie isn't bad."

"Come on out now," said Beatrice, "and I'll show you what she can do."

As they passed the barracks, Robert was dimly aware of Ronald's scrutiny from some safe point of observation; but Beatrice chattered merrily until they reached the open space beyond the Fort.

A convenient stump stood near by and she led the mare to it. "Now then, Beauty," she said. In an instant she was mounted on Queen's bare back, and there ensued an exhibition of horsemanship that would have put a cavalryman to shame. Some of the soldiers came out to see the mare change her gait at a word from her rider, and turn readily with neither bit nor bridle. The pins dropped, one by one, from the girl's hair, and when she turned out on the open plain for a final gallop, it streamed out behind her as Atalanta's may have done when she made her last race.

Beatrice was riding like the wind. She went straight on until she was scarcely a speck upon the horizon, then circled back gradually. Queen was on her mettle, and no dame of high degree ever held her head more proudly than the little black mare with the tossing mane. With a last turn she came toward the Fort straight as an arrow, and stopped so suddenly at the word that she was thrown back upon her haunches.

The girl slipped to the ground, laughing and flushed. "Oh!" she cried, "that was glorious, wasn't it, Queen?"

"I'm proud of my cousin," was all Forsyth said; but there was a volume of meaning in the tone.

A groom led the horse away to be rubbed down, and Beatrice began a fruitless search for the lost hairpins, in which Robert refused to join her. "Don't put it up," he pleaded, "you look so much prettier with it down."

"I can't, anyway," she said. "I haven't a single pin."

The heavy mass of brown and auburn hung far below her waist, rippling ever so slightly, and ending in a curl. A pink flush was on her face and her eyes were dancing. "Come," she continued, "they're talking about me over there, and I know it."

She had hit upon the truth, for the Mackenzies were having an animated conference with Captain Wells. "I never suspected there was any trouble," he was saying, "and she didn't mention it. She was waiting for us a piece up the trail, and two men with her were carrying her box. She said she was coming, so the soldiers took her things and she rode with me.

"As she told you, they probably know it now, but I'll see them the first thing when I go back and explain. They'll be glad to know she's safe. She's as skittish a filly as I've ever laid eyes on – she won't wear a bit, nor stand; and that little black devil that she rides is made out of the same kind of timber. The two of them will have the settlement by the ears inside of a month – you wait and see."

Beatrice appeared at this juncture and pointed a rosy finger at Captain Wells. "Perjurer!" she laughed. "You've been taking my character away from me!"

"I never tell anything but the truth, Miss," returned the Captain, awkwardly. "Are you going back with me this afternoon?"

"I told you once," she answered, "that I was going to live with Aunt Eleanor. I'm never going to Fort Wayne again!"

"Do you want me to take a letter or a message to your people?"

"No!" cried Beatrice, with her eyes blazing. "If you dare to mention me to them, or say I sent any kind of a message, I'll – I'll haunt you!"

The Captain went out, murmuring confused apologies; and Robert, feeling himself in the way, went to his room. The moccasins hanging on the wall gave him a vivid moment of self-knowledge. The dainty, arched foot he had seen for the first time when Beatrice stamped on the piazza, might easily have been the one for which the moccasins were made. He stroked the pretty things caressingly, with a soft light in his eyes.

"I knew she was coming," he said to himself; "but how did I know?"

In the afternoon, Mackenzie and the officers rode a little way on the Fort Wayne trail with Captain Wells, who was charged with many letters and messages for friends there, and Beatrice watched the start from the window of the living-room.

"Who's that, Aunt Eleanor, riding beside Uncle John?"

"Captain Franklin, in command of the Fort."

"And who's the mean-looking one, twisting his mustache?"

"Lieutenant Howard, dear – Katherine's husband."

"Oh!" said Beatrice, quickly. "Aren't they happy together?"

There was a long silence. "Not very happy, I'm afraid," sighed Mrs. Mackenzie.

"I'm sorry," said the girl, with genuine sympathy. "Do you think I could help in any way?"

"I don't know, Bee – I wish you could. You will be company for Katherine, and perhaps you can make it easier for her, in some ways, if you try."

"Poor Cousin Kit! Of course I'll try! Look, Aunty," she said, abruptly pointing to a belated rider who was galloping to overtake the others. He had his cap in his hand, and his yellow hair was blowing in the wind. "That's the big boy I scared. Is he married?"

"No," replied Mrs. Mackenzie. Her lips did not move, but her eyes smiled.

"He's handsome," said Beatrice, dispassionately. "I've lived at all the posts – Fort Wayne, Detroit, and Fort Mackinac, and he's the best-looking soldier I've seen. I'd like to paint his picture, if he'd let me."

"I'll ask him, dear; I think he'll let you."

"Aunt Eleanor!" cried Beatrice, reproachfully.

"Why not?"

