

# **A Tale Of The Red River Plains Vol.I**

**By  
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***Free*editorial** 

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### **The Buffalo Runners Chapter One**

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 coldbitterly coldlike 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 masseshere 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 whiteygrey.

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 snowdrifts suggested powerfully the madness of agony.

Two white and ghostly pillars moved slowly but steadily through all this hurlyburly in a straight line. One of the pillars was short and broad; the other was tall and stately. Both were very solidagreeably so, when contrasted with surrounding chaos. Suddenly the two pillars stoppedthough 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 snowmask 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 goodhumour.

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 fivefeetlong snowshoes. 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 wellfed men.

Nothing but some overpowering necessity could have stimulated them to such prolonged and severe exertion. Even selfpreservation might have failed to nerve them to it, for both had wellnigh 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 snowclad plains, and Davidson had left his affianced bride.

The buffalohunt 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 mettlecalled on to face a difficulty of the most appalling nature. To remain on the snowclad 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 footand 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 onceeven 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 goodbye, 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 goodnature 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 goodhumour 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. Halfanhour 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 trywhatever.”

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 halfbreed. 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 goodnatured or goodfor 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 topdressing, 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 easygoing 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 serenely 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 goodwill, 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 halfbreed, 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 halfbreeds 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 buffalohumps 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 fryingpan 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 halfbreeds 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 farmhouse 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 openhandedness, 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?”

“Ayin great hurry! They are starving on the plains! Many are dead! Davidson has come in! He is more than halfdead! 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 halfbreed 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 is 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 furtraders.

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 dogsledges 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 servante French halfbreed 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 washtub, 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 jacket towel, "have you got the sledge ready, and the provisions packed, and the empty sledge with the buffalo robes?"

"Aye, 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 wornout 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 dogwhip 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 darkskinned 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 selfappointed hangeron, 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 buffalorobes, 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 snowshoes by the Indian, who stepped out in front, was guide enough for them; and a tailline 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 plainshope 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 snowwreaths that suggested the buried forms of frozen men.

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

At this point the rescueparty chanced to have reached one of those bluffs of woodland which at that time speckled the plainstough 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 Redskin 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 Redskin.”

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 meatcold. The dogs were also treated to a hearty feed, and then, resuming the march, the rescuers pushed on with renewed vigourDan 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 evervarying expression were irresistibly suggestive of a soul full of sympathy and tender regard for the feelings of others.

Nutbrown 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, crossgrained, 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 sonalso named Duncana cross ne’erdoweel like himselfwas 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 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 was 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 today 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’. Gootnight, 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' psalmsingin' 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 whatever."

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 halfbreeds. 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!

Horrorstruck 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.

Selfdefence 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 stouthearted 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 selfdefence?"

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 halfbreeds 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 snowshoes and left the scene of the murder.

Although a dark night, there was sufficient moonlight 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 snowshoes 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 halfbreed women were toiling

slowly over the same plains behind him, bound for the same haven of hopedfor and muchneeded 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 wellknown, 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 snowshoes, and buried the body of the hunter thereinhaving 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 longbarrelled trading guns in use among the buffalohunters.

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.

"Seehere 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 scalpingknife," said the other woman. "It is the knife of a settler."

The weapon in question was one of the large sheathknives 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 scalpingknives supplied by the furtraders to the halfbreeds and Indians.

“I see no name on itno 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 fleshpots 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 campStarvation 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.

“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 sleighbells 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 petrification 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 taysa hungry wolf tooan' 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 rescueparties 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 muchneeded 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 rescueparty had travelled outthe provisions transferred to the strong backs of their rescuersold 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 inas they did?”

“No thanks to you that they did, Tuncan, whatever. Where did you leave the other boys?”

“How should I know?” returned the son sharply; “they dropped offwan here an’ wan theresayin’ 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 halfbreed 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 thingsthings 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 halfbreed 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.”

“Nonot 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’ goodbye.”

“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 buffalorobes 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 storekeeper; “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 halfbreed, 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 halfbreed 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 gunflints, and, O yes, he had almost forgotten a most essential thing wine to make a net, and some fishhooks.

"It is a regular outfit you will be wanting," remarked the storekeeper, 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 is 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 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 is pure extravagance," said McKay, remonstrating.

La Certe could not, dare not, face his wife without these articles. He pleaded earnestly. "Slowfoot is so clever with the needle," he said. "See! she sends 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 storekeeper, 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 buffalohunters for the plains.

“You have a horse to sellthey say?” he remarked to his friend in a careless way.

“Yesand 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 thatbut 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 Pierrepoor things! they’re widows now, for Blanc and Pierre are both dead. Well, the women had wellnigh 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.

“Nothat 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’ snowshoes 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 firewater, dissension, and disaster all over the wilderness of Rupert's Land. Happily the two companies coalesced in the year , 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 halfbreeds of Red River influenced, it is said, by the Nor'West Company received the newcomers with suspicion and illwill. The Indians followed the lead of the halfbreeds, 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 thoroughgoing. 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 heartbreaking character which is known as ne’er-doweel. 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 moonlight 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 masthead.

"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.

"Brayvo!" 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 overdone freeand 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 selfcommand. 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 manslayer, 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 halfbreed maiden appeared at the door.

"Did you mend that shotbag 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 truewhatever," 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 snowcovered 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 wornout 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, savagelooking 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 longdrawn wail, he sank dead upon the snow; whereupon his amiable friendswhen quite sure of his demisetore 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 shortlegged wolf flounders helplessly in its depths, while the longlimbed 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 wellnigh wornout, 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 unlookedfor 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 halfbreed, 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 selfconfidence! 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 wellknown 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 wellknown 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 halfbreeds, and, to some extent, by the severity of the climate. An open rupture took place between them and the Northwesters. Encounters between the contending parties occurred, in which several on both sides were killed, and at last the NorthWesters, 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 furtraders, 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 NorthWest party, consisting chiefly of halfbreeds, 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 scalpingknives, besides which they were painted and plumed à la sauvage, and were in the habit when rushing to battle, of yelling like the Redmen whose blood mingled with that of the Whiteman 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 NorthWesters swept through the settlements. The old man was seated in the hall, parlour, drawingroom 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 handbesides, 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 bestor seem to think they dotell 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 wellwhat 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 pleasanter 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 wasstthough not ferry muchI will be”

He was interrupted at this point by the sudden entrance of Jacques Bourassin with the astounding intelligence that a band of NorthWesters 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.

“Nonot 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 nagsquick,” 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 halfbreeds and Indians, not to offer battle, but for the purpose of parlay 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 halfbreeds 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 halfbreeds, 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 upturned rightabout, 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 halfbreeds 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 devils 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 pocketsamongst 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 valuedamong 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 feebleindeed, judged by her capacities, she might have been pronounced middleaged, for she could walk about the house all day, actively engaged in miscellaneous selfimposed duties, and could also eat like a man and sleep like a dormouseshe was, nevertheless, withered, and wrinkled, and grey, and small. Her exact age nobody knewand, for the matter of that, nobody seemed to care.

Extreme amiability and selfobliteration were the chief characteristics of Old Peg. She was silent by nature, and deaf as a postwhether by art or nature we know not; probably both. Well, noon 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, didup the whole McKay family. When not engaged in definite or specific work, she had a chronic sockknitting 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 backdoor 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 carthorse 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 halfbreed 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 Redskin, 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 carthorse 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 sidesaddle would have been impossible; but Elephant was barebacked. Fortunately he was fat and broad, and without a visible backbone. 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 forelegs. 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.

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 manan 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 scalplocks, 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 Redskin to the rightabout, and sent him back to his friends much faster than he had come.

On receiving his report, the halfbreeds 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 halfbreed 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 fireraisin' cutthroats. It iss the fortune of warwhatever, 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'spaw 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 waterfowl, 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 feedinggrounds.

