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THE BUFFALO RUNNERS: A TALE OF THE RED RIVER PLAINS

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Chapter One.
A Tale of the Red River Plains. Help!

A blizzard was blowing wildly over the American prairies one winter day in the earlier part of the present century.

Fresh, free and straight, it came from the realms of Jack Frost, and cold—bitterly cold—like the bergs on the Arctic seas, to which it had but recently said farewell.

Snow, fine as dust and sharp as needles, was caught up bodily by the wind in great masses—here in snaky coils, there in whirling eddies, elsewhere in rolling clouds; but these had barely time to assume indefinite forms when they were furiously scattered and swept away as by the besom of destruction, while earth and sky commingled in a smother of whitey-grey.

All the demons of the Far North seemed to have taken an outside passage on that blizzard, so tremendous was the roaring and shrieking, while the writhing of tormented snow-drifts suggested powerfully the madness of agony.

Two white and ghostly pillars moved slowly but steadily through all this hurly-burly in a straight line. One of the pillars was short and broad; the other was tall and stately. Both were very solid—agreeably so, when contrasted with surrounding chaos. Suddenly the two pillars stopped—though the gale did not.

Said the short pillar to the tall one—

"Taniel Tavidson, if we will not get to the Settlement this night; it iss my belief that every one o' them will perish."

"Fergus," replied the tall pillar, sternly, "they shall *not* perish if I can help it. At all events, if they do, I shall die in the attempt to save them. Come on."

Daniel Davidson became less like a white pillar as he spoke, and more like a man, by reason of his shaking a good deal of the snow off his stalwart person. Fergus McKay followed his comrade's example, and revealed the fact—for a few minutes—that beneath the snow-mask there stood a young man with a beaming countenance of fiery red, the flaming character of which, however, was relieved by an expression of ineffable good-humour.

The two men resumed their march over the dreary plain in silence. Indeed, conversation in the circumstances was out of the question. The brief remarks that had been made when they paused to recover breath were howled at each other while they stood face to face.

The nature of the storm was such that the gale seemed to rush at the travellers from all quarters at once—including above and below. Men of less vigour and resolution would have been choked by it; but men who don't believe in choking, and have thick necks, powerful frames, vast experience, and indomitable wills are not easily choked!

"It blows hard—whatever," muttered Fergus to himself, with that prolonged emphasis on the last syllable of the last word which is eminently suggestive of the Scottish Highlander.

Davidson may have heard the remark, but he made no reply.

Day declined, but its exit was not marked by much difference in the very feeble light, and the two men held steadily on. The moon came out. As far as appearances went she might almost as well have stayed in, for nobody saw her that night. Her mere existence somewhere in the sky, however,

rendered the indescribable chaos visible. Hours passed by, but still the two men held on their way persistently.

They wore five-feet-long snow-shoes. Progress over the deep snow without these would have been impossible. One traveller walked behind the other to get the benefit of his beaten track, but the benefit was scarcely appreciable, for the whirling snow filled each footstep up almost as soon as it was made. Two days and a night had these men travelled with but an hour or two of rest in the shelter of a copse, without fire, and almost without food, yet they pushed on with the energy of fresh and well-fed men.

Nothing but some overpowering necessity could have stimulated them to such prolonged and severe exertion. Even self-preservation might have failed to nerve them to it, for both had well-nigh reached the limit of their exceptional powers, but each was animated by a stronger motive than self. Fergus had left his old father in an almost dying state on the snow-clad plains, and Davidson had left his affianced bride.

The buffalo-hunt had failed that year; winter had set in with unwonted severity and earlier than usual. The hunters, with the women and children who followed them in carts to help and to reap the benefit of the hunt, were starving. Their horses died or were frozen to death; carts were snowed up; and the starving hunters had been scattered in making the best of their way back to the Settlement of Red River from which they had started.

When old McKay broke down, and his only daughter Elspie had firmly asserted her determination to remain and die with him, Fergus McKay and Daniel Davidson felt themselves to be put upon their mettle—called on to face a difficulty of the most appalling nature. To remain on the snow-clad prairie without food or shelter would be death to all, for there was no living creature there to be shot or trapped. On the other hand, to travel a hundred miles or so on foot—and without food, seemed an impossibility. Love, however, ignores the impossible! The two young men resolved on the attempt. They were pretty well aware of the extent of their physical powers. They would put them fairly to the test for once—even though for the last time! They prepared for the old man and his daughter a shelter in the heart of a clump of willows, near to which spot they had found a group of the hapless hunters already dead and frozen.

Here, as far from the frozen group as possible, they made an encampment by digging down through the snow till the ground was reached. As much dried wood as could be found was collected, and a fire made. The young men left their blankets behind, and, of the small quantity of provisions that remained, they took just sufficient to sustain life. Then, with cheery words of encouragement, they said good-bye, and set out on their journey to the Settlement for help.

The object at which they aimed was almost gained at the point when we introduce them to the reader.

“Taniel!” said Fergus, coming to a sudden halt.

“Well?” exclaimed the other.

“It iss sleepy that I am. Maybe if I wass to lie down—”

He ceased to speak. Davidson looked anxiously into his face, and saw that he had already begun to give way to irresistible drowsiness. Without a moment’s hesitation he seized the Highlander by the throat, and shook him as if he had been a mere baby.

“Iss it for fightin’ ye are?” said Fergus, whose good-nature was not proof against such rough and unexpected treatment.

“Yes, my boy, that’s just what I am for, and I think you’ll get the worst of it too.”

“What iss that you say? Ay, ay! You will hev to bend your back then, Taniel, for it iss not every wan that can give Fergus McKay the worst of it!”

Davidson made no reply, but gave his comrade a shake so violent that it put to flight the last vestige of his good-humour and induced him to struggle so fiercely that in a few minutes the drowsiness was also, and effectually, driven away.

"You'll do now," said Davidson, relaxing his grip and panting somewhat.

"Ay, Taniel, I will be doin' now. An' you're a frund in need whatever," returned the restored Highlander with a smile of appreciation.

About an hour later the travellers again stopped. This time it was Davidson who called a halt.

"Fergus," he said, "we have been successful so far, thank God. But we must part here. Half-an-hour will take me to my father's house, and I want you to go down to the hut of François La Certe; it is nearer than our house, you know—and get him to help you."

"Surely, Tan, that will be wasted time," objected the Highlander. "Of all the lazy useless scamps in Rud Ruver, François La Certe iss the laziest an' most useless."

"Useful enough for our purpose, however," returned Davidson. "Send him up to Fort Garry with a message, while you lie down and rest. If you don't rest, you will yourself be useless in a short time. La Certe is not such a bad fellow as people think him, specially when his feelings are touched."

"That may be as you say, Tan. I will try—*whatever*."

So saying, the two men parted and hurried on their several ways.

Chapter Two.
A Lazy Couple described—and roused

François La Certe was seated on the floor of his hut smoking a long clay pipe beside an open wood fire when Fergus McKay approached. His wife was seated beside him calmly smoking a shorter pipe with obvious enjoyment.

The man was a Canadian half-breed. His wife was an Indian woman. They were both moderately young and well matched, for they thoroughly agreed in everything conceivable—or otherwise. In the length and breadth of the Settlement there could not have been found a lazier or more good-natured or good-for-nothing couple than La Certe and his spouse. Love was, if we may venture to say so, the chief element in the character of each. Love of self was the foundation. Then, happily, love of each other came next. Rising gracefully, the superstructure may be described as, love of tobacco, love of tea, love of ease, and love of general comfort, finishing off with a top-dressing, or capital, of pronounced, decided, and apparently incurable love of indolence. They had only one clear and unmistakable hatred about them, and that was the hatred of work. They had a child about four years of age which was like-minded—and not unlike-bodied.

In the wilderness, as in the city, such individuals are well-known by the similarity of their characteristics. It is not that they can't work, but they won't work—though, of course, if taxed with this disposition they would disclaim it with mild indignation, or an expression of hurt remonstrance, for they are almost too lazy to become enraged. "Take life easy, or, if we can't take it easy, let us take it as easy as we can," is, or ought to be, their motto. In low life at home they slouch and smile. In high life they saunter and affect easy-going urbanity—slightly mingled with mild superiority to things in general. Whatever rank of life they belong to they lay themselves out with persistent resolution to do as little work as they can; to make other people do as much work for them as possible; to get out of life as much of enjoyment as may be attainable—consistently, of course, with the incurable indolence—and, to put off as long as may be the evil day which, they perceive or suspect, must inevitably be coming.

The curious thing about this race of beings is, that, whether in high or low station, they are never ashamed of themselves—or of their position as drones in the world's hive. They seem rather to apologise for their degradation as a thing inevitable, for which they are not accountable—and sometimes, in the case of the rich, as a thing justifiable.

"I'm glad I did not go to the plains this fall," said La Certe, stirring the logs on the fire with his toe and emitting a prolonged sigh of mingled smoke and contentment, while a blast from the bleak nor'-west shook every blackened rafter in his little hut.

"Heel hee!" responded his wife, whose Indian name—translated—was Slowfoot, and might have been Slowtongue with equal propriety, for she was quite an adept at the art of silence. She frequently caused a giggle to do duty for speech. This suited her husband admirably, for he was fond of talking—could tell a good story, sing a good song, and express his feelings in a good hearty laugh.

"Yes, it will be hard for the poor boys who have gone to the plains, the weather is so awful, to say nothing of the women."

"Ho," replied Slowfoot—though what she meant to express by this no mortal knows—nor, perhaps, cares. It meant nothing bad, however, for she smiled seraphically and sent forth a stream of smoke, which, mingling with that just emitted by her husband, rose in a curling harmony to the roof.

Slowfoot was not a bad-looking woman as North American Indians go. She was brown unquestionably, and dirty without doubt, but she had a pleasant expression, suggestive of general good-will, and in the budding period of life must have been even pretty. She was evidently older than her husband, who might, perhaps, have been a little over thirty.

"I should not wonder," continued La Certe, "if the buffalo was drove away, and the people starved this year. But the buffalo, perhaps, will return in time to save them."

"Hm!" responded the wife, helping herself to some very strong tea, which she poured out of a tin kettle into a tin mug and sweetened with maple sugar.

"Do you know if Cloudbrow went with them?" asked the half-breed, pushing forward his mug for a supply of the cheering beverage.

"No, he stopped in his house," replied the woman, rousing herself for a moment to the conversational point, but relapsing immediately.

The man spoke in patois French, the woman in her native Cree language. For convenience we translate their conversation as near as may be into the English in which they were wont to converse with the Scotch settlers who, some time before, had been sent out by the Earl of Selkirk to colonise that remote part of the northern wilderness.

La Certe's father was a French Canadian, his mother an Indian woman, but both having died while he was yet a boy he had been brought or left to grow up under the care of an English woman who had followed the fortunes of the La Certe family. His early companions had been half-breeds and Indians. Hence he could speak the English, French, and Indian languages with equal incorrectness and facility.

"You don't like Cloudbrow," remarked the man with an inquiring glance over the rim of his mug. "Why you not like him?"

"Hee! hee!" was Slowfoot's lucid reply. Then, with an unwonted frown on her mild visage, she added with emphasis—

"No! I *not* like him."

"I know that," returned the husband, setting down his mug and resuming his pipe, "but why?"

To this the lady answered with a sound too brief to spell, and the gentleman, being accustomed to his wife's little eccentricities, broke into a hilarious laugh, and assured her that Cloudbrow was not a bad fellow—a capital hunter and worthy of more regard than she was aware of.

"For," said he, "Cloudbrow is willing to wait till spring for payment of the horse an' cart I hired from him last year. You know that I could not pay him till I go to the plains an' get another load of meat an' leather. You will go with me, Slowfoot, an' we will have grand times of it with buffalo-humps an' marrow bones, an' tea an' tobacco. Ah! it makes my mouth water. Give me more tea. So. That will do. What a noise the wind makes! I hopes it won't blow over the shed an' kill the horse. But if it do I cannot help that. Cloudbrow could not ask me to pay for what the wind does."

There came another gust of such violence, as he spoke, that even Slowfoot's benignant expression changed to a momentary glance of anxiety, for the shingles on the roof rattled, and the rafters creaked as if the hut were groaning under the strain. It passed, however, and the pair went on smoking with placid contentment, for they had but recently had a "square" meal of pemmican and flour.

This compost when cooked in a frying-pan is exceedingly rich and satisfying—not to say heavy—food, but it does not incommode such as La Certe and his wife. It even made the latter feel amiably disposed to Cloudbrow.

This *sobriquet* had been given by the half-breeds to a young Scotch settler named Duncan McKay, in consequence of the dark frown which had settled habitually on his brow—the result of bad temper and unbridled passion. He was younger brother to that Fergus who has already been introduced to the reader. Having been partially trained, while in Scotland, away from the small farm-house of his father, and having received a better education, Duncan conceived himself to stand on a higher level than the sedate and uneducated Fergus. Thus pride was added to his bad temper. But he was not altogether destitute of good points. What man is? One of these was a certain reckless open-handedness, so that he was easily imposed on by the protestations and assurances of the sly, plausible, and lazy La Certe.