"Oh – because. Where are those soldiers going, Aunty?"

Mrs. Mackenzie looked out of the window and saw half a dozen men in the boat belonging to the Fort, headed up-stream.

"They're going fishing, I guess. I'll have to go away a little while this afternoon, Bee. Mrs. Burns is sick and she needs me – you won't mind, will you? I'll leave the table all set, and I'll surely be back before dark. Are you afraid to be left alone?"

"No. I'm not afraid of anything; but where is Cousin Rob?"

"He's teaching the children. They don't seem to get much time, somehow, in the morning, so they begin right after dinner and study till supper time. I'm so glad to have Robert here – he's doing wonders with them."

"He seems nice," said Beatrice, "and I like him. Can't I go with you, Aunt Eleanor?"

"No, dear – somebody has to stay with the baby. He's asleep, though, and I don't think he'll trouble you."

"I'll take care of him, Aunty. Don't fret about us."

Nevertheless, the house seemed very lonely to Beatrice after Mrs. Mackenzie went away, and she roamed about restlessly. For a time she amused herself by examining the articles on the depleted shelves behind the counters, but the interest soon vanished. She could find nothing to read except a soiled and ragged copy of a paper three months old, which she had already seen at Fort Wayne. The murmur of voices from a distant room, reached her ears with sudden and attractive significance, and her face brightened.

"I don't know as I should do it," she said to herself, but she went to the door and tapped softly.

Robert opened it, in surprise, and Beatrice stepped into the room. "I've come to visit the school," she said.

"Goody!" cried Johnny.

She seated herself on the window ledge and smiled radiantly at the embarrassed teacher. Discipline had been difficult from the beginning, and the guest made matters worse.

"Now, then, Johnny," Forsyth said, "what were we studying?"

"Eight times three."

"Yes, and how many are eight times three?"

"Twenty – "

"Twenty-one," said Beatrice.

"Twenty-one," repeated Johnny, readily, with the air of one who has accomplished a difficult feat.

Robert frowned and bit his lips. "Eight times three are twenty-four, Johnny. Write it ten times on your slate – that will help you to remember."

"What a gift for teaching," murmured Beatrice. Robert flushed, but did not speak, and there was no sound in the room but the pencil scratching on the slate.

"Cousin Rob?"

"Yes, Johnny. What is it?"

"Why, Cousin Bee just said eight times three were twenty-one. Did she tell a lie, or didn't she know?"

"Never mind, Johnny; just attend to your lesson."

"Mamma says it's wicked to tell lies," observed Ellen, virtuously, sucking her slate pencil.

Beatrice was enjoying herself hugely. She flashed a wicked glance at Forsyth as she said, "I'm so glad I came!"

"Go on with your work, Ellen. I want you to write that sentence five times without a mistake. Maria Indiana, bring me your primer. Begin here."

"Tan't. Baby's fordot."

"Oh, no, you haven't. We learned this yesterday, don't you remember? Now, then, – 'I see,' – what's the rest of it?"

"I see a tat."

"Where?" asked Beatrice, lightly, and Maria Indiana gazed at her, sadly bewildered.

"Where is the cat?" she asked again. "I don't see any."

"Here, Baby," said Robert; "look at the picture."

"I don't like a picture cat," said Beatrice, with a tempting smile, as she held out her arms to the child.

"Tuzzin Bee!" crowed the baby, running to her, "me loves oo!"

"I've got this done now," said Johnny. "Eight times three are twenty-four."

"That's a mistake," put in Beatrice. "Didn't I tell you it was twenty-one?"

"Cousin Rob," asked Ellen, in deep trouble, "if Cousin Bee has told a lie, will she go to hell?"

"No," sobbed the baby; "me doesn't want Tuzzin Bee to go to hell!"

Robert's face was pale, and there was a dangerous look in the set lines of his mouth. He went to Beatrice, took her by the shoulders, and gently, but firmly, put her out of the room, then locked the door.

"Well, I never!" she said to herself.

Beatrice was not given to self-analysis, but she could not keep from wondering why she felt so queer. She knew she had no right to be angry, and yet she was furious. She was certain that she would have done the same thing if she had been in his place, and much earlier at that; but the fact did not lessen the enormity of his crime.

"He dared to touch me!" she whispered, with her face hidden.

The long afternoon faded into dusk, and then Mackenzie came home. "Where's mother?" he asked.

"She went to see Mrs. Burns. She said she was sick."

"Have you been lonesome, Bee?"

The girl bit her lips. "Not very," she answered grimly.

School was dismissed and the children trooped into the living-room. Robert spoke pleasantly to his uncle, but took no notice of Beatrice.

"Uncle John," she said at length, "what do you think of a person who takes a lady by the shoulders and puts her out of a room?"

"If you had been a lady," retorted Robert, "I wouldn't have put you out."

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