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 nightfrost had relegated these to the graves of their forefathers, or to the mansions of Hibernawe 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 onenot more than two miles in length or breadth, with the opposite shore quite visible, and a number of islets of various sizes on its bosomall more or less wooded, and all, more rather than less, the temporary homes of innumerable wildfowl, 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 birchbark 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 bowpaddle 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 bowpaddle 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 eggshell 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 waterworn 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 opinionswell, 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 wildfowl returning south from their breedinggrounds, and the rivers and lakes were swarming with fish, many of them of excellent quality.

"This will down'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 landingplace.

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 landingplace 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 walkit'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 wildfowl, 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 pinelogs boiled two tin kettles and roasted two fat wildducks. In one of the kettles Archie compounded and stirred robbiboof which, perhaps, the less said the better. In the other, Billie infused a small quantity of tea. The roasting duckssplit open, impaled on sticks and set up before the firelooked 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 immenselynone 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 amazinga shamelessly robustcapacity 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 halfhour, 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?”

“Both,” answered the invalid with decision. “We’ll do both. We will paddle to Willow Point, and try for jackfish on the way.”

“Just sothe very thing, Little Bill. Are you ready to start?”

Billie professed himself quite ready. Archie took him on his back, replaced him in the stern of the canoe in company with the big stone, and then stepped gently into his own place at the bow, where a common trading gun, with the oldfashioned flint lock and single barrel, rested against the gunwale. Pushing off they soon left Breakfastisle far behind them, and crept swiftly along by the margin of the reeds.

On the way Billie cast out his fishingline. It was a strong codline, with a great codhook attached and a lump of fat pork on it; for Archie, in the fervour of hope coupled with piscatorial ignorance and a sanguine disposition, had strongly advised his brother to err, if err he must, on the safe side, and be prepared for anything, from a great lakeserpent to a freshwater whale.

No civilised fish would have deigned to give a second thought to the obvious deception which a mass of indigestible pork presented, but fish of the backwoodsespecially in the early years of this centurywere not suspicious. An enormous pike, or “jackfish,” coveted that bait and took it. Not only so, but it took the great codhook and ten inches of the line besides.

A shout such as Billie had not uttered for many months announced the fact.

“Hi! hold on, Archie! Back water! I say, I’d believe I had hanked the bottom if it didn’t tug in such a lively way!”

“Pay out line, Little Bill!” cried the other, looking over his shoulder with blazing eyes, but unable to render any assistance owing to the small size and

crank nature of the canoe. "Stay, I'll turn about and become steersman, while you play thewhew! It's a whale! I say ease off!"

"Ease off!" cried Billie in desperation; "how can I ease off, with only a few yards o' the line left?"

"Pitch the reel back to me then. I'll manage it!" cried Archie, who had converted the bow of the canoe into the stern both ends being alike by the simple process of turning himself round and sitting with his face towards his brother.

What Archie had styled the reel was simply a piece of stick with the line wound round it. His brother pitched it to him with one hand while the desperate jerking of the other indeed of his whole body told at once of the size and the impatience of the fish.

Unwinding the line in haste, Archie fastened the extreme end of it to two spare paddles and flung them overboard.

"Now, Little Bill," he said; "you may let him have his head, and if you can't hold on without risking the line just let it go."

As he spoke the captive made another rush not very frantic indeed, for the pike is a sluggish creature in all waters but with a steady persistency that meant resolution of purpose. In a few seconds our invalid was compelled to let go, and, the line tightening, the paddles disappeared with a jerk.

Soon after they reappeared, and the boys paddled towards them with a cheer, picked them up and the battle was renewed.

It would be tedious to recount all the incidents of that fight. We can only say that after a struggle that lasted an hour according to the younger brother; two hours and a half, according to the elder a pike of about four feet in length was hauled into the canoe.

"That's enough of fishing for one day," remarked Billie, wiping his heated brow.

"Quite enough," assented the other; "shall we make for Willow Point now, Little Bill?"

"Yes. We will try the shooting now."

In accordance with this plan, the direction of the canoe was changed, and, early in the afternoon, the young hunters found themselves alongside of a low point of rocks which stretched well out into the lake, leaving a deep bay on

either side. The extreme end of the point consisted of naked rock, but the greater part of it was covered with a dense undergrowth of low willow bushes.

Here they disembarked, and Archie, as before, carried his brother to the highest part of the low point, where a piece of green sward, free from bushes, formed an attractive restingplace.

“Sit there now, Billie, till I get some brush, an’ make yourself useful by cutting out goose heads. See, here are some branches o’ the right sort ready to hand. No doubt some Redskins have been at work here before us.”

He picked up some pieces of wood which Nature had formed more or less to resemble the heads and necks of geese. By a very slight use of the knife Billie converted these into excellent portraits. When he had finished halfadozen of them, his brother had cut and brought to the spot a number of bushy branches about two or three feet high. These were soon stuck into the ground in a small circle so as to resemble a growing bush, behind, or, rather, in the midst of which, they could effectually conceal themselves by crouching.

While this was being constructed the elder brother went down to the edge of the water and made halfadozen mudheaps well within gunshot, which when the artificial heads and necks were attached to them, formed such exact counterparts of geese that the wild birds might well be excused for mistaking them for friends. Indeed tyros at this work have been known to fire at such decoys believing them to be genuine birds.

Even while they were thus engaged one and another flock of ducks and geese passed them on their way to warmer climes; of course sheering off as they passed. But when the arrangement was completed, and the two boys, crouching low, gazed at the horizon with eager looks, the wild birds no longer avoided the spot. On the contrary, seeing the decoys, they rather inclined to pass close to the place.

In flying down a river, or along the margin of a lake, wild birds may diverge a little to follow the sinuosities of bank or shore, but they will not get out of the way of a projecting promontory; they rather make a short cut by crossing over it.

The young hunters had not to wait long.

“There’s a flock of geese coming,” said Archie in a whisper, though the birds were at the moment some miles away. “Take the first shot, Little Bill.”

They had only one gun between them.

“I don’t like to,” said Billie, “that thing gave me such an awful kick last time, and I can’t stand it now.”

“O! there’s no fear, I put in only a small charge of powder and shot, on purpose. It won’t kick hard this time. Try.”

“Well, I’ll try,” said Billie, taking the gun.

“Aim well in advance, Bill. They fly fast, and primin’ gets damp sometimes.”

A flock of small geese was approaching. The boys became dumb, but they had remarkably speaking eyes.

Animated by curiosity, the flock descended to observe the decoys. How often that feeling of curiosity has proved fatal not only to feathered geese!

Little Bill raised his gun. Puff! went the priming. Bang! went the charge. One of the birds, describing a beautiful curve, fell with bursting violence on the ground.

“Well done, Billie,” cried his brother enthusiastically as he leaped over the sheltering brush and ran to secure the prize. “A few like that will give a supper to the whole camp. Now, then,” he added on returning, “you’ll try again.”

“No, Archie. It’s your turn now and the thing did give me a tremendous kick.”

“But I will put in still less powder this time, Little Bill, and less shot too, so you’ll have to be careful of your aim. See, there’s another flock coming there, take it, and down with you. I do believe they are big fellows.”

Thus encouraged, Billie took the gun and crouched low. His brother was right. It was a flock of the great grey geese of Canada which now approached. The hearts of both boys beat high, for they were not only actuated by what is termed the sporting tendency, but by the desire to contribute their fair share to the general larder of their friends, who were encamped a considerable distance off at the other end of the lake.

“Okématan will open his eyes if we take back a goose or two like these; why, they are swans almost!” whispered Archie, as the birds approached in the form of an angle. “Take the big fat one on the left the one now squintin’ down at the decoys.”