The couple were still engaged in smoking, quaffing tea, and other intellectual pursuits, when they heard sounds outside as of some one approaching. Another moment, and the door burst open, and a man in white stepped in. He saluted them with a familiar and hasty "*bonjour*," as he stamped and beat the snow vigorously from his garments.

"What? Antoine Dechamp!" exclaimed La Certe, rising slowly to welcome his friend; "you seem in hurry?"

"Ay—in great hurry! They are starving on the plains! Many are dead! Davidson has come in! He is more than half-dead! Can hardly tell the news! Drops asleep when he is speaking! Luckily I met him when going home in my cariole! Okématan, the Indian, was with me. So he got out, and said he would pilot Davidson safe home! He said something about Fergus McKay, which I could not understand, so I have come on, and will drive to Fort Garry with the news! But my horse has broke down! Is yours in the stable?"

Dechamp was a sturdy young half-breed and an old playmate of La Certe. He spoke with obvious impatience at the delay caused by having so much to tell.

"Is your horse in the stable?" he demanded sharply a second time, while his friend began, with exasperating composure, to assure him that it was, but that the horse was not his.

"Cloudbrow is its owner," he said, "and you know if anything happens to it he will —. Stay, I will get you lantern—"

He stopped, for Dechamp, observing a large key hanging on the wall, had seized it and rushed out of the hut without waiting for a lantern.

"Strange, how easy some men get into a fuss!" remarked La Certe to his surprised, but quiet, spouse as he lighted a large tin lantern, and went to the door. Looking out with an expression of discomfort, he put on his cap, and prepared to face the storm in the cause of humanity. He held the lantern high up first, however, and peered under it as if to observe the full extent of the discomfort before braving it. Just then a furious gust blew out the light.

"Ha! I expected that," he said, with a sigh that was strongly suggestive of relief, as he returned to the fire to relight the lantern.

On going the second time to the door he observed the form of his friend leading the horse past —both of them looking dim and spectral through the driving snow.

"Dechamp have good eyes!" he remarked, halting on the threshold. "There is light enough without the lantern; besides—ha! there, it is out again! What a trouble it is! Impossible to keep it in—such a night!"

"Hee! hee!" giggled Slowfoot, who was busy refilling her pipe.

La Certe was still standing in a state of hesitancy, troubled by a strong desire to help his friend, and a stronger desire to spare himself, when he was thrown somewhat off his wonted balance by the sudden reappearance of Dechamp, leading, or rather supporting, a man.

Need we say that it was Fergus McKay, almost blind and dumb from exhaustion, for the parting from Dan Davidson which we have mentioned had proved to be the last straw which broke them both down, and it is probable that the frozen corpse of poor Dan would have been found next day on the snow, had he not been accidentally met by Dechamp, and taken in charge by the Indian Okématan. Fergus, having a shorter way to go, and, perhaps, possessing a little more vitality or endurance, had just managed to stagger to La Certe's hut when he encountered the same man who, an hour previously, had met and saved his companion further down the Settlement.

The moment Fergus entered the hut, he looked wildly round, and opened his mouth as if to speak. Then he suddenly collapsed, and fell in a heap upon the floor, scattering flakes of snow from his person in all directions.

La Certe and his wife, though steeped in selfishness, were by no means insensible to the sufferings of humanity when these were actually made visible to their naked eyes. Like many—too many—people, they were incapable of being impressed very deeply through their ears, but could be

keenly touched through the eyes. No sooner did they behold the condition of Fergus—who was well-known to them—than they dropped their apathetic characters as though they had been garments.

In her haste Slowfoot let fall her pipe, which broke to atoms on the floor—but she heeded it not. La Certe capsized his mug of tea—but regarded it not; and while the former proceeded to remove the shawl from Fergus's neck and chafe his cold hands, the latter assisted Dechamp to drag the exhausted man a little nearer to the fire, and poured a cup of warm tea down his throat.

Their efforts, though perchance not as wisely directed as they might have been, were so vigorously conducted that success rewarded them. Fergus soon began to show signs of returning animation. A hunter of the western wilderness is not easily overcome, neither is he long of reviving, as a rule, if not killed outright.

They set him up in a sitting posture with his back against a box, and his feet towards the fire. Heaving a deep sigh, Fergus looked round with a bewildered, anxious expression. In a moment intelligence returned to his eyes, and he made a violent attempt to rise, but Dechamp held him down.

"Let me up!" he gasped, "life and death are in the matter—if it iss not death already—"

"Be still, Fergus McKay," said Dechamp, with that firmness of manner and tone which somehow command respect; "I know all about it. Take one bit of bread, one swig more of tea, and you go with me to Fort Garry, to tell the Gov'nor what you know. He will send help at once."

Great was the relief of Fergus when he heard this. Submitting to treatment like an obedient child, he was soon fit to stagger to the sleigh or cariole, into which he was carefully stuffed and packed like a bale of goods by La Certe and his wife, who, to their credit be it recorded, utterly ignored, for once, the discomforts of the situation.

Fergus was asleep before the packing was quite done. Then Dechamp jumped in beside him, and drove off in the direction of the Hudson's Bay Company's establishment, Fort Garry, while our worthy couple returned to their hut to indulge in a final and well-earned pipe and a mug of the strongest possible tea.

Chapter Three.
To the Rescue

Winnipeg city, with its thousands of inhabitants, now covers the spot to which Antoine Dechamp drove his friend Fergus McKay.

At the time we write of, the only habitation there was Fort Garry, a solitary stone building of some strength, but without regular troops of any kind, and held only by a few employés of the Hudson's Bay Company, who were there only in the capacity of fur-traders.

Here the Governor of the colony received the unexpected guests with hospitality; heard the tale of Fergus with a sympathetic ear, and at once organised a rescue-expedition with dog-sledges and provisions.

While this was being done at the fort, Dan Davidson was similarly employed at Prairie Cottage, the residence of his mother, who, since the death of her husband—a farmer from the Scottish Lowlands—had managed her farm with the aid of her two sons, Dan and Peter; the latter being a youth of seventeen. She was also assisted by her only daughter, Jessie, who was over thirteen years of age, and already esteemed an authority on the subjects of poultry, cookery, and dairy produce. A small servant—a French half-breed named Louise—completed the household of the widow Davidson.

On reaching home, Dan, like Fergus McKay, experienced difficulties that he had not counted on, for his overtaxed strength fairly broke down, and he found himself almost incapable at first of telling his tale of disaster. Then, when he tried to go about the needful preparations for rescue, he found himself unable to resist drowsiness, and if he ventured to sit down for a moment he fell sound asleep at once.

Those who have experienced this condition know how overwhelming and intensely disagreeable it is, especially if resistance to it is rendered imperative by a matter of life or death. Davidson struggled bravely against it of course, but the struggle had already been so long continued that his efforts were now in vain.

Starting up from the supper which Jessie had spread before him, and which he was languidly attempting to eat, he said, almost fiercely, "Where is the wash-tub, Louise?"

The surprised little domestic pointed to the article in question.

"Here; fetch some cold water."

"It is full," said Louise with a strong French accent and a pretty lisp.

Without the ceremony even of throwing back his collar Dan plunged his head into the water, and, after steeping it for a few seconds, drew it out refreshed.

His younger brother entered the room at that moment.

"Peter," he said, drying his head violently with a jack-towel, "have you got the sledge ready, and the provisions packed, and the empty sledge wi' the buffalo-robes?"

"Ay—all ready," answered the other, for he was a sprightly, willing youth, who rejoiced in any unexpected demand on his superabundant energies. "But I say, Dan, you are quite unfit to start off again without rest."

He looked in his brother's face anxiously, for Dan had seated himself once more to his food, but seemed unable to deal with it properly. "Why, you've got the knife and fork in the wrong hands, Dan! You *must* have an hour's rest before we start."

"Impossible," returned the other with a dazed look, as he seized a mug of water and drank it off. "An hour's delay may mean death to Elspie and old Duncan McKay."

"But let *me* start off at once," returned Peter, eagerly. "I've a pretty good guess, from your description, where you left them. Besides, the gale is not so bad now. After an hour's sleep you will be able to start fresh, maybe overtake me. Jess will be sure to waken you in—"

He stopped, for his brother's head had bent slowly forward while he was speaking, and now rested on his arms on the table. The worn-out man was sound asleep.

"Just leave him, Peter, and be off wi' the dogs," said Mrs Davidson. "Okématan will keep you in the right track. I'll be sure to wake him in time to catch you up."

"No, mother, not without his leave," said the youth, firmly. "Dan! Dan! rouse up, old boy! Shall we start without you?"

"Yes, yes—I'm ready," said the poor fellow, starting up and swaying to and fro like a drunken man; "but—I say, Peter, I'm done for. I depend on you, lad, to keep me up to the scratch. Lay the dog-whip across my shoulders if I try to lie down. Promise me that. D'ee hear!"

"Yes, I understand," returned the youth with intense earnestness. "Now look here, Dan, you know me: will you trust me?"

"Of course I will," answered Dan with a languid smile.

"Well, then; come along, we'll rescue Elspie—you may depend on that. Okématan and I will look after you and see that all goes right. Come."

He took his brother by the arm, and led him unresistingly away, followed by the dark-skinned Indian, who, with the usual reticence of his race, had stood like a brown statue, silently observing events.

Jessie Davidson, who was a fair and comely maiden, touched him on the arm as he was passing out—

"Oh! take care of him, Okématan," she said, anxiously.

Okématan replied "Ho!" in a sort of grunt. It was an expressively uttered though not very comprehensible reply; but Jessie was satisfied, for she knew the man well, as he had for a considerable time been, not exactly a servant of the house, but a sort of self-appointed hanger-on, or unpaid retainer. For an Indian, he was of a cheerful disposition and made himself generally useful.

When they were outside, it was found that the gale had abated considerably, and that the moon was occasionally visible among the clouds which were driving wildly athwart the heavens, as though the elemental war which had ceased to trouble the earth were still raging in the sky.

"Peter," said the brother, as they stood for a moment beside two Indian sledges, one of which was laden with provisions, the other empty—"Peter, don't forget your promise. Lay the whip on heavy. Nothing else will keep me awake!"

"All right! Sit down there for a moment. We're not quite ready yet."

"I'd better not. No! I will stand till it's time to start," returned Dan with a dubious shake of his head.

"Didn't you say you would trust me?"

"Yes, I did, old boy."

"Does it look like trusting me to refuse the very first order I give you? What an example to Okématan! I am in command, Dan. Do as you're bid, sir, and sit down."

With a faint smile, and a still more dubious shake of the head, Dan obeyed. He sat down on the empty sledge and the expected result followed. In a few seconds he was asleep.

"Now we'll pack him in tight," observed his brother, as he and the Indian stretched the sleeper at full length on the sledge, wrapped him completely up in the warm buffalo-robes, and lashed him down in such a way that he resembled a mummy, with nothing visible of him except his mouth and nose.

Four strong large dogs were attached to each sledge in tandem fashion, each dog having a little collar and harness of its own. No reins were necessary. A track beaten in the soft snow with his snow-shoes by the Indian, who stepped out in front, was guide enough for them; and a tail-line attached to the rear of each sledge, and held by the drivers, sufficed to restrain them when a stretch of hard snow or ice tempted them to have a scamper.

The road thus beaten over the prairie by Okématan, though a comparatively soft one, was by no means smooth, and the rough motion would, in ordinary circumstances, have rendered sleep

impossible to our hero; but it need hardly be said that it failed to disturb him on the present occasion. He slept like an infant throughout the whole night; cared nothing for the many plunges down the prairie waves, and recked not of the frequent jerks out of the hollows.

Hour after hour did Peter Davidson with his silent companion trudge over the monotonous plains—hope in the ascendant, and vigour, apparently, inexhaustible. The dogs, too, were good and strong. A brief halt now and then of a few minutes sufficed to freshen them for every new start. Night passed away, and daylight came in with its ghostly revelations of bushes that looked like bears or buffaloes, and snow-wreaths that suggested the buried forms of frozen men.

Then the sun arose and scattered these sombre visions of early morning with its gladdening, soul-reviving rays.

At this point the rescue-party chanced to have reached one of those bluffs of woodland which at that time speckled the plains—though they were few indeed and far between.

"Breakfast," said Peter, heaving a profound sigh as he turned about and checked the teams, for at that point he happened to be in advance beating the track.

Okématan expressed his entire concurrence with an emphatic "Ho!" The wearied dogs lay down in their tracks, shot out their tongues, panted, and looked amiable, for well they knew the meaning of the word "breakfast" and the relative halt.

The sudden stoppage awoke the sleeper, and he struggled to rise.

"Hallo! What's wrong? Where am I? Have the Redskins got hold o' me at last?"

"Ay, that they have. At least one Red-skin has got you," said Peter. "Have a care, man, don't struggle so violently. Okématan won't scalp you."

The sound of his brother's voice quieted Davidson, and at once restored his memory.

"Cast me loose, Peter," he said; "you're a good fellow. I see you have brought me along wi' you, and I feel like a giant refreshed now, tho' somewhat stiff. Have we come far?"

"I don't know how far we've come, but I know that we've been pegging along the whole night, and that we must have breakfast before we take another step. It's all very well for you, Dan, to lie there all night like a mere bag o' pemmican enjoying yourself, but you must remember that your brother is mortal, and so are the dogs, to say nothing o' the Red-skin."

While he was speaking, the youth undid the fastenings, and set his brother free, but Dan was far too anxious to indulge in pleasantries just then. After surveying the landscape, and coming to a conclusion as to where they were, he took a hurried breakfast of dried meat—cold. The dogs were also treated to a hearty feed, and then, resuming the march, the rescuers pushed on with renewed vigour—Dan Davidson now beating the track, and thus rendering it more easy for those who came behind him.

All that day they pushed on almost without halt, and spent the next night in a clump of willows; but Dan was too anxious to take much rest. They rose at the first sign of daybreak, and pushed on at their utmost speed, until the poor dogs began to show signs of breaking down; but an extra hour of rest, and a full allowance of food kept them up to the mark, while calm weather and clear skies served to cheer them on their way.

Chapter Four.
Tells of Love, Duty, Starvation, and Murder

Pushing on ahead of them, with that sometimes fatal facility peculiar to writers and readers, we will now visit the couple whom Dan and his party were so anxious to rescue.

A single glance at Elspie McKay would have been sufficient to account to most people for the desperate anxiety of Daniel Davidson to rescue her from death, for her pretty sparkling face and ever-varying expression were irresistibly suggestive of a soul full of sympathy and tender regard for the feelings of others.

Nut-brown hair, dark eyes, brilliant teeth, and many more charms that it would take too much time and room to record still further accounted for the desperate determination with which Dan had wooed and won her.

But to see this creature at her best, you had to see her doing the dutiful to her old father. If ever there was a peevish, cross-grained, crabbed, unreasonable old sinner in this world, that sinner was Duncan McKay, senior. He was a widower. Perhaps that accounted to some extent for his condition. That he should have a younger son—also named Duncan—a cross ne'er-do-weel like himself—was natural, but how he came to have such a sweet daughter as Elspie, and such a good elder son as Fergus, are mysteries which we do not attempt to unravel or explain. Perhaps these two took after their departed mother. We know not, for we never met her. Certain it is that they did not in the least resemble their undeparted father—except in looks, for McKay senior had been a handsome man, though at the time we introduce him his good looks, like his temper, had nearly fled, and he was considerably shrivelled up by age, hard work, and exposure. The poor man was too old to emigrate to a wilderness home when he had set out for the Red River Colony, and the unusual sufferings, disappointments, and hardships to which the first settlers were exposed had told heavily on even younger men than he.

Elspie's love for her father was intense; her pity for him in his misfortunes was very tender; and, now that he was brought face to face with, perhaps, the greatest danger that had ever befallen him, her anxiety to relieve and comfort him was very touching. She seemed quite to forget herself, and the fact that she might perish on the bleak plains along with her father did not seem even to occur to her.

"It wass madness to come here, *whatever*," said the poor old man, as he cowered over the small fire, which his son Fergus had kindled before leaving, and which Elspie had kept up with infinite labour and difficulty ever since.

The remark was made testily to himself, for Elspie had gone into the surrounding bush, axe in hand, to find, if possible, and cut down some more small pieces of firewood. When she returned with an armful of dry sticks, he repeated the sentiment still more testily, and added—"If it wass not for Tuncan, I would have been at home this night in my warm bed, wi' a goot supper inside o' me, instead o' freezin' an' starvin' oot here on the plain among the snow. It's mischief that boy wass always after from the tay he wass born."

"But you know that poor Duncan could not guess we were to have such awful weather, or that the buffalo would be so scarce. Come now, dear daddy," said the cheery girl, as she heaped on wood and made a blaze that revived the old man, "I'll warm up some more of the tea. There's a very little left—and—and—it surely won't be long till God sends Daniel and Fergus back to us with food."

Old McKay was somewhat mollified by her manner, or by the fire, or by the prospect of relief held out, for his tone improved decidedly.

"Try the bag again, lass," he said, "maybe you'll find a crumb or two in the corners yet. It will do no harm to try."

Obediently poor Elspie tried, but shook her head as she did so.

"There's nothing there, daddy. I turned it inside out last time."

"Wow! but it's ill to bear!" exclaimed old Duncan, with a half-suppressed groan.

Meanwhile his daughter put the tin kettle on the fire and prepared their last cup of tea. When it was ready she looked up with a peculiar expression on her face, as she drew something from her pocket.

"Look here, daddy," she said, holding up a bit of pemmican about the size of a hen's egg.

The old man snatched it from her, and, biting off a piece, began to chew with a sort of wolfish voracity.

"I reserved it till now," said the girl, "for I knew that this being the second night, you would find it impossible to get to sleep at all without something in you, however small. If you manage to sleep on this and the cup of hot tea, you'll maybe rest well till morning—and then—"

"God forgive me!" exclaimed the old man, suddenly pausing, as he was about to thrust the last morsel into his mouth; "hunger makes me selfish. I wass forgettin' that you are starvin' too, my tear. Open your mouth."

"No, father, I don't want it. I really don't feel hungry."

"Elspie, my shild," said old Duncan, in a tone of stern remonstrance, "when wass it that you began to tell lies?"

"I'm telling the truth, daddy. I did feel hungry yesterday, but that has passed away, and to-day I feel only a little faint."

"Open your mouth, I'm tellin' you," repeated old Duncan in a tone of command which long experience had taught Elspie promptly to obey. She received the morsel, ate it with much relish, and wished earnestly for more.

"Now, you'll lie down and go to sleep," she said, after her father had washed down the last morsel of food with the last cup of hot tea, "and I'll gather a few more sticks to keep the fire going till morning. I think it is not so cold as it was, and the wind is quite gone. They have been away five days now, or more. I think that God, in His mercy, will send us relief in the morning."

"You are a goot lass, my tear," said the old man, allowing himself to be made as comfortable as it was in his daughter's power to accomplish; "what you say is ferry true. The weather feels warmer, and the wind is down. Perhaps they will find us in the mornin'. Goot-night, my tear."

It was one of the characteristics of this testy old man, that he believed it quite possible for a human being to get on quite well enough in this world without any distinct recognition of his Maker.

Once, in conversation with his youngest son and namesake Duncan junior, he had somehow got upon this subject, not by any means in a reverential, but in an argumentative, controversial spirit, and had expressed the opinion that as man knew nothing whatever about God, and had no means of finding out anything about Him, there was no need to trouble one's head about Him at all.

"I just go about my work, Tuncan," he said, "an' leave preachin' an' prayin' an' psalm-singin' to them that likes it. There's Elspie, now. She believes in God, an' likes goin' to churches an' meetin's, an' that seems to make her happy. Ferry goot—I don't pelieve in these things, an' I think I'm as happy as hersel'."

"Humph!" grunted the son in a tone of unconcealed contempt; "if ye *are* as happy as hersel', faither, yer looks give the lie to your condeetion, *whatever*. An' there's this great dufference between you an' her, that she's not only happy hersel', but she does her best to mak other folk happy—but you, wi' your girnin' an' snappin', are always doin' the best ye can to mak everybody aboot ye meeserable."

"Tuncan," retorted the sire, with solemn candour, "it iss the same compliment I can return to yoursel' with interest, my boy—what*ever*."

With such sentiments, then, it is not remarkable that Duncan McKay senior turned over to sleep as he best could without looking to a higher source than earth afforded for help in his extremity. Happily his daughter was actuated by a better spirit, and when she at last lay down on her pile of

brushwood, with her feet towards the fire, and her head on a buffalo robe, the fact of her having previously committed herself and her father to God made her sleep all the sounder.

In another clump of wood not many miles distant from the spot where the father and daughter lay, two hunters were encamped. One was Duncan McKay, to whom we have just referred as being in discord with his father. The other was a Canadian named Henri Perrin.

Both men were gaunt and weakened by famine. They had just returned to camp from an unsuccessful hunt, and the latter, being first to return, had kindled the fire, and was about to put on the kettle when McKay came in.

"I've seen nothing," remarked McKay as he flung down his gun and then flung himself beside it. "Did you see anything?"

"No, nothing," answered Perrin, breaking off a piece of pemmican and putting it into the pot.

"How much is left?" asked McKay.

"Hardly enough for two days—for the two of us; four days perhaps for one!" answered the other.

McKay looked up quickly, but the Canadian was gazing abstractedly into the pot. Apparently his remark had no significance. But McKay did not think so. Since arriving in the colony he had seen and heard much about deception and crime among both Indians and half-breeds. Being suspicious by nature, he became alarmed, for it was evident enough, as Perrin had said, that food to last two men for three days would last one man for six, and the one who should possess six days' provisions might hope to reach the Settlement alive, even though weakened by previous starvation.

The dark expression which had procured for Duncan McKay junior the *sobriquet* of Cloudbrow from La Certe and his wife, deepened visibly as these thoughts troubled his brain, and for some time he sat gazing at the fire in profound abstraction.

Young McKay was not by any means one of the most depraved of men, but when a man is devoid of principle it only requires temptation strong enough, and opportunity convenient, to sink him suddenly to the lowest depths. Starvation had so far weakened the physique of the hunters that it was obviously impossible for both of them to reach the Settlement on two days' short allowance of food. The buffalo had been driven away from that neighbourhood by the recent storm, and the hope of again falling in with them was now gone. The starving hunters, as we have said, had broken up camp, and were scattered over the plains no one could tell where. To find them might take days, if not weeks; and, even if successful, of what avail would it be to discover groups of men who were in the same predicament with themselves? To remain where they were was certain and not far-distant death! The situation was desperate, and each knew it to be so. Yet each did not take it in the same way. McKay, as we have said, became abstracted and slightly nervous. The Canadian, whatever his thoughts, was calm and collected, and went about his culinary operations as if he were quite at ease. He was about to lift the pot off the hook that suspended it over the fire, when his companion quietly, and as if without any definite purpose, took up his gun.

Perrin observed the action, and quickly reached out his hand towards his own weapon, which lay on the ground beside him.

Quick as lightning McKay raised his gun and fired. Next moment his comrade lay dead upon the ground—shot through the heart!

Horror-struck at what he had done, the murderer could scarcely believe his eyes, and he stood up glaring at the corpse as if he had been frozen to death in that position. After standing a long time, he sat down and tried to think of his act and the probable consequences.

Self-defence was the first idea that was suggested clearly to him; and he clung to it as a drowning man is said to cling to a straw. "Was it not clear," he thought, "that Perrin intended to murder me? If not, why so quick to grip his gun? If I had waited it would have been me, not Perrin, that would be lying there now!"

His memory reminded him faithfully, however, that when he first thought of taking up his gun, Conscience had sternly said,—"Don't." Why should Conscience have spoken thus, or at all, if his motive had been innocent?

There are two ways in which a wicked man gets rid of conscientious troubles—at least for a time. One way is by stout-hearted defiance of God, and ignoring of Conscience altogether. The other is by sophistical reasoning, and a more or less successful effort to throw dust in his own eyes.

Duncan McKay took the latter method. It is an easy enough method—especially with the illogical—but it works indifferently, and it does not last long.

Conscience may be seared; may be ignored; may be trampled on, but it cannot be killed; it cannot even be weakened and is ever ready at the most unseasonable and unexpected times to start up, vigorous and faithful to the very end, with its emphatic "Don't!" and "No!"

Dragging the body out of the camp, McKay returned to take his supper and reason the matter out with himself.

"I could not help myself," he thought; "when I took up my gun I did not intend to kill the man."

Conscience again reminded him of its "Don't!"

"And would not every man in Rud Ruver justify me for firing first in self-defence?"

Conscience again said "No!"

Here the hunter uttered a savage oath, to which Conscience made no reply, for Conscience never speaks back or engages in disputation.

We need not attempt further to analyse the workings of sophistry in the brain of a murderer. Suffice it to say that when the man had finished his supper he had completely, though not satisfactorily, justified himself in his own eyes. There was, he felt, a disagreeable undercurrent of uneasiness; but this might have been the result of fear as to how the Canadian half-breeds and friends of the slain man would regard the matter in the event of its being found out.

There was reason for anxiety on this head, for poor Perrin was a great favourite among his comrades, while Cloudbrow was very much the reverse.

Having finished the supper which he had purchased at such a terrible price, the young man gathered his things together, packed the provisions on his back, put on his snow-shoes and left the scene of the murder.

Although a dark night, there was sufficient moon-light to enable him to pick his steps, but he had not advanced more than two miles when he came upon the track of a party that had preceded him. This rendered the walking more easy, and as he plodded along he reflected that the wolves would soon find Perrin's body, and, by tearing it to pieces render recognition of the victim impossible.

Suddenly it occurred to him that if any of the scattered band of hunters should come on the camp before the wolves had time to do their work, the print of his snow-shoes might tell a tale—for snowshoes were of various shapes and sizes, and most of his companions in the Settlement might be pretty well acquainted with the shape of his. The danger of such a *contretemps* was not great, but, to make quite sure that it should not occur, he turned round and walked straight back on his track to the camp he had just left—thus obliterating, or, rather, confusing the track, so as to render recognition improbable. As he walked over it a third time, in resuming his march to the Settlement, all danger on this ground, he considered, was effectually counteracted. Of course, when he reached the tracks of the party before mentioned, all trace of his own track was necessarily lost among these.