Billie obeyed, and fired. The result was, in a manner, threefold. First, the boy’s aim was so good that the big fat fellow dropped like a stone not three yards from their position. Second, the hitherto silent and symmetrically arranged flock went into dire confusion and sheered off in trumpeting convulsions; and,



third, a scattering shot, having found its billet in the head of another goose immediately behind the first one, caused it to plunge right into the camp, straight for the head of Little Bill. Archie, ignorant of this, was in the very act of leaping over the brush to secure the first goose, and had fortunately got in front of his brother at the right moment when the second goose caught him on the shoulder and knocked him into the poor invalid's arms.

He was stunned at first, and rose in a few moments in some degree of mental confusion; but he was not much the worse for the accident and greatly rejoiced at his fortunate escape, as well as the splendid shooting, of Little Bill.

It must not be supposed that the brothers continued to shoot at this rate. Comparatively few flocks of geese passed over Willow Point that day, but numerous flocks of wildducks did, and before evening had put an end to their work, they had secured a fair canoeload of game.

That night they lighted their campfire among the neighbouring willows; feasted luxuriously on part of the day's hunt; lay down side by side under one blanket, with the upturned canoe partially covering them; dreamed at first of Okématan, gazing in wonder at their load, and, afterwards, of being knocked head over heels by an enormous grey goose whose persistent pugnacity was only equalled by its strange incapacity to achieve its murderous ends.

Ultimately Oblivion came to their rescue, and the young hunters fell into a dreamless slumber, with the smoking campfire sending an occasional gleam of ruddy light on their recumbent forms, and the dark sky with its hosts of twinkling stars serving for a gorgeous canopy.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **Shows some of the Troubles of Pioneer Colonists**

Okématan was not the only person who opened his eyes on the return of the Sinclair boys to camp next day with their heavily laden canoe. The Davidson and McKay families were much more emphatic in their astonishment, for the boys, they knew, had not hitherto performed any exploits in shooting. They had not supposed them gifted with even ordinary powers as sportsmen, and had imagined that the poor invalid little Bill was utterly helpless. On the other hand, Okématan was not unacquainted with the sudden rise to unexpected celebrity of Indian boys in his tribe, and knew something about the capacity of even cripples to overcome difficulties when driven by that stern taskmaster, Necessity.

The abundant supply of provisions thus unexpectedly received was very acceptable, because during the day on which the boys were absent, a fresh

band of immigrants had arrived on their way to Red River, and one party of these, hailing from Switzerland, had come on to the little lake where our Scotch friends were encamped, for the purpose of consulting as to their future movements for it was evident that it would be dangerous as well as useless for them to proceed to Red River in the existing state of affairs. The leader of the party was a fairhaired youth, who could speak English very well.

The Scotch families were having their midday meal around the campfires, when the Switzers arrived and introduced themselves. Of course they were made heartily welcome by Mr Sutherland, who acted as spokesman for his countrymen.

“We are unfortunate,” said the leader of the new arrivals, whose name was André Morel. “We hoped that the severe climate would be our only foe to fight with especially in a land where the people are so few.”

Sutherland whose sedate and quiet manner was consistent with his position as an elder and spiritual guide of his countrymen at that time smiled gravely, shook his head, and stroked his chin.

“You will find,” he said, “that whatever part of this world you go to, the passions of man are always more deadly in their consequences than surroundings, or climates, or anything else.”

“H’m! what you say iss ferry true,” remarked old McKay, who was busy picking the drumstick of a wildgoose at the moment. “If it wass not for the jealousy an’ illwill o’ the NorthWesters we should hev been at this goot hour in our comfortable houses amang the green fields of Rud Ruver.”

“Wheesht! faither!” interposed Duncan junior, “Mr Sutherland wass speakin’, an’ ye’ve stoppit him.”

“An’ what if I hev, Tuncan? Can he not continoo to speak when I hev done?” retorted the old man, resuming his drumstick.

“You are right, Mr McKay,” said the elder. “But for the unfortunate jealousies of the two Companies, we might have been in very different circumstances today. If the NorthWesters could only see that the establishment of a colony in Red River would in no way hinder the furtrade, we could all get along peaceably enough together. But it seems to have been ordained that man shall reach every good thing through much tribulation.”

“I do not agree wi’ you at all, Muster Sutherland,” said old McKay. “There iss many of rich people in this world, who hev all that hert can wush, an’ are born to it without hevin’ any treebulation at all.”

“But I did not say ‘all that heart could wish,’ Mr McKay. I said ‘every good thing’.”

“Well, an’ iss not wealth a goot thing, Muster Sutherland?”

“Only if God’s blessing goes along with it,” returned the elder. “If it does not, wealth is a curse.”

“H’m! I wush I had a little more o’ that cursewhatever,” answered the irreverent old man.

“Besides,” continued Sutherland, not noticing the remark, “the rich are by no means exempt from tribulation. They are sometimes afflicted with bad children; not infrequently with bad health, which doctors, at two or three guineas a visit, cannot cure, and many of them are much troubled with poverty!”

“You are talking in ruddles now, Muster Sutherland,” said old Duncan, who, having finished the drumstick and its duplicate, was preparing his pipe for action.

“It is not much of a riddle, Mr McKay. I suppose you consider a man with ten thousand a year rich, and a man with two hundred poor.”

“Well, yes; I wull not be denyin’ that.”

“Wellif the rich man spends ten thousand and fifty pounds a year and never has anything to spare or to lay by, is he not miserably poorpoor in spirit as well as in purse? For, at the end of the year his purse is empty, and he is in debt. On the other hand, if the man with two hundred a year spends one hundred and fifty, gives away twenty, and lays by thirty every year, is he not rich?”

“Ferry true, Muster Sutherland,” said McKay, with a peculiar smile, as he emitted his first whiff. “I wull not be arguin’ wi’ you, for you always get the best of it. Nevertheless, it is my opeenion that we’ve had treebulation enough in Rud Ruver since we came oot, an’ I would be ferry gled of a luttie prosperity nowif only by way of a pleasant change.”

Recurring to this subject a few days later, young Morel asked Dan Davidson, while they were paddling back to camp together one evening with the proceeds of a day’s hunt: “Has your life in the colony, since the beginning, been as bad as old McKay made it out the other day?”

“Well, making due allowance for the old man’s use of strong language, his

account of matters has not been much overdrawn,” answered Dan, who, in virtue of his superior canoecraft, acted the part of steersman. “You see, when we came out here we expected, like you, that all would be plain sailing, except as regarded climate and ordinary difficulties, but our eyes were soon opened to the true state of things. Instead of the wilderness, with a few peaceful inhabitants living under the mild sway of the Hudson Bay Company, we found another company, apparently as strong as the Hudson’s Bay one, in violent opposition. They regarded our coming as likely to ruin their trade, for Lord Selkirk was a share holder in the Hudson’s Bay Company, and it was supposed his object in planting the colony was to advance his scheme of monopolising the whole furtrade of the Far West. I cannot myself see how this colony could injure the furtrade; but, anyhow, I know that the opposition has affected the colonists very severely, for we have been deceived by the contending parties, and misled, and delayed or thwarted in all our operations.

“At the very outset, on our arrival, a band of the Nor’Westers, composed of halfbreeds and Indians, warned us that our presence was unwelcome, and tried to frighten us away by their accounts of the savage nature of the natives. Then the fear of perishing for want of food induced a lot of us to take their advice, leave the farms allotted to us, and go to a place called Pembina, about seventy miles distant from the colony, there to spend the long and hard winter in tents, according to the Indian fashion, and live on the produce of the chase.”

“I should have thought that was a pleasant way of spending the first winter,” remarked André Morel, who, besides being young, was strong and enthusiastic.