That "murder will out" is supposed to be an unquestionable truism. We nevertheless question it very much; for, while the thousands of cases of murder that have been discovered are obvious, the vast number, it may be, that have never been found out are not obvious, however probable.

The case we are now describing seemed likely to belong to the class which remains a mystery till altogether forgotten. Nevertheless Nemesis was on the wing.

While Duncan McKay junior was thus pushing his way over the plains in the direction of Red River Settlement, two poor half-breed women were toiling slowly over the same plains behind him,

bound for the same haven of hoped-for and much-needed rest and refreshment. The poor creatures had been recently made widows. The husband of one, Louis Blanc, had been killed by Indians during this hunt; that of the other, Antoine Pierre, had met his death by being thrown from his horse when running the buffalo. Both women were in better condition than many of the other hunters' wives, for they had started on the homeward journey with a better supply of meat, which had not yet been exhausted.

It happened that Marie Blanc and Annette Pierre came upon McKay's camp soon after he left it the second time. Here they prepared to spend the night, but, on discovering marks of fresh blood about, they made a search, and soon came on the unburied corpse of the murdered man, lying behind a bush. They recognised it at once, for Perrin had been well-known, as well as much liked, in the Settlement.

Neither of the women was demonstrative. They did not express much feeling, though they were undoubtedly shocked; but they dug a hole in the snow with their snow-shoes, and buried the body of the hunter therein—having first carefully examined the wound in his breast, and removed the poor man's coat, which exhibited a burnt hole in front, as well as a hole in the back, for the bullet had gone quite through him.

Then they returned to the camp, and made a careful examination of it; but nothing was found there which could throw light on the subject of who was the murderer. Whether a comrade or an Indian had done the deed there was nothing to show; but that a murder had been committed they could not doubt, for it was physically almost impossible that a man could have shot himself in the chest, either by accident or intention, with one of the long-barrelled trading guns in use among the buffalo-hunters.

Another point, justifying the supposition of foul play, was the significant fact that Perrin's gun, with his name rudely carved on the stock, still lay in the camp *undischarged*.

"See—here is something," said one woman to the other in the Cree tongue, as they were about to quit the camp.

She held up a knife which she had found half buried near the fire.

"It is not a common scalping-knife," said the other woman. "It is the knife of a settler."

The weapon in question was one of the large sheath-knives which many of the recently arrived settlers had brought with them from their native land. Most of these differed a little in size and form from each other, but all of them were very different from the ordinary scalping-knives supplied by the fur-traders to the half-breeds and Indians.

"I see no name on it—no mark," said the woman who found it, after a critical inspection. Her companion examined it with equal care and similar result.

The two women had at first intended to encamp at this spot, but now they determined to push forward to the Settlement as fast as their exhausted condition permitted, carrying the knife, with the coat and gun of the murdered man, along with them.

Chapter Five.
Saved

Duncan McKay senior was dreaming of, and gloating over, the flesh-pots of Red River, and his amiable daughter was rambling over the green carpet of the summer prairies, when the sun arose and shone upon the bushes which surrounded their winter camp—Starvation Camp, as the old man had styled it.

There is no saying how long Duncan would have gloated, and the fair Elspie wandered, if a hair of the buffalo robe on which the former lay had not entered his nostril, and caused him to sneeze.

Old McKay's sneeze was something to be remembered when once heard. Indeed it was something that could not be forgotten! From the profoundest depths of his person it seemed to burst, and how his nose sustained the strain without splitting has remained one of the mysteries of the Nor'-West unto this day. It acted like an electric shock on Elspie, who sat bolt upright at once with a scared look that was quite in keeping with her tousled hair.

ELSPIE SAID, "SH——! —PAGE 44

"Oh! daddy, what a fright you gave me!" Elspie said, remonstratively.

"It iss goot seventeen years an' more that you hev had to get used to it, whatever," growled the old man. "I suppose we've got nothin' for breakfast?"

He raised himself slowly, and gazed at Elspie with a disconsolate expression.

"Nothing," returned the girl with a look of profound woe.

It is said that when things are at the worst they are sure to mend. It may be so: the sayings of man are sometimes true. Whether or not the circumstances of Elspie and old McKay were at the worst is an open question; but there can be no doubt that they began to mend just about that time, for the girl had not quite got rid of her disconsolate feelings when the faint but merry tinkle of sleigh-bells was heard in the frosty air.

The startled look of sudden surprise and profound attention is interesting to behold, whether in old or young. It is a condition of being that utterly blots out self for a brief moment in the person affected, and allows the mind and frame for once to have free unconscious play.

Elspie said, “Sh!—” and gazed aside with wide and lustrous eyes, head a little on one side, a hand and forefinger slightly raised, as if to enforce silence, and her graceful figure bent forward—a petrifaction of intensely attentive loveliness.

Old McKay said “Ho!” and, with both hands resting on the ground to prop him up, eyes and mouth wide open, and breath restrained, presented the very personification of petrified stupidity.

Another moment, and the sound became too distinct to admit of a doubt.

“Here they are at long last!” exclaimed the old man, rising with unwonted alacrity for his years.

“Thank God!” ejaculated Elspie, springing up and drawing a shawl round her shoulders, at the same time making some hasty and futile attempts to reduce the confusion of her hair.

It need scarcely be said that this was the arrival of the rescue-party of which Daniel Davidson was in command. Before the starving pair had time to get fairly on their legs, Daniel strode into the camp and seized Elspie in his arms.

We need not repeat what he said, for it was not meant to be made public, but no such reticence need trouble us in regard to old Duncan.

“Hoot! Taniel,” said he, somewhat peevishly, “keep your coortin’ till efter breakfast, man! It iss a wolf that will be livin’ inside o’ me for the last few tays—a hungry wolf too—an’ nothin’ for him to eat. That’s right, Okématan, on wi’ the kettle; it iss yourself that knows what it iss to starve. Blow up the fire, Peter Tavidson. You’re a cliver boy for your age, an’ hes goot lungs, I make no doubt.”

“That I have, Mr McKay, else I should not be here,” said the lad, laughing, as he knelt before the embers of the fire, and blew them into a blaze.

“Wow! Dan, hev ye not a pit pemmican handy?” asked McKay. “It iss little I care for cookin’ just now.”

“Here you are,” said Dan, taking a lump of the desired article from his wallet and handing it to the impatient man; at the same time giving a morsel to Elspie. “I knew you would want it in a hurry, and kept it handy. Where is Duncan? I thought he was with you.”

“So he wass, Taniel, when you left us to go to Rud Ruver, but my son Tuncan was never fond o’ stickin’ to his father. He left us, an’ no wan knows where he iss now. Starvin’, maybe, like the rest of us.”

“I hope not,” said Elspie, while her sire continued his breakfast with manifest satisfaction. “He went off to search for buffalo with Perrin and several others. They said they would return to us if they found anything. But, as they have not come back, we suppose they must have been unsuccessful. Did you meet any of the poor people on the way out, Dan?”

“Ay, we met some of them,” replied the hunter, in a sad tone. “All struggling to make their way back to the Settlement, and all more or less starving. We helped them what we could, but some were past help; and we came upon two or three that had fallen in their tracks and died in the snow. But we have roused the Settlement, and there are many rescue-parties out in all directions now, scouring the plains.”

“You hev stirred it enough, Okématan,” said old McKay, referring to the kettle of food which was being prepared. “Here, fill my pannikin: I can wait no longer.”

“Whenever you have finished breakfast we must start off home,” said Davidson, helping Elspie to some of the much-needed and not yet warmed soup, which was quickly made by mixing pemmican with flour and water. “I have brought two sleds, so that you and your father may ride, and we will carry the provisions. We never know when the gale may break out again.”

“Or when heavy snow may come on,” added Peter, who was by that time busy with his own breakfast.

Okématan occupied himself in stirring the contents of the large kettle, and occasionally devouring a mouthful of pemmican uncooked.

An hour later, and they were making for home almost as fast as the rescue-party had travelled out—the provisions transferred to the strong backs of their rescuers—old McKay and Elspie carefully wrapped up in furs, reposing on the two sledges.

Chapter Six.
Discord and Deceit, Etcetera

It was found, on their arrival at the home of Duncan McKay senior, that Duncan junior had got there before them, he having been met and brought in by one of the settlers who had gone out with his cariole to do what he could for the hunters. The two women who discovered the body of Perrin, however, had not yet arrived, and nothing was known of the murder in the Settlement.

"It iss little troubled *you* wass, what came over us," remarked old Duncan angrily, on entering his house, and finding his younger son engaged with a pipe beside the kitchen fire.

"An' how could *I* know where you wass; efter I had been huntin' for nothin' for two days?" retorted his son. "Wass I to think you would be stoppin' in the lame camp till you died? Wass it not more likely that some wan would find you an' bring you in—as they did?"

"No thanks to you that they did, Tuncan, what*ever*. Where did you leave the other boys?"

"How should I know?" returned the son sharply; "they dropped off—wan here an' wan there—sayin' they would try for a buffalo in wan place or another, or, that they would rest awhile; an' so I wass left by myself. I found it quite enough to look efter number wan."

"It hes *always* been as much, that, as ye could manitch, Tuncan, even when things wass goin' easy," said the old man with a sarcastic laugh, that induced the young man to rise and quit the room.

He went towards a small shop, or store, as such places were styled in the Nor'-West. It fell to his lot in the family arrangements to look after and manage this store. Indeed the youth's anxiety for the ease and comfort of "number wan" had induced him to select the post as being a part of the family duties that was peculiarly suited to himself.

On reaching the store he went straight to a large roll of Canadian twist tobacco, cut off a piece, refilled his pipe, and, sitting down on a bale began or, rather, continued to smoke. He had not been seated long when the door opened, and the head of a half-breed peeped cautiously in with an uncommonly sly look.

"That you, François La Certe?" said McKay rather sternly, for he knew the man well. "What iss it you will be wantin' now?"

François wanted many things—things almost too numerous to mention; but, first, he would pay his debts to Cloudbrow.

"Come, that's something new," said McKay with a cynical laugh. "You must have come by a fortune, or committed a robbery before ye would be so honest. How much are you goin' to pay?"

"The sledge that you lent me, I have brought back," said the half-breed with a deprecatory air.

"So, you call returning a loan paying your debts?" said Duncan.

La Certe did not quite say that, but he thought it bore some resemblance to a payment to account, and at all events was proof of his good intentions.

"And on the strength of that you'll want plenty more credit, I hev no doubt."

"No—not plenty," said La Certe, with the earnest air of a man who is exposing his whole soul to inspection, and who means to act this time with the strictest sincerity, to say nothing of honesty. "It is only a little that I want. Not much. Just enough to keep body and soul from sayin' good-bye."

"But you have not paid a fraction of your old debt. How will you be expectin' to meet the new one?"

Oh! La Certe could easily explain that. He was going off immediately to hunt and trap, and would soon return with a heavy load, for there were plenty of animals about. Then in the spring, which was near at hand, he meant to fish, or go to the plains with the hunters, and return laden with bags of pemmican, bales of dried meat, and buffalo-robes enough to pay off all his debts, and leave something over to enable him to spend the winter in luxurious idleness.

"And you expect me to believe all that nonsense?" said McKay, sternly.

La Certe was hurt. Of course he expected to be believed! His feelings were injured, but he was of a forgiving disposition and would say no more about it. He had expected better treatment, however, from one who had known him so long.

"A trip to the plains requires more than powder and shot," said the store-keeper; "where will you be goin' to get a horse an' cart? for you can hev mine no longer."

"Dechamp, he promise to sole me a horse, an' Mrs Davis'n will loan me a cart," returned the half-breed, with lofty independence.

"Hm! an' you will be returnin' the cart an' payin' for the horse when the hunt is over, I suppose?"

Yes, that was exactly the idea that was in La Certe's brain, and which, he hoped and fully expected, to reduce to practice in course of time—if Duncan McKay would only assist him by making him a few advances at that present time.

"Well, what do you want?" asked McKay, getting off the bath.

The half-breed wanted a good many things. As he was going off in the course of a few days, and might not be able to return for a long time, he might as well take with him even a few things that he did not absolutely need at the moment. Of course he wanted a good supply of powder, shot, and ball. Without that little or nothing could be done. Then a new axe, as his old one was much worn —the steel almost gone—and it was well-known that a trapper without an axe was a very helpless creature. A tin kettle was, of course, an absolute necessity; and the only one he possessed had a small hole in it. A few awls to enable him to mend his bark canoe when open water came, and a couple of steel traps, some gun-flints, and, O yes, he had almost forgotten a most essential thing—twine to make a net, and some fish-hooks.

"It iss a regular outfit you will be wanting," remarked the store-keeper, as he handed over the various articles.

O no—not a regular one—only a very little one, considering the length of time he should be away, and the wealth with which he would return. But again he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten something else.

"Well, what iss it?"

Some glover's needles and sinews for making leather coats and moccasins. Needles and thread and scissors, for it was quite clear that people could not live without suitable clothing. A new capote, also, and—and—a yard or two of scarlet cloth with a few beads.

As he made the last request, La Certe attempted to speak insinuatingly, and to look humble.

"Come, that iss pure extravagance," said McKay, remonstrating.

La Certe could not, dare not, face his wife without these articles. He pleaded earnestly. "Slowfoot is so clever wi' the needle," he said. "See! she send you a pair of moccasins."

The wily man here drew from the breast of his capote a pair of beautifully made moccasins, soft as chamois leather, and richly ornamented with dyed quills of the porcupine.

McKay laughed; nevertheless he swallowed the bait and was pleased. He finally handed the goods to La Certe, who, when he had obtained all that he could possibly squeeze out of the store-keeper, bundled up the whole, made many solemn protestations of gratitude and honest intentions, and went off to cheer Slowfoot with the news of his success.

It chanced that Antoine Dechamp, the very man about whom he had been talking to Duncan McKay, had dropped in to see him and his spouse, and was sitting beside the fire smoking when he entered. Displaying his possessions with much pride, he assured Dechamp that he had paid for the whole outfit, and meant to return in the spring a rich man with means enough to buy a horse and cart, and start with the buffalo-hunters for the plains.

"You have a horse to sell—they say?" he remarked to his friend in a careless way.

"Yes—and a good one too," answered Dechamp.

"Well, if you will loan him to me in the spring, I will pay for him when I come back. It takes all I have to fit me out to start, you see."

Dechamp did not quite see his way to that—but there was plenty of time to think over it!

"Have you heard," said Dechamp, willing to change the subject, "there is some talk that Perrin has been killed? George McDermid was out, like many others, huntin' about for the starvin' people, an' he came across the wives of Blanc and Pierre—poor things! they're widows now, for Blanc and Pierre are both dead. Well, the women had well-nigh given in. I had dropped down, they were so tired, and were crawlin' on their hands and knees when McDermid found them. I didn't hear all the outs and ins of it, but there is no doubt that poor Perrin has been murdered, for he was shot right through the breast."

"Perhaps he shot hisself," suggested La Certe.

"No—that could not be, for the women have brought his coat, which shows that the ball went in at the breast and came *straight* out at the back. If he had shot himself he must have pulled the trigger with his toe, an' then the ball would have slanted up from his breast to somewhere about his shoulders."

"It was a Saulteaux, may be," said Slowfoot, who had been listening with all the eagerness of a gossip.

"There were no marks of Redskins' snow-shoes about," returned Dechamp, "an' the tracks were too confused to make them out. A knife was found, but there were no marks about it to tell who owned it—only it was a settler's knife, but there are lots of them about, an' many have changed hands since the settlers came."

At the time we write of, the colony of Red River of the north was in a very unhappy and disorganised condition. There were laws indeed, but there was no authority or force sufficiently strong to apply the laws, and discord reigned because of the two great fur companies—the Hudson's Bay, and the Nor'-West—which opposed each other with extreme bitterness, carrying fire-water, dissension, and disaster all over the wilderness of Rupert's Land. Happily the two companies coalesced in the year 1821, and from that date, onward, comparative peace has reigned under the mild sway of the Hudson's Bay Company.

But at the period which we describe the coalition had not taken place, and many of the functionaries of the Hudson's Bay Company in Red River, from the Governor downward, seem to have been entirely demoralised, if we are to believe the reports of contemporary historians.

Some time previous to this, the Earl of Selkirk—chiefly from philanthropic views, it is said—resolved to send a colony to Red River. At different times bands of Scotch, Swiss, Danes, and others, made their appearance in the Settlement. They had been sent out by the agents of the Earl, but there was a great deal of mismanagement and misunderstanding, both as to the motives and intentions of the Earl. The result was that the half-breeds of Red River—influenced, it is said, by the Nor'-West Company—received the newcomers with suspicion and ill-will. The Indians followed the lead of the half-breeds, to whom they were allied. Not only was every sort of obstruction thrown in the way of the unfortunate immigrants, but more than once during those first years they were driven from the colony, and their homesteads were burned to the ground.

There must have been more than the usual spirit of indomitable resolution in those people, however, for notwithstanding all the opposition and hardship they had to endure, they returned again and again to their farms, rebuilt their dwellings, cultivated their fields, and, so to speak, compelled prosperity to smile on them—and that, too, although several times the powers of Nature, in the shape of grass hoppers and disastrous floods, seemed to league with men in seeking their destruction.

Perhaps the Scottish element among the immigrants had much to do with this resolute perseverance. Possibly the religious element in the Scotch had more to do with it still.

The disastrous winter which we have slightly sketched was one of the many troubles with which not only the newcomers, but all parties in the colony, were at this time afflicted.

Chapter Seven.
Vixen Delivered and Wolves Defeated

With much labour and skill had the Davidsons and McKays erected two timber cottages side by side in the land of their adoption.

These two families were among the first band of settlers. They were very different in character—one being Highland, the other Lowland Scotch, but they were more or less united by sympathy, intermarriage, and long residence beside each other on the slopes of the Grampian Hills, so that, on the voyage out, they made a compact that they should stick by each other, and strive, and work, and fight the battle of life together in the new land.

All the members of the Davidson family were sterling, sedate, hearty, and thorough-going. Daniel and Peter were what men style "dependable" fellows, and bore strong resemblance to their father, who died almost immediately after their arrival in the new country. Little Jessie was like her mother, a sort of bottomless well of sympathy, into which oceans of joy or sorrow might be poured without causing an overflow—except, perchance, at the eyelids—and out of which the waters of consolation might be pumped for evermore without pumping dry. The idea of self never suggested itself in the presence of these two. The consequence was that everybody adored them. It was rather a selfish adoration, we fear, nevertheless it was extremely delightful—to the adorers, we mean—and doubtless not unpleasant to the adored.

The love of God, in Christ, was the foundation of their characters.

Of the McKay family we cannot speak so confidently. Elspie, indeed, was all that could be desired, and Fergus was in all respects a sterling man; but the head of the family was, as we have seen, open to improvement in many respects, and Duncan junior was of that heart-breaking character which is known as ne'er-do-weel. Possibly, if differently treated by his father, he might have been a better man. As it was, he was unprincipled and hasty of temper.

Little wonder that, when thrown together during a long voyage—to an almost unknown land—Elspie McKay and Daniel Davidson should fall into that condition which is common to all mankind, and less wonder that, being a daring youth with a resolute will, Daniel should manage to induce the pliant, loving Elspie, to plight her troth while they were gazing over the ship's side at the first iceberg they met. We may as well hark back here a little, and very briefly sketch the incident. It may serve as a guide to others.

The two were standing—according to the report of the bo's'n, who witnessed the whole affair—"abaft the main shrouds squintin' over the weather gangway." We are not quite sure of the exact words used by that discreditable bo's'n, but these are something like them. It was moon-light and dead calm; therefore propitious, so far, to Daniel's design—for Daniel undoubtedly had a design that night, obvious to his own mind, and clearly defined like the great iceberg, though, like it too, somewhat hazy in detail.

"What a glorious, magnificent object!" exclaimed Elspie, gazing in wonder at the berg, the pinnacles of which rose considerably above the mast-head.

"Yes, very glorious, very magnificent!" said Daniel, gazing into the maiden's eyes, and utterly regardless of the berg.

"I wonder how such a huge mass ever manages to melt," said Elspie—for the human mind, even in pretty girls, is discursive.

"*I* wonder it does not melt at once," said Dan, with pointed emphasis.

"What do you mean?" she asked, turning her eyes in considerable astonishment from the berg to the man.

"I mean," said he, "that under the influence of your eyes the iceberg ought to melt straight away. They have melted my heart, Elspie, and *That* has been an iceberg, I find, till now."

He seized her hand. It had all come on so suddenly that poor Elspie was quite unprepared for it. She turned as if to fly, but Daniel put his arm round her waist and detained her.

"Elspie, dearest Elspie, it *must* be settled now—or—." He would not—could not—say "never."

"O Daniel, don't!" entreated Elspie.

But Daniel *did*.

"Bray-vo!" exclaimed the bo's'n with enthusiasm, for he was a sympathetic man, though unprincipled in the matter of eavesdropping.

That cut it short. They retired precipitately from the weather gangway abaft the main shrouds, and sought refuge in a sequestered nook near the companion-hatch, which was, in name as well as in every other way, much more suited to their circumstances. The steersman had his eye on them there, but they fortunately did not know it.

Apologising for this reminiscence, we return to the thread of our story.

Mrs Davidson was seated at breakfast one morning, with all her family around her in Prairie Cottage. She had named it thus because, from one of the windows, there was to be had a peep of the prairies lying beyond the bushes by which it was surrounded.

Old McKay had named his cottage Ben Nevis, either because the country around was as flat as a pancake, or out of sheer contradictiousness.

"Have they found out anything more about the murder of that poor fellow Perrin?" asked Mrs Davidson. "More than four months have passed since it happened."

"Nothing more, mother," said Dan, who now filled his father's chair. "As you say, four months have passed, and one would think that was time enough to discover the murderer, but, you see, it is nobody's business in particular, and we've no regular police, and everybody is far too busy just now to think about it. In fact, not many people in these parts care much about a murder, I fear."

"Ah if they went to see Perrin's old mother," said Jessie, "it would oblige them to care a great deal, for he was her only son."

"Ay, her only child!" added Mrs Davidson.

While she was yet speaking, it so happened that Duncan McKay junior himself entered the room, with that over-done free-and-easiness which sometimes characterises a man who is ill at ease.

"Whose only child are you speaking about, Mrs Davidson?" he asked carelessly.

"Mrs Perrin's," she replied, with a familiar nod to the visitor, who often dropped in on them casually in this way.

The reply was so unexpected and sudden, that McKay could not avoid a slight start and a peculiar expression, in spite of his usual self-command. He glanced quickly at Dan and Peter, but they were busy with their food, and had apparently not noticed the guilty signs.

"Ah, poor thing," returned the youth, in his cynical and somewhat nasal tone, "it *iss* hard on her. By the way, Dan, hev ye heard that the wolves hev killed two or three of McDermid's horses that had strayed out on the plains, and Elspie's mare Vixen iss out too. Some of us will be going to seek for her. The day bein' warm an' the snow soft, we hev a good chance of killin' some o' the wolves. I thought Peter might like to go too."

"So Peter does," said the youth, rising and brushing the crumbs off his knees: "there's nothing I like better than to hunt down these sneaking, murderous brutes that are so ready to spring suddenly unawares on friend or foe."

Again Duncan McKay cast a quick inquiring glance at Peter, but the lad was evidently innocent of any double meaning. It was only a movement, within the man-slayer, of that conscience which "makes cowards of us all."

"Louise!" shouted Dan, as he also rose from the table.

"Oui, monsieur," came, in polite deferential tones, from the culinary department, and the little half-breed maiden appeared at the door.

"Did you mend that shot-bag last night?"

"Oui, monsieur."

"Fetch it here, then, please; and, Jessie, stir your stumps like a good girl, and get some food ready to take with us."

"Will you tell me the precise way in which good girls stir their stumps?" asked Jessie; "for I'm not quite sure."

Dan answered with a laugh, and went out to saddle his horse, followed by his brother and Duncan McKay.

"Rescuing seems to be the order of the day this year," remarked Peter, as they walked towards the stable behind the cottage. "We've had a good deal of rescuing men in the winter, and now we are goin' to rescue horses."

"Rescuing is the grandest work that a fellow can undertake," said Dan, "whether it be the body from death or the soul from sin."

"What you say iss true—whatever," remarked McKay, whose speech, although not so broad as that of his father, was tinged with similar characteristics. "It will be better to rescue than to kill."

This was so obvious a truism that his companions laughed, but Duncan had uttered it almost as a soliloquy, for he was thinking at the moment of poor Perrin, whose body had long since been brought to the Settlement and buried. Indeed thoughts of the murdered man were seldom out of his mind.

Meanwhile, far out on the lonesome and still snow-covered prairie the steed which they were going to rescue stood on a low mound or undulation of the plain surrounded by wolves. It was a pitiful sight to see the noble mare, almost worn-out with watching and defending herself, while the pack of those sneaking hounds of the wilderness sat or stood around her licking their chops and patiently biding their time.

They formed a lean, gaunt, savage-looking crew, as they sat there, calculating, apparently, how long their victim's strength would hold out, and when it would be safe to make a united and cowardly rush.

One wolf, more gaunt and rugged and grey than the others, with black lips and red tongue and bloodshot eyes, moved about the circle uneasily as if trying to screw up its craven spirit to the sticking point. The others evidently regarded this one as their leader, for they hung back from him a little, and kept a watchful eye on his movements. So did Vixen, the mare. She kept her tail always turned towards him, looking savagely back at him with her great eyes glittering, her ears laid flat, and her heels ready.