“So thought some of us at first,” returned Dan, “but when we found that the thermometer fell to somewhere between and degrees below zero; that walking in snowshoes, trapping, hunting buffalo, and shooting, were not to be learned in a few days; and when we saw our women and children dependent sometimes on the charity of Indians, and reduced almost to starvation, we changed our minds as to the pleasure of the thing. However, if the school was rough, it made the scholars all the quicker, and now I think that most of us are equal to the Redskins themselves at their own work.

“When that winter came to an end,” continued Dan, “we returned to Red River, in the month of May, wiser men, thoroughly determined to plant and sow, and make ourselves independent of the savages. But hunger followed us, for fish were scarce that season; so were roots and berries; and, if it had not been for a kind of parsnip which grows wild in the plains, and a species of eatable nettle, I do believe some of us would have gone under altogether.”

“And did your first sowing turn out well?” asked the young Swiss, who having

been bred a watchmaker, had only hazy notions as to farming.

“Ay, there was a gleam of prosperity there that led us to hope great things for the future,” answered Dan; “but the gleam did not continue. Why, one fellow, not far from our place, sowed four quarts of wheat, and reaped twelve and a half bushels; but we had terrible trouble to save our crops from the birds. In the Spring and Fall, blackbirds and wild pigeons pass over the prairies on their way north or south, in immense numbers. They pass in such numbers that they could, I do believe, swallow our whole harvest, if they got only a grain apiece. The berries failed them that year, an’ men, women, and children had to work hard wi’ guns, birdnets, and rattles, from morning to night, to say nothing o’ scarecrows. We had resolved never to go near Pembina again, but what we saved of the harvest was little more than enough for seed, so we were forced to try it for another winter. Troubles again awaited us there. The halfbreeds and Indians who had been kind at first became jealous. A plot was discovered to murder two of our party who had undertaken to hunt, so we were obliged to buy our provisions at a high price, and even to barter away our clothing to avoid starvation, and we returned halfnaked to the Settlement the following spring. Then, coming upon us in armed bands and superior numbers, they drove us out of the Settlement altogether at last, and we came here to Jack River to spend the winter as we best could. After that we went back and struggled on for some time, but now, here have they a second time banished us! What the end is to be, who can tell?”

“Truly, if such be the country I have come to, I will go back to my native land and make watches,” remarked the Swiss in a tone from which the sanguine element had almost entirely disappeared.

## **Chapter Twelve**

### **Round the CampFires**

Had any one been watching the campfires of the banished colonists that night, the last idea that would have entered the observer’s mind would have been that of suffering or distress.

The night was brilliantly fine, and just cold enough to make the blazing fires agreeable without being necessary except, indeed, as a means of cooking food. The light of these fires, shining through the green, yellow, and golden foliage, and illuminating the sunburnt faces of men, women, and children, gave to the scene a strain of the free, the wild, and the romantic, which harmonised well with the gypsylike appearance of the people, and formed a ruddy contrast to the pure cold light of the innumerable stars overhead, which, with their blueblack setting, were reflected in the neighbouring lake.

Over every fire pots and kettles were suspended from tripods, or rested on the halfburned logs, while impaled wildfowl roasted in front of it. Food being in great abundance, hearts were light in spite of other adverse circumstances, and men and women, forgetting to some extent the sufferings of the past and the dark prospects of the future, appeared to abandon themselves to the enjoyment of the present.

The children, of course, were full of glee, and not altogether empty of mischief; and there were fortunately no infants of age so tender as to induce a squalling protest against the discomforts of a situation which could be neither understood nor appreciated.

“It iss a pleasant night, whatever,” remarked old McKay, lighting his pipe with a brand plucked from the fire which his family and the Davidsons shared in common; “an’ if it wass always like this, it iss myself that would not object to be a rud savitch.”

“I don’t know that a rud savitch is much worse than a white wan,” growled Duncan junior, in an undertone.

“What iss that you say?” demanded the old man with a look of suspicion, for his hearing was imperfect.

“Surely the water must be boiling now, daddy?” said Elspie, by way of checking the conversation.

“I don’t know whuther it iss boilin’ or not,” answered Duncan senior, applying another brand to his pipe.

“Archie, boy!” exclaimed Dan Davidson, “you’re letting that goose roast to a cinder.”

“No, Dan, I’m notbut Billie can’t abear meat underdone, so it’s better to blacken the outside than have the inside raw.”

“Who iss that singing? Wheesht, boys,” said Fergus McKay, turning his head a little on one side as if to listen.

There was profound silence for a few moments as a rich manly voice was heard to swell forth from the neighbourhood of one of the campfires.

“It comes from the camp of the Switzers, I think,” said Elspie McKay.

“I know it,” said Jessie Davidson, who was seated on a log beside her friend. “It is François La Certe. He came to our meetingplace in Red River, you know, just after Cuthbert Grant and his men left us, and, hearing that we were

starting off to Jack River again, he resolved to follow. I heard him tell Slowfoot to get ready to go along with us.”

“I wonder why he came?” said Mrs Davidson, coming out of her tent at the moment, and joining the party round the fire.

“He did not say,” answered Jessie.

“He did not require to say,” remarked Duncan McKay, with a sarcastic laugh. “Every wan knows that wherever there iss a chance of gettin’ ammunition and plenty of victuals for nothing, there La Certe iss certain to be found. He knew that we would be sure to hev plenty at this season o’ the year, an’ that we would not see him an’ his wife sterve when our kettles wass full. Iss not that so, Okématan? You know him best.”

Thus appealed to, the Indian, whose usual expression was one of intense gravity, shut his eyes, opened his mouth, displayed his superb teeth, and uttered a low chuckle, but made no further reply.

It was enough. Those who understood Okématan and his ways were well aware that he thought La Certe uncommonly sly.

The halfbreed had indeed followed the expelled colonists in the belief that they would certainly possess plenty of powder and shot which he had not the means of purchasing. He also knew that the whole of Rupert’s Land swarmed with game in autumn and spring, and that the Scotch were an openhanded race when approached in the right way. Putting these things together, he carefully gummed his canoe, put his wife and child into it also some of the provision which had been supplied to him by Duncan McKay junior and followed the settlers over Lake Winnipeg to Jack River.

Here, finding that a new party of immigrants had arrived, who were necessarily unacquainted with his little peculiarities, La Certe attached himself to them and made himself agreeable. This he could do very well, for the Switzers understood his bad French, as well as his good tuneful voice, and appreciated his capacity for telling a story.

“Did you never,” he said to André Morel, after his song was finished, “hear of how my old mother saved her whole tribe from death one time in the Rocky Mountains?”

“Never,” Morel replied with a somewhat sceptical but goodnatured smile.

“No! I wonder much, for every one in this land heard about it, an’ I thought the news must have spread over Europe and and, perhaps Africa. Well, I will

tell you. Where is my baccybag?"

"Never mind, fill your pipe from mine," said Morel, tossing him a little bag of the coveted weed.

"Thank you. Well, you must know that my mother had a beautiful voiceO! much more beautiful than mine. Indeed, I do not joke, so you need not laugh. It was so sweet that men were always forced to listen till she was done. They could not help it."

"Did they ever want to help it?" asked Morel quietly.

"O yesas you shall hear. Well, one day my mother was living with all our tribeI say our tribe because my mother was an Indianwith all our tribe, in a great dark gorge of the Rocky Mountains. The braves had gone out to hunt that day, but my mother stayed behind with the women and children. I was a little foolish child at that timetoo young to hunt or fight. My fathera French Canadianhe was dead.

"We knewmy mother and Ithat the braves would be home soon. We expected them every minute. While we were waiting for them, my mother went into the bush to pick berries. There she discovered a warparty of our enemies. They were preparing to attack our village, for they knew the men were away, and they wanted the scalps of the women and children. But they did not know the exact spot where our wigwams were pitched, and were just going, after a feed, to look for it.

"My mother ran home with the news, and immediately roused the camp, and made them get ready to fly to meet the returning men.

"'But, my daughter,' said an old chief, who had stayed in camp, 'our enemies are young and active; they will quickly overtake us before we meet our men.'

"'No,' said my mother, 'I will stop them. Get ready, and set off quickly.'

"She then ran back on her trailmy mother was a tremendous runnersuperb! She came to a narrow place where our enemies would have to pass. A very thick tree grew there. She climbed it, and hid among the branches. It projected beyond a precipice and overhung a stream. Soon after that she saw the enemy advancing, step by step, slowly, cautiously, like men who dread an ambush, and with glances quick and solemn from side to side, like men who see a foe in every stump and stone."

La Certe paused at this point. He was an adept at storytelling. His voice had slowed by degrees and become increasingly deep and solemn as he proceeded.



“Now,” continued he, in a higher tone, “my mother did not fear that they would see her if they looked up when they passed the tree. She was too well hidden for that; but she was not sure what the effect of her voice would be, for she had never tried it in that way before. However, she was full of courage. She resembled me in that bold as a lion! She began to sing. Low and soft at the beginning, like a dream of song.

“At the first note the Indians halted every man; each in the position in which he was fixed. If a foot was up he kept it up. If both feet were down he left them down. The feet that were up came slowly to the ground when the Indians got tired, but no one took another step. My mother’s voice was a weird voice. It sounded as if the place from which it came was nowhere or anywhere or everywhere! Slowly the painted heads turned from side to side as far as they could go, and the glaring eyes turned a little further. A creeping fear came over them. They trembled. They turned pale. That could be easily seen through the paint. My mother saw it! She became more courageous and sang out in her most pathetic strain. The Indians wept. That was quite visible. My mother saw it. Her great object was to delay the attack until our men had time to arrive. She tried a war song, but that was not so successful. It was too commonplace. Besides, in her energy she shook the branches, and that drew attention to the tree. My mother thought that she was in danger then; but fortune favoured her. It always favours the brave. I know this from experience.

“She had just come to a terrific whoop in the war song when she slipped off her branch and the whoop increased to a death yell as she went crashing headlong through the branches and down into the stream at the foot of the precipice.

“Water! water!” exclaimed La Certe at this point, holding out both hands. “I can never pass this part of my story without burning thirst!”

A mug of water was handed him.

“Poor fellow have some brandy in it,” said a sympathetic hearer, hastily getting out his bottle.

La Certe held out his mug impatiently for the brandy, drained the mug, and cleared his voice.

“Was your mother killed?” asked the sympathiser, earnestly.

“Killed? No. Impossible! My mother could not be killed because her destiny was not yet fulfilled. No: there was a deep pool right under the tree. She fell into that with a plunge that echoed from cliff to cliff. The Indians were profoundly superstitious. All Indians are not so, but these Indians were. They

waited not for more. They turned and fled as if all the evil spirits in the Rocky Mountains were chasing them. They reached their wigwams breathless, and told their squaws that one of the spirits of a mountain stream had sat among the branches of a tree and sung to them. It had told them that the right time for attacking their foes had not yet come. Then it sang them a warsong descriptive of their final victory, and, just after uttering a tremendous warwhoop, it had dived back into its native stream.”

“Well done!” exclaimed an enthusiastic Canadian.

“But what became of your mother?” asked Morel.

“Oh! she swam ashore. My mother was a splendid swimmer. I know it, for she taught me.”

“Was it a long swim?” asked a sceptical sailor, who was one of the emigrants.

“How? what mean you?” demanded La Certe, sternly.

“I only want to know if she took long to swim ashore out o’ that pool,” said the sceptic, simply.

La Certe cast on him a glance of suspicion, and replied that his mother had found no difficulty in getting out of the pool.

“Is the old lady alive yet?” asked the pertinacious sceptic.

“Of course not. She died long long ago thirty years ago.”

“What! before you was born? That’s strange, isn’t it?”

“No, but you not understand. I suppose my speech is not plain to you. I said three years ago.”

“Ah! that’s more like it. I only missed what you said,” returned the sceptic, whose name was Fred Jenkins, “for I’ve lived a while in France, and understand your lingo pretty well. Pass that goose, Morel, if you have left anything on it. This air o’ the wilderness beats the air o’ the sea itself for givin’ a fellow a twist.”

The remarks of Jenkins, while they did not absolutely destroy the confidence of the Swiss party, shook it enough to show the wily halfbreed that he must do something if possible to reestablish his credit. He therefore volunteered another song, which was gladly accepted and highly appreciated; for, as we have said, La Certe possessed a really good and tuneful voice, and these immigrants were a musical people.

While this was going on at the Swiss campfires an incident occurred at the fire round which the McKayDavidson party was assembled, which deserves particular notice.

Old McKay was giving some directions to Fergus; Duncan junior was seated opposite Dan Davidson, smoking his pipe, and Elspie had gone into her tent, when Slowfoot, the spouse of La Certe, drew near.

“Come along, old girl,” exclaimed McKay senior. “It iss some baccy you will be wantin’, I’ll wager.”

Slowfoot did not reply in words, but the smile upon her face was eloquent.

“Come away, then,” continued the hospitable Highlander. “You shall hev a pipe of it, whatever.”

He handed her a large plug of tobacco, and the woman, sitting down close to young Duncan, produced her pipe, and drew out a knife for the purpose of cutting up the tobacco.

“Hallo!” exclaimed Duncan, “where did you get hold o’ my knife?”

He stopped abruptly a little confused in spite of himself. For the moment he had quite forgotten that the knife had been left in the camp where he had slain Perrin, and the sudden sight of it had thrown him off his guard. It was now too late to unsay the words, but not too late to mislead his hearers.

“I got it from Marie Blanc,” said Slowfoot with a look of surprise. “Does the knife belong to Cloudbrow?”

“I think it does. I’m almost sure it iss mine. Let me see it,” returned Duncan, taking the knife from the woman’s hand, and examining it with cool and critical deliberation.

“No,” continued he, “it iss not mine, but very like one that I lost so like that I felt sure at first it wass mine.”

Men who lie, usually overact their part. Duncan glanced suspiciously at Dan to see how he took the explanation as he returned the knife to Slowfoot, and Dan observed the glance, as being uncalled for unnatural in the circumstances.

Dan was by no means of a suspicious nature, nevertheless the glance haunted him for many a day after that. Suspicion once aroused is a ghost which is not easily laid. He tried to shake it off, and he carefully, loyally, kept it confined in his own breast; but, do what he would, he could not banish entirely from his mind that Duncan McKay the brother of his Elspie had some sort of guilty

knowledge of the murder of poor Henri Perrin.

### **Chapter Thirteen**

#### **Difficulties of Various Kinds overcome**

When the bright warm days and cool starry nights of the Indian summer gave place to the sharp days and frosty nights of early winter when young ice formed on the lakes and rendered canoeing impossible, and the ducks and geese had fled to warmer climes, and the Frost King had sent his first messengers of snow to cover the wilderness with a windsheet and herald his return to the Winter Palace then it was that the banished Red River settlers began to feel the pinch of poverty and to understand the full extent of the calamity that had befallen them.

We have not space to follow them through all the details of that winter at Jack River. Some died, all suffered more or less; but they had to endure it, for escape from the country to the civilised world was even more difficult and hopeless than escape from the dreaded wilds of Siberia. The men hunted, fished under the ice, trapped, and sustained themselves and their families in life during the long, dreary winter; the only gain being that they became more or less expert at the Redman's work and ways of life.

Only two of the Indians remained with them to help them over their difficulties namely, Okématan and Kateegoose, with their respective squaws. These last were invaluable as the makers of moccasins and duffle socks and leathern coats, without which existence in such a climate would have been impossible. They also imparted their knowledge in such matters to the squaws of the white men.