Poor Vixen! Elspie had given her the name when in a facetious frame of mind, as being descriptive of the very opposite of her character, for she was gentle as a lamb, tender in the mouth, playful in her moods, and sensitive to a degree both in body and spirit. No curb was ever needed to restrain Vixen, nor spur to urge her on. A chirp sent an electric thrill through her handsome frame; a "Quiet, Vic!" sufficed to calm her to absolute docility. Any child could have reined her in, and she went with springy elasticity as though her limbs were made of vivified steel and indiarubber. But she was getting old, and somehow the wolves seemed to be aware of that melancholy fact. They would not have troubled her in the heyday of her youth!

An impatient howl from one of the pack seemed to insinuate that the grey old leader was a coward. So he was, but evidently he did not relish being told so, for he uncovered his glittering fangs and made a sudden dash at the mare.

With a whisk of the tail worthy of her best days, she lashed out behind and planted both her pretty little feet on the ribs of the grey chief with such a portentous whack that he succumbed at once. With a gasp, and a long-drawn wail, he sank dead upon the snow; whereupon his amiable friends—when quite sure of his demise—tore him limb from limb and devoured him.

This was a fortunate respite for Vixen, most of whose remaining strength and pluck had been thrown into that magnificent fling. Old Duncan, had he seen it, would probably have styled it a "goot Highland fling."

But the respite was not of long duration. Their leader formed but a mouthful to each of the pack.

When done, they returned to encircle their victim again, lick their chops, and wait.

Evening was drawing on, and a sort of grey desolation seemed to be creeping over the plains.

A decided thaw had been operating all that day, rendering the snow soft. If the mare had only known the advantage thus given to her, a successful effort at escape might have been made. When snow on the prairie is frozen with a hard crust on the surface, the light wolf can run easily on the top of it, while the heavy horse breaks through at every stride and is soon knocked up. The case is reversed when a thaw softens the surface, for then the short-legged wolf flounders helplessly in its depths, while the long-limbed and powerful horse can gallop through it with comparative ease. But the good mare, intelligent though she was, did not consider this fact, and the wolves, you may be sure, did not enlighten her. Besides, by that time she was well-nigh worn-out, and could not have made a vigorous run for life even over a good course.

Gradually, a worthy lieutenant of the old grey chief began to show symptoms of impatience, and the hungry circle closed in. Vixen looked up and whinnied slightly. It seemed a pitiful appeal for help from the human friends who had cared for her so well and so long. Perchance it was the last wail of despair—a final farewell to the green fields and the flowering plains of memory.

Whatever it was, an answer came in the form of several dark specks on the horizon. Vixen saw them, and whinnied again in a decidedly different tone. The wolves also saw them, and moved about uneasily.

On came the black specks, increasing in size as they drew near. The wolves looked at each other inquiringly, moved still more uneasily, appeared to hold a consultation, and finally drew off to a neighbouring knoll, as if to await the result of this unlooked-for interruption, and return to business when it was past.

The intelligence of the lower animals is great—in some cases very great—but it does not amount to reason. If it did, those wolves would not have sat there, in the pride of physical strength and personal freedom, calmly awaiting their doom, while Daniel and Peter Davidson, Duncan McKay junior, Okématan the Cree Indian, another Indian named Kateegoose, and Jacques Bourassin, a half-breed, came thundering down towards them like infuriated centaurs.

At last they seemed to realise the truth that "discretion is the better part of valour," and began to retire from the scene—slowly at first.

Vixen, recognising friends, trotted off with reviving strength, and a high head and tail to meet them. Seeing this, Dan, who led the party, drew rein so as to allow the steeds to recover breath before the final burst.

The wolves, with that presumption which is usually found to be the handmaid of ignorance, halted, and sat down again to watch the progress of events. Fatal self-confidence! They little knew the deep duplicity of man!

"O you stupid brutes!" murmured Dan to himself, advancing in a somewhat sidling manner as if he meant to pass them. They evidently believed this to be his intention until they saw the six horsemen turn their steeds straight in their direction and charge them at full gallop with a yell that drove rapid conviction to their brains.

Then, with tails between legs and ears flat they fled. But it was too late. The horses scattered the soft snow with comparative ease. The wolves plunged through it with difficulty. First to overtake them was Peter Davidson. He put the muzzle of his gun to the side of the grey lieutenant, and shot him through the heart. His brother Dan, selecting another of the pack, pointed at the ear and blew out its brains. Okématan, partial to the weapons of his forefathers, sent an arrow through the ribs of a third,

while Kateegoose transfixed a fourth. Duncan McKay shot a fifth, and Bourassin knocked over a sixth at comparatively long range, his horse being too poor or too tired to come fairly up with the pack.

There was no wasting of powder, shot, or shaft in this affair. Each man was an expert with his weapon, and cool as the proverbial cucumber, though considerably excited. Loading as they ran, they fitted and shot again, stretching six more of the enemy on the plain. Then they pulled up and suffered the rest to escape, being afraid to leave Vixen out of sight behind them, for that happy creature, following and enjoying the sport as long as she could, found that her powers were too much exhausted to permit of her keeping up with the chase.

"She's not fit to travel another mile," said Dan, stroking her glossy neck and allowing her to rub her nose affectionately on his shoulder.

"That iss true, whatever," assented Duncan. "I think we could not do better than camp on the nearest bluff."

This was agreed to by all. Provision for one meal, it will be remembered, had been prepared at Prairie Cottage in the morning. A hunter's meal, when properly divided, makes two or three average meals, and a hunter's powers of endurance are proverbial. Each man had his blanket strapped to his saddle. Branches of various kinds of trees make a good mattress, and the air of the prairie is well-known to conduce to appetite and slumber.

With such environment it is scarcely necessary to add that the hunters enjoyed themselves, and that Vixen had a restful night, probably without even a dream about hungry wolves.

Chapter Eight.
Stirring Events Described

The proverbial slip 'twixt the cup and the lip, and the well-known uncertainty of all human affairs, received striking illustration in the person and prospects of our hero, Daniel Davidson, not long after the events narrated in the last chapter.

Up to this period the unfortunate colonists of the Red River Settlement had led a life chiefly of disappointment and disaster. Although everything had been done for them by their patron the Earl of Selkirk with the best intentions, the carrying out of his plans had been frustrated by the feuds of the rival fur companies, the misunderstandings and the jealousies of Indians and half-breeds, and, to some extent, by the severity of the climate. An open rupture took place between them and the North-westers. Encounters between the contending parties occurred, in which several on both sides were killed, and at last the North-Westers, attacking the settlers in force, drove them from the colony and burnt their dwellings and homesteads.

Retreating to the north end of Lake Winnipeg, the colonists found refuge at Jack River—three hundred miles distant. From this place they were ultimately recalled by the Hudson's Bay Company, which took them under its protection. Returning to Red River, the unfortunate but persevering people proceeded to resume their farming operations. But the prospect before them was gloomy enough. The lawless proceedings of the rival companies had convulsed the whole Indian country, and the evil seemed to culminate in the Red River Colony, to which retired servants of the fur-traders, voyageurs, adventurers, and idlers gravitated as to a centre; so that there was little prospect of their being allowed to prosecute their agricultural operations in peace.

The dissensions at last became so great that a large proportion of the new settlers, including many of the Scotch Highlanders, dispersed to seek a precarious livelihood among the Indians, on the prairies bordering the waters of the Missouri, or to sustain themselves and their families by fishing in the distant lakes, and hunting on their shores.

On the advent of spring, however, most of these returned to the colony, with renewed hope in agriculture, and set to work—every man, woman, and child—to get some seed into the ground.

But at this point an event occurred which threw the colony into great consternation, and induced vigorous action on the part of Lord Selkirk, which was the first step towards more peaceful times.

The North-West party, consisting chiefly of half-breeds, had augmented to upwards of three hundred warriors. It would be more correct, perhaps, to style them banditti; for they had penetrated through every part of Rupert's Land, set law at defiance, pillaged and destroyed many of the establishments of their rivals, and kept the whole country in a state of ferment and alarm.

One band of these men, numbering between sixty and seventy, advanced upon Red River Colony. They were a motley crew, all mounted on horseback and armed with guns, spears, tomahawks, bows, and scalping-knives, besides which they were painted and plumed *à la sauvage*, and were in the habit when rushing to battle, of yelling like the Red-men whose blood mingled with that of the White-man in their veins.

What was the precise intention of these men at this time it is difficult to say, but it was not difficult to see that peace was not their object.

Governor Semple, of the Hudson's Bay Company, a mild, just, and much respected man, was in charge of the colony at the time.

Daniel Davidson was engaged in a very important conversation with old Duncan McKay at the time the formidable troop of North-Westers swept through the settlements. The old man was seated in the hall, parlour, drawing-room—or whatever you choose to call it—of Ben Nevis House. It was an uncarpeted, unpainted, unadorned room with pine plank flooring, plank walls, a plank ceiling, a

plank table, and a set of plank chairs. Ornament was dispensed with in the hall of Ben Nevis House; for although Elspie would fain have clothed it with a little feminine grace, its proprietor would not hear of such proposals.

"Stick as many gimcracks as you like about your own room, Elspie," he had remarked when the first attempt was made, "but leave me my hall in peace. It iss quite pleased with it I am as it iss."

Opposite the door of the hall there was a large open fireplace without a grate. Doors all round the walls of the hall opened into the other rooms of the establishment. Above what would have been the mantelpiece, had one existed, there was a row of tobacco pipes. Old Duncan was a great smoker. Indeed he would have been almost unrecognisable without his pipe. He was smoking when Daniel Davidson visited him, in order to hold the very important conversation to which we have referred.

"It iss as you say, Taniel," remarked the old man, frowning at his pipe, which was not drawing properly. "Marrit life iss more to be desired than single blessedness, whatever, an' it is a my opeenion that you will do more work with Elspie helpin' you, than by yourself. When iss it you will be wantin' to call me your father?"

The old man asked the question with a somewhat humorous smile, for he was, to say truth, not a little proud of the staid, sensible, and strong young fellow who aspired to his daughter's hand—besides, the pipe was drawing well by that time.

"As soon as you like," answered Dan, "or, rather, as soon as Elspie likes. You see, things are beginning to look a little more hopeful now. People who seem to know best—or seem to think they do—tell us that the Nor'-Westers are beginning to see that a colony here won't interfere in any way with their business; a good deal of seed has been sown, and, if all goes well, we may look for a better year than we have yet had; therefore I don't see why we should wait any longer."

"Your observations are ferry true. There iss just wan little word you mention that requires consideration," returned the old man with a brow wrinkled so as to suggest profound sagacity of thought. "You said 'if all goes well.' But supposin', for the sake of argument, that all does *not* go well—what then?"

"Why, then," answered the young man with a laugh, "we shall be no worse off than other people, who have to make the best of things as they find them."

"No doubt—no doubt—that iss the true an' pheelosophical way to look at the matter. But don't you think, Taniel, that it would be as well to putt off till our munister arrives? I would not be havin' my daughter marrit without a munister if I can help it. An' you know his Lordship has promised more than wance to send us wan. He will not be long o' coming now."

"Yes, a minister has been promised again an' again," returned Dan, somewhat bitterly, "an' I suppose he will go on promising again and over again, but I have not much faith in these promises. The Earl has too many agents who are not as true as himself. I would rather not delay my marriage on that account. What ails you at Mr Sutherland?"

"Well, Taniel, I hev nothing to say against Muster Sutherland. He iss a ferry goot man—I will not be denyin' that, but—he iss not an ordained munister."

"What of that?" retorted Dan. "He is an ordained elder of the Church of Scotland, and that is much the same thing. And he is a good, Christian man, respected by every one in the Settlement."

"Well, well, Taniel; hev it your own way," returned old Duncan with a resigned look. "Of course, it would have been pleesanter if he had been a regular munister, whatever; but, as you say, my boy, 'what of that?' So, as things look a little more peaceable than they wass—though not ferry much—I will be—"

He was interrupted at this point by the sudden entrance of Jacques Bourassin with the astounding intelligence that a band of North-Westers had gone up the Settlement to attack Fort Garry.

"Hoot! nonsense, man!" exclaimed old McKay, starting up and flinging his pipe away in the excitement of the moment.

"No—not nonsense!" said Bourassin in broken English; "it be true. I knows it. I come to say that we go to the fort to help them."

"Right, boy, right!" exclaimed the old man, hastily belting on his capote. "Fergus! Tuncan!—Elspie! where are these boys?"

"In the stable, father. I saw them just—"

"Let them saddle all the nags—quick," cried the old man. "Taniel, you better—"

He stopped; for Daniel had already run out to saddle and mount his own horse.

In a few minutes a cavalcade of a dozen powerful young fellows, headed by old Duncan McKay, and armed with guns, were galloping at full speed in the direction of Fort Garry.

But before this cavalcade had set out, the rencontre at the fort had already taken place, and been fatally decided.

The approach of the enemy had been announced to those nearest the scene of action by the women and children of that part of the Settlement, who were seen running about in frantic alarm trying to hide themselves, and some of them seeking refuge in the fort.

Among these were two brothers named Sinclair. One of them, Archie by name, was a stout healthy fellow of twelve or thereabouts, the other was a thin delicate boy of ten, whose illness, whatever it was, had reduced him to skin and bone, taken all the colour out of his cheeks, and rendered him quite unable to run or play like other boys. They had recently become orphans, their father and mother, who were among the most recent arrivals, having died suddenly within a few weeks of each other. When the alarm of the threatened attack was given, the brothers were amusing themselves on the sunny side of the cottage which had been for only one year their happy home.