There was one friend, however, who did not remain with the settlers when things began to look dismal around them. This was the amiable, musical, storytelling La Certe. That tenderhearted man could not endure the sight of human distress. If he could not relieve it, he felt constrained to shut his eyes to it and to flee from it. At the first indication of the approach of winter he had come to old McKay with that peculiarly mild, humble, deprecatory expression of countenance with which he was wont to preface an appeal for assistance of some sort.

"What iss it you will be wantin' now?" demanded the old man, rather testily, for he had an aversion to the halfbreed's sneaking ways. "Surely you will not be wantin' more powder an' shot efter the supply I gave you last week?"

O no! nothing could be further from the mind of La Certe. He had plenty of ammunition and provisions. He had only come to say that he was going back

totoRed River.

“Weel, weel,” returned the Highlander, “there is no call for hesitation, man, in tellin’ me that. I will not be breakin’ my heart when ye are gone. I suppose that now ye hev got the best the season can supply, ye think the comforts o’ the Settlement will be more to your taste.”

The remonstrative expression on La Certe’s face deepened. The idea of his own taste or comfort had not once entered his head: but he had a wife and child whom he was bound to consider, and he had a huta homein Red River which he felt constrained to look after. Besides, he had social duties of many kinds which claimed attention.

“I’ve no doubt ye hev,” said McKay, with a short sarcastic laugh, “an’ ye will attend to them tooI’ll be bound. But ye did not come here, I suppose, to take a tender farewell o’ me. What iss it you will be wantin’? Oot wi’ it, man!”

“There is a canoe” said La Certe, with some hesitation.

“There iss many a canoe!” returned McKay with a peculiar grin.

“True, but there is one on the shore now, close to the flat rock which”

“My own canoe!” interrupted the other, “what will ye be wantin’ wi’ that?”

La Certe did not wish to appear greedy, but the season was late, and his own canoe was not in a very fit condition to carry a family round the shores of a lake so large as Lake Winnipeg. Would the white father lend his canoe to him? It could not be wanted much longer that Fall, and the one he would leave behind him was an excellent canoe for ordinary fishing and hunting purposes. He would be quite willing to hire the canoe or to pay the full price for it if any accident should happen to it.

“No,” said McKay, firmly. “No, La Certe; your hiring means borrowing, and your payin’ means owin’ a debt for the remainder o’ your natural life. I will see you at the bottom o’ Lake Winnipeg before I will be lending you my canoe.”

La Certe smiled sadly, and gazed at the cap with which his hands played, as if appealing to it for sympathy.

With an aspect of the profoundest resignation he made his bow and left the Presence.

But La Certe was not in the least put out by this failure. He went to his tent, and recounted the interview to his squaw, who, when he entered, was in the act of giving her child, a creature of about four years of age, one or two draws of

her pipe, to let it taste how nice it was.

Smoking in calm placidity, the amiable pair discussed the subject. The conclusion they came to was, as usual, harmonious.

“I think he will agree to lend it next time I go to him,” said La Certe, hopefully.

“He will give in,” replied Slowfoot, decidedly.

The fouryearold could not understand the subject, and made no comment; but it howled for another smoke, and got it.

La Certe was wrong, and his wife was right as usual. Old McKay did not agree to “lend” his canoe the “next time,” or the next again, but he did “give in” at last, more, perhaps, to get rid of the halfbreed’s importunity than because of goodwill, and sold the canoe to him on credit.

When that winter was over, the Hudson’s Bay Company again encouraged the settlers to return, under promise of protection, and the spring found the persevering people, in spite of all difficulties and previous failures, busy putting into the ground what little seed they possessed, and otherwise cultivating the soil.

Some of them there were, however, who, after lending a hand in this work, determined to provide second strings to their bows by following the buffalohunters to the plains. These were chiefly the young and strong men, such as Dan Davidson and his brother Peter, Fergus McKay, Antoine Dechamp, and Jacques Bourassin, among many others.

La Certe also went, as well as his squaw and the fouryearold. He managed the thing characteristically thus.

When the halfbreeds were making preparations for their spring hunt, he paid a visit to Duncan McKay, who was busy at the time helping his father and brother to rebuild their house. Indeed the edifice was almost rebuilt, for the erection of small wooden houses does not usually take long.

“You’ve come to beg, borrow, or steal, no doubt,” said Cloudbrow, who was worthy of his nickname, for he was as short of temper as Duncan senior.

No, La Certe had come to do none of these things, he said, with a conciliatory smile.

“Well, then, you can’t have come to buy or to ask advances,” growled Duncan; “for you see that our store and all we possessed has been burnt by your

precious countrymen.”

La Certe knew this, and professed himself profoundly grieved as well as indignant with his countrymen. No, he did not come to buy or to borrow, but to hire. The McKays had still some horses left, and carts. Could they not spare a horse and cart to him on hire?

“No, we can do nothing of the sort,” said Duncan shortly, resuming his axe and work. “You can go to the Company. Perhaps they will trust you though they are fools if they do.”

La Certe was regretful, but not cast down. He changed the subject, commented on the building that was going on, the prospects of a good harvest, and finally took refuge in that stale old subject, the weather. Then he said in a casual way as if it had just occurred to him

“By the way that knife that my wife got from Marie Blanc”

Young McKay stopped, and looked quickly up for a moment, with a slight flush, but instantly resumed work.

“Well,” he said, quietly, “what about the knife?”

“Would you like to have it my wife bade me inquire?”

“Why should I like to have it?” he asked carelessly.

“Oh! I thought it was yours,” said La Certe.

“You are mistaken. I said it was very like mine. But it is not mine and I have no wish for what does not belong to me.”

“Of course not. Well, I must be going,” said the halfbreed, preparing to leave. “I wished much to have your horse and cart, for they are both good, and I would offer you pounds for the trip, which, you know, is double the usual charge, for I never grudge a good price for a good thing.”

“Yes, all the more when you have no intention to pay it,” said McKay with a laugh. “However, since you seem so anxious, and offer so good a price, I am willing to oblige you this time, in the hope that you are really becoming an honest man!”

The halfbreed was profuse in his thanks, and in his assurance that Cloudbrow’s hopes would certainly not be disappointed.

Having thus attained his chief object, our archbeggar went off to obtain provisions. Those which had been supplied him the previous autumn by young

McKay had been quite consumed by himself and his friends for the man, you see, had a liberal heart and hand.

But his first attempts were unsuccessful. He wanted ammunition. To go to the plains without ammunition was obviously useless. He wanted food, sugar, tea, flour, pork. To go to the plains without these would be dreary work. But men knew La Certe's character, and refused him. One after another he tried his friends. Then he tried them again. Then he tried comparative strangers. He could not try his enemies, for, strange to say, he had none. Then he went over them all again.

At last, by indomitable perseverance, he managed to wear out the patience of one of his friends, who believed in the restoration of the incorrigible, and he found himself fully equipped to take the field with his hardworking comrades.

It may be remarked here that the buffalo runners generally went on the credit system, trusting to a successful hunt to pay off their debts, and leave them supplied with food for the winter. But, then, most of these men were in earnest, and meant to pay off their debts loyally. Whereas La Certe, good, humorous, easygoing man, had not the slightest intention of paying his debts at all!

## **Chapter Fourteen**

### **Treachery in the Air**

At this time the halfbreeds of the colony of Red River formed a small party compared with the numbers to which they multiplied in after years, and the band of hunters who annually went to the plains to chase the buffalo was proportionally small. Nevertheless, they were numerous enough to constitute a formidable band, capable of holding their own, when united, against any band of wandering Indians who might feel disposed to attack them. They were a brave, hardy race of men, but of course there were some black sheep among them like La Certe.