In a moment Archie took his brother on his back and scampered away with him to a place near the river, and hid him in a hollow under the bank, where they had been wont to play at grizzly bears and hunters.

Meanwhile Governor Semple, with several gentlemen and attendants, walked out to meet the party of half-breeds and Indians, not to offer battle, but for the purpose of parlance and conciliation. It is admitted, however, that Governor Semple committed a grave error of judgment in allowing his small party to carry arms. They numbered only twenty-eight in all, and, being untrained, could have had no chance in an open fight with such opponents. If the Governor had gone out unarmed with only one or two attendants, he would, it was thought, have appealed irresistibly to the honour of the party.

As it was, when the Hudson's Bay party drew near they thought the look of their opponents so suspicious that the Governor halted his men, and they stood in a group as if in consultation. Seeing this, the half-breeds divided themselves into two bodies, and commenced firing from behind some willows—at first a shot or two, and then a merciless volley. No fewer than twenty-one of the twenty-eight fell to rise no more, among whom were the Governor himself; Mr Wilkinson, his secretary: Captain Rogers, a mineralogist; Mr White, the surgeon; Mr Holt, of the Swedish navy, and Mr McLean, a principal settler.

Indeed the whole party would have probably been killed and the settlers massacred at that time, but for the courageous interposition of the chief of the half-breeds, Cuthbert Grant, who, at the risk of his life, stood between the settlers and their foes, only one of which last was killed.

When old McKay and his party drew near to the scene, the massacre was completed, and most of his little band—which had been slightly augmented on the way up—turned right-about, and rode away to defend their respective homes.

But the warrior spirit of old McKay and his sons had been roused. They refused to turn tail, and, in company with Dan and Peter Davidson, made a furious charge into a detached party of the half-breeds which they chanced to encounter. They scattered them like sheep, though they did not succeed in killing any. Then they also wheeled round and galloped back to their respective homes.

"Come, Elspie, tear," said the old man as he dismounted, "putt what ye value most in your pocket an' come away. The duvles are down on us, and we are not able to hold out in Ben Nevis. The settlers must choin altogether, an' do the best we can to defend ourselves."

While he was speaking, the Highlander was busy stuffing some of the smaller of his household goods into his pockets—amongst them a large quantity of tobacco.

Meanwhile Fergus hastened to the stable to saddle Vixen for Elspie, while the poor girl ran to her room and secured some small objects which she valued—among them a miniature portrait of her mother, and a Bible which the good lady had given to her a short time before her death. There was no money, and no valuable documents had to be looked after, so that preparations for fight were soon completed.

Now there was a member of old Duncan McKay's household who has not yet been introduced to the reader, but whose character and influence in the household were such as to demand special notice. This member was an old woman named Peg. Probably this was an abbreviation of Peggy, but we cannot tell. Neither can we say what her surname was, for we never heard it, and no one spoke of the old creature by any other name than that of "Old Peg."

Although Old Peg was by no means feeble—indeed, judged by her capacities, she might have been pronounced middle-aged, for she could walk about the house all day, actively engaged in miscellaneous self-imposed duties, and could also eat like a man and sleep like a dormouse—she was, nevertheless, withered, and wrinkled, and grey, and small. Her exact age nobody knew—and, for the matter of that, nobody seemed to care.

Extreme amiability and self-obliteration were the chief characteristics of Old Peg. She was silent by nature, and deaf as a post—whether by art or nature we know not; probably both. Well, no—on second thoughts, not quite as deaf as a post, for by means of severe shouting she could be made to hear.

Smiles and nods, however, were her chief means of communication with the outer world. When these failed, a yell might be tried with advantage.

No one of the McKay household ever thought of giving Old Peg anything in the shape of work to do, for the very good reason that, being an extremely willing horse, she was always working; and she possessed a peculiar faculty of observation, which enabled her to perceive, long before any one else, what ought to be done, and the right time to do it, so that, when any one bounced round with the sudden intention of telling her to do anything, Old Peg was found to have done it already, or to be in the act of doing it. It is almost superfluous to say that she patched and mended the household garments, washed the most of things washable, sewed the sewable, darned the sock, and, generally, did-up the whole McKay family. When not engaged in definite or specific work, she had a chronic sock-knitting which helped to fill up and round off the corners of her leisure hours.

Old Peg had been the nurse, consecutively, of Fergus, Elspie, and Duncan junior. She was now equivalent to their second mother, having nursed their first mother to the end with faithful untiring affection, and received from the dying woman a solemn commission never to forsake Duncan senior or his progeny.

No sentiment of a religious nature ever escaped Old Peg, but it was observed that she read her Bible regularly, and was occasionally found asleep on her knees—greatly to the amusement of that irritable old rascal, Duncan senior, and to the gratification of Elspie, who came to the conclusion that the old woman must have learned well off by heart such words as—"Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do; do it with thy might." "Do good to all men as thy hand findeth opportunity." "Be clothed with humility." "Trust in the Lord at all times." Probably Elspie was right, for she judged of people in the old-fashioned way, namely, "by their fruits." Her judgment of the two Duncans on this principle, by the way, could not have been very exalted, but we cannot tell. She was much too loyal and loving a daughter and sister to give any sign or opinion.

At the time of the sudden call to flight just described, the McKay family had totally forgotten Old Peg in their hurry. Elspie was the first to miss her.

"Old Peg!" she exclaimed—almost screamed—while Fergus was assisting her to mount Vixen, "where is she?"

"I'll find her," said Fergus, "and bring her on in the cart. You be off after father. We've no time to lose."

"Be *sure* you bring her, Fergus," said Elspie.

"All right; no fear!"

Thus assured, Elspie was about to gallop away after her father—who had started in advance, to overtake and stop the Prairie Cottage family, so that they might travel in one band—when the clatter of hoofs was heard, and next moment Dan Davidson galloped round the corner of the house.

"I came back for you, Elspie," he said, pulling up. "Why did you not come on with your father?"

"I expected to overtake him, Dan. You know Vixen is swift. Besides, I missed Old Peg, and delayed a few minutes on her account. Is she with your party?"

"No—at least I did not see her. But she may have been in the cart with Louise. Shall I look for her while you gallop on?"

"No; Fergus has promised to find and bring her after us. Come, I am ready."

The two galloped away. As they did so young Duncan issued from the stable behind the house, leading out his horse. He was in no hurry, having a good mount. At the same time Fergus came out at the back-door of the house shouting, "Old Peg! Hallo! old woman, where are ye?"

"Hev ye seen her, Duncan?" he asked impatiently.

"It iss seekin' high an' low I hev been, an' it iss of no use shoutin', for she hears nothin'."

"I'm sure I saw her in the cart wi' the Davidsons," said Duncan.

"Are you sure?" asked Fergus.

"Weel, I did not pass quite close to them, as I ran up here for my horse on hearin' the news," replied Duncan; "but I am pretty sure that I saw her sittin' beside Louise."

"Hm! that accoonts for her not being here," said Fergus, running into the stable. "Hold on a bit, Duncan. I'll go with ye in a meenit."

In the circumstances he was not long about saddling his horse. A few minutes more, and the brothers were galloping after their friends, who had got a considerable distance in advance of them by that time, and they did not overtake them till a part of the Settlement was reached where a strong muster of the settlers was taking place, and where it was resolved to make a stand and face the foe.

Here it was discovered, to the consternation of the McKay family, that Old Peg was not with the Davidson party, and that therefore she must have been left behind!

"She *must* be found and rescued," exclaimed Elspie, on making the discovery.

"She *must*!" echoed Dan Davidson: "who will go back with me?"

A dozen stout young fellows at once rode to the front, and old McKay offered to take command of them, but was overruled and left behind.

Chapter Nine.
Old Peg

Meanwhile, accustomed to think and act for herself, Old Peg, on the first alarm, had made up her mind to do her fair share of work quietly.

She did not require to be told that danger threatened the family and that flight had been resolved on. A shout from some one that Nor'-Westers were coming, coupled with the hasty preparations, might have enlightened a mind much less intelligent than that of the old woman. She knew that she could do nothing to help where smart bodily exercise was needed, but, down by the creek close by, there was a small stable in which a sedate, lumbering old cart-horse dwelt. The horse, she felt sure, would be wanted. She could not harness it, but she could put a bridle on it and lead it up to the house.

This animal, which was named Elephant on account of its size, had been totally forgotten by the family in the hurry of departure.

Old Peg found the putting of a bridle on the huge creature more difficult work than she had expected, and only succeeded at last by dint of perseverance, standing on three or four bundles of hay, and much coaxing—for the creature had evidently taken it into its head that the old woman had come there to fondle it—perhaps to feed it with sugar after the manner of Elspie.

She managed the thing at last, however, and led the horse up towards the house.

Now, while she had been thus engaged the family had left, and the half-breeds—having combined their forces—had arrived.

Ben Nevis was the first house the scoundrels came to. Dismounting, and finding the place deserted, they helped themselves to whatever was attractive and portable—especially to a large quantity of Canada twist tobacco, which old Duncan had found it impossible to carry away. Then they applied fire to the mansion, and, in a wonderfully short time Ben Nevis was reduced to a level with the plain. Another party treated Prairie Cottage in a similar manner.

It was when the first volume of black smoke rose into the sky that Old Peg came to the edge of the bushes that fringed the creek and discovered that Ben Nevis had suddenly become volcanic! She instantly became fully aware of the state of matters, and rightly judged that the family must have escaped, else there would have been some evidence of resistance.

Fortunately the old woman had not yet passed quite from the shelter of the bushes. She drew back with a degree of caution worthy of a Red-skin, leading the horse with her. When well out of sight she paused for the purpose of meditation. What was now to be done! As we have said, she possessed decision of character in an eminent degree. She never at any time had taken long to make up her mind; she was not going to begin now, though the position was probably the most perplexing that she had ever experienced. Suddenly she raised her head and laughed.

In the circumstances it would not have been surprising had hysteria seized Old Peg, but there was nothing hysterical in her nature. Calm, cool, calculating courage dominated her every thought and feeling, but the idea of what she was driven to in her old age had tickled her fancy. Leading the big cart-horse close up to a bank, she prepared to mount him—having previously broken off a good strong switch from a neighbouring bush.

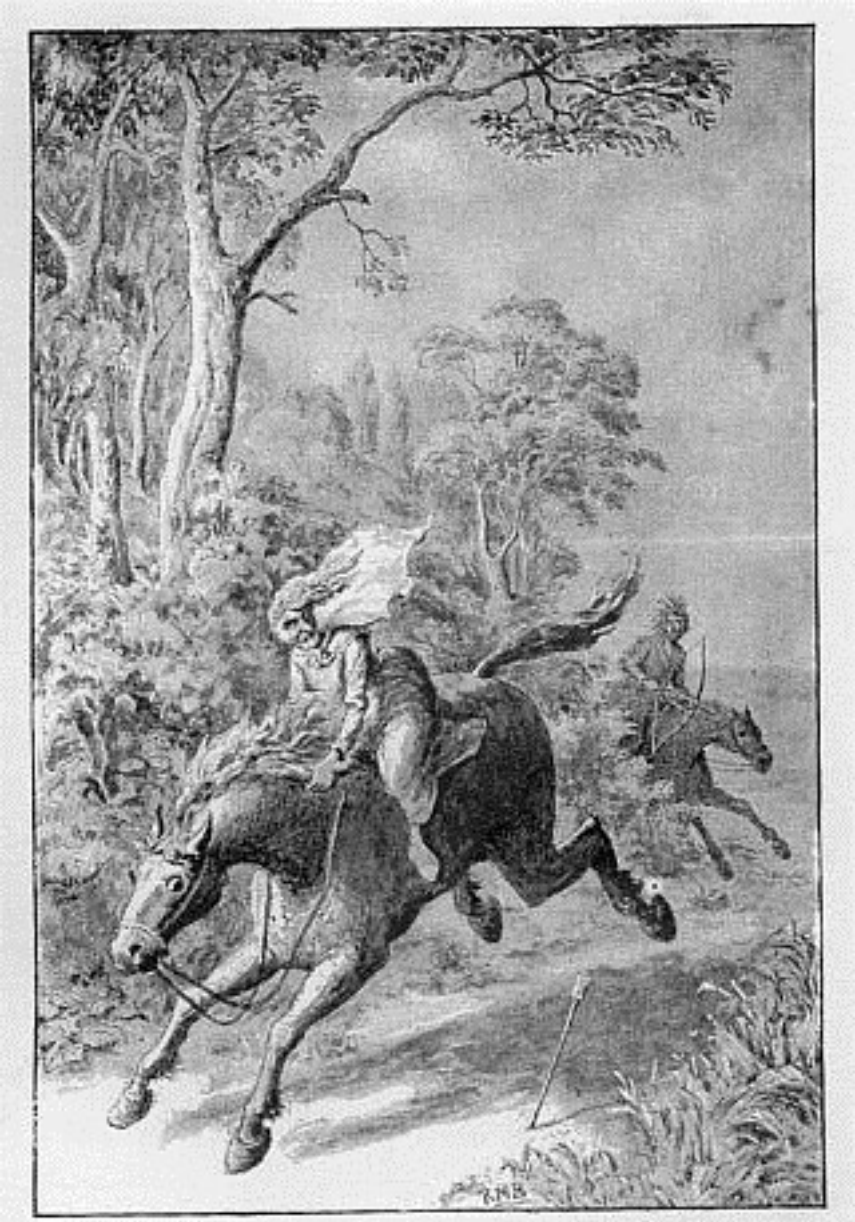
Never before in her life had Peg mounted a steed of any kind whatever. She knew the lady's position on horseback by sight, of course, but not by practice. To attempt it even with a side-saddle would have been impossible; but Elephant was barebacked. Fortunately he was fat and broad, and without a visible back-bone. Old Peg at once made up her mind, and, climbing the bank, scrambled on his back in gentleman's position. It was more comfortable than she had dared to hope.

But now an unexpected difficulty met her. Elephant declined to move! She pulled at his bridle, and he turned sluggishly, but he would not advance. Peg administered a sounding whack with the

switch. She might as well have hit a neighbouring tree. Elephant's hide was like that of his namesake, and he had no feelings to speak of that could be touched, or hurt, or worked upon.

In this dilemma the old woman had recourse to a weapon with which her broad bosom was at all times furnished. She drew a large pin, and drove the point into Elephant's flank. The result was instantaneous. Up went his hindquarters, and Peg found herself sprawling on his bushy mane. She held on to that, however, and, gradually working her way back, regained her old position—thankful that she had not been thrown to the ground.

Another result was that Elephant condescended to walk. But this was not enough. Escape at such a pace was impossible. Old Peg prodded him again—this time on the shoulder, for she rightly conjectured that he could not well kick up with his fore-legs. But he might rear! The thought caused her to grasp the bushy mane with both hands and hold on. He did not rear, but he trotted, and poor Old Peg came to the conclusion that there were disagreeable novelties in life, even for her.



FLIGHT OF OLD PEG.—Page 90.

When Elephant at length burst out of the fringe of wood and gained the track that followed the course of the river, she was immediately seen by the plunderers, who laughed at the strange rider but did not follow her, with the exception of one man—an Indian, painted and feathered,—who started in pursuit, hoping, possibly, for an easy scalp.

He soon came close up, and, being armed with a bow, sent an arrow in advance of him. The shaft was well aimed. It grazed the flank of Elephant, inflicting a painful wound. This woke up the old horse surprisingly, so that it not only broke into a gallop, but set off at racing speed as it used to do when young. The Indian was badly mounted, and gradually lost ground, whereupon he sent after the fugitives several more arrows which all fell wide of the mark.

The change to Old Peg was as a reprieve from death! The trot had almost dislocated her bones, and shaken her up like an addled egg, and the change to racing speed afforded infinite relief. She could scarcely credit her senses, and she felt a tendency to laugh again as she glanced over her shoulder. But that glance removed the tendency, for it revealed the Indian warrior, in all his paint and feathers and streaming scalp-locks, in hot pursuit, while the whiz of another arrow close past her ear convinced our heroine that it was not a dream.

The jolting to which the poor old creature was subjected had disturbed her costume not a little. Her shawl came nearly off, and, holding on by one pin, fluttered like a flag of defiance. Her slippers, which were of the carpet pattern, were left behind on the prairie to perplex the wolves, and her voluminous hair—once a rich auburn, but now a pearly grey—having escaped its cap and fastenings, was streaming out gaily in the breeze, as if to tempt the fingers and knife of the pursuer.

A stern-chase is a long one, whether ashore or afloat. Pursuer and pursued went rapidly down the Settlement until they came in sight of the band which had come to rescue Peg. They received her with a wild cheer of surprise and joy, which turned the Red-skin to the right-about, and sent him back to his friends much faster than he had come.

On receiving his report, the half-breeds at once dashed off in pursuit of the settlers, and did not draw rein until they reached the place where the Scotchmen had made a stand. The latter were greatly outnumbered, at least in fighting men, but they showed such a resolute front, that Cuthbert Grant, the half-breed leader, again interfered to prevent bloodshed if possible. After calming his men, and advising forbearance, he turned to Duncan McKay senior, who was the settlers' spokesman, and said—

"If you will go peaceably away out of the colony, we will spare you, but if you show fight your blood be on your own heads, for I cannot restrain my men much longer."

"Iss it sparin' us you will be talkin' of, Cuthbert Grant?" answered the Highlander, with scorn. "Wow! but if it wass not for the weemen an' children that's with us, you would hev a goot chance o' bein' in need o' sparin' yoursels; an' it iss not much o' the blood o' the Grants, either, that's in *your* veins, or ye would scorn to consort wi' such fire-raisin' cut-throats. It iss the fortune of war—whatever, and we can't affoord to leave our weemen an' bairns defenceless. So we accept your terms, if we are not hindered from carryin' away our arms."

"Carry away whatever you like," replied Grant, quietly, "only be off at once, or I'll not answer for the consequences."

Thus the angry Highlander was dismissed, and in the end the unfortunate settlers, being a second time driven into exile, took refuge, as before, at Jack River.

Chapter Ten.
Archie and Little Bill do Wonders

We change the scene now to the margin of a small lake embosomed like a gem in the great wilderness of the Far North.

It is autumn. The sun is bright, the air is calm and clear. There is a species of warm haze which, paradoxically, does not seem to interfere with the clearness, and a faint zephyr which appears rather to emphasise than break the calm. It sends a soft cat's-paw now and then across parts of the lake, and thus, by contrast, brings into greater prominence the bright reflection of trees and cloudland mirrored in its depths. Instead of being the proverbial "dead" calm, it is, if we may so put it, rather a lively, cheerful calm.

The liveliness of it is vastly increased by hundreds of water-fowl, which disport themselves on the surface of the lake, as if coquetting with their own reflections, or whistle round its margin while busy on the feeding-grounds.

Myriads of mosquitoes were wont there to murmur their maddening career in search of blood, but, happily, at the period we write of, an incidental and premonitory night-frost had relegated these to the graves of their forefathers, or to the mansions of Hiberna—we know not, and care not, which.

We have styled the lake a "little" one, but we must remind the reader that we use the expression in an American sense, and that where lakes are two and three hundred miles long, a little one can well afford to be twenty or thirty miles in diameter, with, perchance, a boundless horizon. The lake in question, however, was really a little one—not more than two miles in length or breadth, with the opposite shore quite visible, and a number of islets of various sizes on its bosom—all more or less wooded, and all, more rather than less, the temporary homes of innumerable wild-fowl, among which were noisy little gulls with pure white bodies and bright red legs and bills.

On the morning in question—for the sun was not yet much above the horizon—a little birch-bark canoe might have been seen to glide noiselessly from a bed of rushes, and proceed quietly, yet swiftly, along the outer margin of the bed.

The bow-paddle was wielded by a stout boy with fair curly hair. Another boy, of gentle mien and sickly aspect, sat in the stern and steered.

"Little Bill," said the stout boy in a low voice, "you're too light. This will never do."

"Archie," returned the other with a languid smile, "I can't help it, you know—at least not in a hurry. In course of time, if I eat frightfully, I may grow heavier, but just now there's no remedy except the old one of a stone."

"That's true, Little Bill," responded Archie with a perplexed look, as he glanced inquiringly along the shore; "nevertheless, if thought could make you heavier, you'd soon be all right, for you're a powerful thinker. The old remedy, you see, is not available, for this side of the lake is low and swampy. I don't see a single stone anywhere."

"Never mind, get along; we'll come to one soon, I dare say," said the other, dipping his paddle more briskly over the side.

The point which troubled Archie Sinclair was the difference in weight between himself and his invalid brother, which, as he occupied the bow, resulted in the stern of the light craft being raised much too high out of the water. Of course this could have been remedied by their changing places, but that would have thrown the heavier work of the bow-paddle on the invalid, who happened also to be the better steersman of the two. A large stone placed in the stern would have been a simple and effective remedy, but, as we have seen, no large stone was procurable just then.

"It didn't much matter in the clumsy wooden things at Red River," said Archie, "but this egg-shell of Okématan's is very different. Ho! there's one at last," he continued with animation as they

rounded a point of land, and opened up a small bay, on the margin of which there were plenty of pebbles, and some large water-worn stones.

One of these having been placed in the stern of the canoe, and the balance thus rectified, the voyage was continued.

"Don't you think that breakfast on one of these islets would be nice?" said Billie.

"Just the very thing that was in my mind, Little Bill," answered his brother.

It was a curious peculiarity in this sturdy youth, that whatever his invalid brother wished, he immediately wished also. Similarly, when Billie didn't desire anything, Archie did not desire it. In short Billie's opinion was Archie's opinion, and Billie's will was Archie's law. Not that Archie had no will or opinion of his own. On the contrary, he was quite sufficiently gifted in that way, but his love and profound pity for the poor and almost helpless invalid were such that in regard to him he had sunk his own will entirely. As to opinions—well, he did differ from him occasionally, but he did it mildly, and with an openness to conviction which was almost enviable. He called him Bill, Billie, or Little Bill, according to fancy at the moment.

Poor boys! The sudden death of both parents had been a terrible blow to them, and had intensified the tenderness with which the elder had constituted himself the guardian of the younger.

When the Scotch settlers were banished from the colony, pity, as well as friendship for their deceased parents, induced the Davidson family to adopt the boys, and now, in exile, they were out hunting by themselves to aid in replenishing the general store of provisions.

It need scarcely be said that at this period of the year the exiled colonists were not subjected to severe hardships, for the air was alive with wild-fowl returning south from their breeding-grounds, and the rivers and lakes were swarming with fish, many of them of excellent quality.

"This will do—won't it?" said Archie, pointing with his paddle to an islet about a hundred yards in diameter.

"Yes, famously," responded Little Bill, as he steered towards a shelving rock which formed a convenient landing-place.

The trees and shrubs covered the islet to the water's edge with dense foliage, that glowed with all the gorgeous colouring for which North American woods in autumn are celebrated. An open grassy space just beyond the landing-place seemed to have been formed by nature for the express purpose of accommodating picnic parties.

"Nothing could have been better," said Archie, drawing up the bow of the canoe, and stooping to lift his brother out.

"I think I'll try to walk—it's such a short bit," said Billie.

"D'ye think so? well, I've no doubt you can do it, Little Bill, for you've got a brave spirit of your own, but there's a wet bit o' moss you'll have to cross which you mayn't have noticed. Would you like to be lifted over that, and so keep your moccasins dry?"

"Archie, you're a humbug. You're always trying to make me give you needless trouble."

"Well, have it your own way, Little Bill. I'll help you to walk up."

"No, carry me," said Billie, stretching out his arms; "I've changed my mind."

"I will, if you prefer it, Little Bill," said Archie, lifting his brother in his strong arms and setting him down on the convenient spot before referred to.

Billie was not altogether helpless. He could stand on his weak legs and even walk a little without support, but to tramp through the woods, or clamber up a hill, was to him an absolute impossibility. He had to content himself with enjoyments of a milder type. And, to do him justice, he seemed to have no difficulty in doing so. Perhaps he owed it to his mother, who had been a singularly contented woman and had taught Billie from his earliest years the truth that, "contentment, with godliness, is great gain." Billie did not announce his belief in this truth, but he proclaimed it unwittingly by the more powerful force of example.

Breakfast is a pleasant meal at any time if the operator be hungry, but who shall describe the delights of breakfast when eaten in company with several thousand wild-fowl, in a romantic wilderness with fresh air laden with the perfumes of the vegetable kingdom encircling the person; the glorious sunshine dazzling the eyes; the sweet songs of animated nature thrilling the ears, and the gentle solicitations of an expectant appetite craving within? Words are wasted in such an effort. We feel constrained to leave it—as we have not seldom left many a thing before now—to the reader's more or less vivid imagination.

A blazing fire of pine-logs boiled two tin kettles and roasted two fat wild-ducks. In one of the kettles Archie compounded and stirred robbiboo—of which, perhaps, the less said the better. In the other, Billie infused a small quantity of tea. The roasting ducks—split open, impaled on sticks and set up before the fire—looked after themselves till they began to burn, when they were turned by Archie and again neglected for a few minutes.

It was a glorious meal in all respects, and even Billie, whose appetite was moderately strong, enjoyed it immensely—none the less that he had asked a blessing on it before beginning, and all the more that he sympathised fully with his brother in his possession of an amazing—a shamelessly robust—capacity for food.

"Now, we'll go to work," remarked Archie, wiping his mouth with a sigh of contentment, (he had nothing else to wipe it with!) after finishing the last spoonful of robbiboo, the last limb of duck and the last mug of tea.

Such a remark at such a period in the entertainment caused Billie to laugh.

"Why, Archie, you've been at work this half-hour, and there's nothing left to go to work upon now."

"You know quite well, Little Bill, that I refer to the *day's* work. What is it to be? Provisions must be got if the camp is not to starve, and you and I are bound to do our share. Shall we go to Willow Point and shoot ducks and geese, or cross the lake and trawl for fish?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.