About sixty or a hundred miles from the Settlement, the party, under command of Antoine Dechamp, found the buffalo, and preparations were at once made to attack them. It was dusk, however, when the herds were discovered, so that the hunt had to be postponed to the following day.

A small clump of bushes afforded wood enough for campfires. The carts were ranged in a circle with the trains outward. Sentries were posted; the horses were secured; the kettles put on; pipes lighted; and noise, laughter, song and story, mingled with the shrill voices of children, were heard far on into the night.



Among the children, if we may venture so to class them, were Archie and Billie Sinclair though we suspect that Archie would have claimed, and with some reason, to be classed with the men. They belonged to the campfire, which formed a centre to the party composed of Dan and Peter, Fergus, Dechamp, and Fred Jenkins the sailor. The latter, who it was thought had come out to the country by way of a skylark rather than as a settler, had followed the hunters, bent, he said, on firing a broadside into a buffalo. He had brought with him a blunderbuss, which he averred had been used by his greatgrandfather at the battle of Culloden. It was a formidable old weapon, capable of swallowing, at one gulp, several of the bullets which fitted the trading guns of the country. Its powers of scattering ordinary shot in large quantity had proved to be very effective, and had done such execution among flocks of wildfowl, that the Indians and halfbreeds, although at first inclined to laugh at it, were ultimately filled with respect.

“I doubt its capacity for sending ball straight, however,” remarked Dan to Jenkins, who was carefully cleaning out the piece, “especially if charged with more than one ball.”

“No fear of it,” returned the sailor, with a confident air. “Of course it scattered the balls about six yards apart the only time I tried it with a lot of ’em, but that was at fifty yards off, an’ they tell me that you a’most ram the muzzle against the brutes’ sides when chasin’ buffalo. So there’s no room to scatter, d’ee see, till they get inside their bodies, and when there it don’t matter how much they scatter.”

“It’s well named a young cannon by La Certe,” said Peter Davidson, who, like the seaman, was out on his first buffalohunt. “I never heard such a roar as it gave that time you brought down ten out of one flock of ducks on the way up here.”

“Ay, Peter, she barked well that time,” remarked the sailor, with a grin, “but, then there was a reason. I had doubleshotted her by mistake.”

“An’ ye did it too without an aim, for you had both eyes tight shut at the time,” remarked Fergus. “Iss that the way they teach ye to shoot at sea?”

“In course it is,” replied Jenkins, gravely. “That’s the beauty o’ the blunderbuss. There’s no chance o’ missin’, so what ’ud be the use o’ keepin’ yer eyes open, excep’ to get ’em filled wi’ smoke. You’ve on’y got to point straight, an’ blaze away.”

“I did not know that you use the blunderbuss in your ships at all,” said Dechamp, with a look of assumed simplicity.

“Ho yes, they do,” said Jenkins, squinting down the bellmouthed barrel, as if to see that the touchhole was clear. “Aboard o’ one mano’war that I sailed in after pirates in the China seas, we had a blunderbuss company. The firstleftenant, who was thought to be queer in his head, he got it up.

“The first time the company was ranged along the deck he gave the order to load with ball cartridges. There was twentysix of us, all told.

“‘We’ve got no cartridges for ’em, sir,’ whispered the man nearest him.

“‘If you don’t obey orders,’ growled the leftenant ’tween his teeth, ‘I’ll have ye strung up for mutiny every man Jack of youload!’ he repeated in a kind of a yell.

“We had our or’nary belts and pouches on, so we out wi’ the or’nary cartridgessome three, some four,an’, biting off the ends, poured in the powder somehow, shoved in the balls anyhow, an’ rammed the whole consarn down.

“‘Presentfire!’ roared the leftenant.

“Bang! went the six an’ twenty blunderbusses, an’ when the smoke cleared away there was fourteen out o’ the twentysix men flat on their backs. The rest o’ us was raither stunned, but hearty.

“‘Take these men below,’ cried the leftenant, ‘an’ send fourteen strong men here. We don’t want weaklings for this company.’

“After that we loaded in moderation, an’ got on better.”

“And the pirateswhat did they think o’ the new weapon?” asked Peter Davidson, with an amused expression.

“O! they couldn’t stand it at all,” answered the sailor, looking up from his work, with a solemnity that was quite impressive. “They stood fire only once. After that they sheered off like wildcats. I say, Mistress La Certe, how long is that lobscouseor whatever you call it,goin’ to be in cookin’?” Slowfoot gave vent to a sweet, low giggle, as she lifted the kettle off the hook, and thus gave a practical answer to the question. She placed before him the robbiboo, or pemmican, soup, which the seaman had so grievously misnamed.

During the time that the hunters were appeasing their appetites, it was observed that Antoine Dechamp, the leader of the expedition, was unusually silent and thoughtful, and that he betrayed a slight look of anxiety. It therefore did not surprise Dan Davidson, when the supper was nearly ended, that Dechamp should rise and leave the fire after giving him a look which was a

silent but obvious invitation to follow.

Dan obeyed at once, and his leader, conducting him between the various campfires, led him outside the circle of carts.

A clear moon lit up the prairie all round, so that they could see its undulating sweep in every direction.

“Anything wrong, Antoine?” asked Dan in a low voice, when they were out of earshot of the camp.

“Nothing wrong, Dan.”

“Surely,” continued the other, while Dechamp paused as if in perplexity, “surely there can be no chance of Redskins troubling us on a clear night like this. I can distinguish every bush for miles around.”

“There is no fear o’ Redskins. No, I am not troubled about them. It is matters concerning yourself that trouble me.”

“How’s that? What do you mean, Antoine?”

“Is your brotherinlawtobe, Duncan McKay, coming to join us this spring?” asked Dechamp.

“I believe he is after he has helped his father a bit longer wi’ the farm. Why do you ask?”

“Well, to say truth, I can’t give you a very good reason for my bein’ anxious. Only I can’t help havin’ my ears open, and I’ve heard some talk among the lads that makes me fear for the young man. They say, or hint, that he knows more about the murder o’ poor Perrin than he chooses to tell. I’ve not been quite able to find out what makes them suspect him, but they do suspect him, an’ it would be well to warn him not to come here, for you know there are many opportunities to commit murder on a buffalohunt!”

The incident of the knife, and of Duncan McKay’s significant glance, at once flashed across Davidson’s mind, and he felt a terrible sinking of the heart when the suspicion, once before roused within him, seemed now to be confirmed. He resolved, however, to reveal his thoughts to no one especially not to Elspie.

“I think it a shame,” he said, “that men should allow such rumours to circulate, when nothing certain has arisen to rouse suspicion. That affair of the knife was clearly explained when young McKay declared that it was not his, though it

looked like it. If he knew anything about the murder, would he not have been certain to have told us long ago? And, surely, you cannot suppose that Duncan killed Perrin with his own hand? Speak, Dechamp! Why do you shake your head?"

"I know nothing," returned the leader. "What right have I to suppose anything? I only know that men's deeds are often mysterious and unaccountable, and that our men have strong suspicion. For myself, I have no opinion. Duncan McKay is probably innocent, for he and Perrin were not enemies. I hope he is so, but I advise you to stop his coming to the camp just now if you can. His life may depend on it."

"I cannot stop him," returned Dan, with a perplexed look. "He is headstrong, as you know, and if he has made up his mind to come, nothing will stop him."

"Perhaps if he knew his life would be in danger that might stop him."

"I doubt it; but I will give him the chance. I will ride back to Red River without delay, and warn him."

"Good. When will you start?"

"Tonight. The moon is clear and will not set till morning. I shall be well on my way by that time."

"Will you ride alone?"

"No, there may be bad Indians about. I will ask Okématan or Fergus McKay to ride with me. Why did you not speak to Fergus instead of to me?"

"Because he has not been spoken to by any one," answered Dechamp; "and I would not be the first to put suspicion into his head about his own brother. Besides, your head is clearer; and your interest in Duncan, for Elspie's sake, is greater than his, no doubt."

"Well, you may be right, Antoine. At all events if I take Fergus with me I shall send him back before reaching the Settlement, and say nothing whatever about my reason for going there. 'Pressing business,' you know, will be sufficient."

"I'm not so sure of that," returned Dechamp with a laugh. "Men are apt to want to know the nature of 'pressing business.' However, it may be as well to take Fergus. At any rate you cannot have Okématan, for he is not in camp, he left soon after we pitched, and I know has not yet returned."

"It matters not. Fergus will do better. He is more companionable."

Returning to camp, Dan Davidson made the proposal to Fergus McKay. That worthy was, as he said, ready for anything, and the two were soon mounted. They were also well armed, for the risk of meeting a party of hostile Indians was not altogether out of the question, though improbable. Each horseman carried his blanket and provision wallet, his gun, a long knife almost equal to an ancient Roman sword, and a cavalry pistolrevolvers not having been invented at that time: at least they had not come into general use. Thus provided for all contingencies, they set forth.

As we have said, the night was clear and fine, so that the plains were open to view in all directions, save where a few scattered clumps of willows and small trees grew like islets in the ocean.

“It iss this that I like better than farming,” said Fergus, as the fresh horses carried them swiftly and lightly over the prairie waves, and down into the grassy hollows, now swerving to avoid a badgerhole, or clearing a small shrub with a little bound. “I do think that man wass intended to live in the wilderness, an’ not to coop himself up in the cities like rabbits in their holes.”

“Why, Fergus, you should have been born a savage,” said Dan.

“Ay, it iss savitch I am that I wass not born a savitch,” returned Fergus with a grim smile. “What in all the world iss the use of ceevilisation if it will not make people happy? A man wants nothing more than a goot supper an’ a goot bed, an’ a goot shelter over him, an’ it is a not five hunderd pound a year that we will want to buy thatwhatever.”

“But surely man wants a little more than that, Fergus. He wants breakfast and dinner usually, as well as supper, and a few comforts besides, such as tea and sugarat least the women dobesides pipes an’ baccyto say nothing of books.”

“Oo ay, I will not be denyin’ that. But we’ve no need for wan half the luxuries o’ ceevilisation. An’ ye know ferry weel, Tan, that my sister Elspie would be content to live wi’ you in a ferry small hoose, and the bare necessities of life, but here you are forced to put off the merritch because our hooses wass burnt, and you are obleeged to wait till you get a sort o’ palace built, I suppose, and a grand farm set agoin’.”

“Indeed, Fergus, you touch me on a sore point there, but with all your scorn of luxury, I’m sure you’d be the last man to let his sister marry a fellow who could take her only to a hut or a wigwam.”

“You are right, Tan. Yet I hev spent many a comfortable night in a hut an’ a wigwam since I came to Red River. I wish the place wass more peaceable.”

“It will never be more peaceable as long as there are two rival companies fighting for the furs,” said Davidson; “but there’s worse than that goin’ on, for some of the Indians, it seems, are mad at the agreement made between them and Lord Selkirk.”

“Wow! that iss a peety. Where heard ye that?”

“I heard it from La Certe, whose wife Slowfoot, you know, is a Cree Indian. It seems that the Crees have always claimed Red River as their lands; but when Lord Selkirk came to make a treaty with the natives he found some Saulteaux livin’ on the soil, an’ his lordship, in ignorance, gave them an interest in the treaty, though they were mere visitors an’ indeed don’t even claim to be owners of the soil their lands lying far to the east of Red River.”

“Well,” continued Dan, guiding his horse carefully down the next hollow, for the moon had gone behind a cloud just then, “when the Crees found out what had been done, they were naturally very angry an’ I don’t wonder an’ they threaten now to expel the Saulteaux from Red River altogether, an’ the white men along wi’ them, unless the names of the Saulteaux chiefs are wiped out o’ the contract, an’ the annual payment made to the Crees alone.”

“That iss bad, Taniel, ferry bad,” said Fergus, as they reached the bottom of the hollow and began to ascend the succeeding undulation, “an’ I am all the more sorry to hear it because our goot frund Okématan is a Cree.”

“Ay, Fergus, he is a great chief of the Crees, and a man of considerable influence among his people. I should not like to have him for an enemy.”

“Stop!” said Fergus in a whisper at that moment, laying his hand on Davidson’s arm.

Dan drew rein at once and looked at his friend, but could not clearly see his face, for the moon was still behind thick drifting clouds.

They had just risen high enough on the prairie wave, which they had been ascending, to be able to see over it, and Dan could perceive by the outstretched neck of his companion that he was gazing intently at something directly in front.

“What do you see, Fergus?” he asked in a low voice.

“Do you see nothin’, Taniel?” was the Highlander’s reply.

“Why, yes. I see the plains stretching away to the horizon an’ dark enough they are, too, at this moment. I also see a few small clumps that look like bushes here an’ there.”

“Don’t you see the clump that’s nearest to your right foment your nose?” said the other.

“Of course I do,” and he stopped abruptly, for at that moment he saw a spark in the clump referred to a spark so small that it might have been taken for a glowworm, had such a creature existed there.

“Savitches!” whispered the Highlander. “Let’s get into the hollow as fast as we can.”

This retrograde movement was soon effected, and the friends dismounted.

“Now, Fergus, what’s the best thing to be done?”

“I will be leavin’ that to you, Taniel, for you’ve a clearer head than mine.”

“We dare not ride forward,” said Dan, as if communing with himself, “an’ it would be foolish to make a long détour to escape from something until we know there is something worth escaping from. My notion is that we hobble or picket our horses here, and go cautiously forward on foot to see what it is.”

“You’ll be doin’ what ye think best, Captain Taniel, an’ you will find that private Fergus will back you up whatever.”

This being settled, the two men picketed their steeds in the hollow, fastened their guns to the saddles, as being too cumbrous for a creeping advance, and, armed only with their long knives and pistols, reascended the prairie wave. With feet clothed in soft moccasin, and practised by that time in the art of stealthy tread, they moved towards the summit noiseless as ghosts.

On gaining the ridge they sank slowly down into the tall grass and disappeared.

After a prolonged and somewhat painful creep on hands and knees the two men reached the edge of the clump of bushes already referred to.

Before reaching it they discovered, from the sound of voices, that a party of some kind was encamped there; but, of course, as they knew not who, it became needful to proceed with extreme caution. When they gained the edge of the clump, and raised their heads over a low bushcovered bank, they beheld a sight which was not calculated to cheer them, for there, in the centre of the bush, encircling a very small fire, sat a warparty of about fifty painted and befeathered braves of the Cree Indians. They were engaged in council at the moment.

A creeping sensation about their scalps was experienced by the two eavesdroppers on observing that they had passed not a hundred yards from a sentinel who occupied a low knoll on their left.

Neither Dan nor Fergus dared to speak not even to whisper. Still less did they dare to move; for a few moments after they reached the bank just referred to, the moon came out from behind the clouds and flooded the whole scene as with the light of day.

There was nothing left for it, therefore, except to lie still and listen. But this gave them small comfort; for, although quite within earshot of the warparty, the language spoken was utterly unintelligible to either of them.

Their eyes, however, were not so useless as their ears, for they could clearly see each warrior as he rose to harangue his comrades, and, from the vindictive expression of their faces as well as their frequent pointing in the direction of the buffalohunters it was abundantly evident that an attack upon them was being discussed.

At last, after many braves had spoken, a chief of tall and noble mien arose. His back was towards the two spies, but the moment they heard his voice they turned their heads and gazed at each other in speechless amazement, for the voice was quite familiar.

No word did they dare to utter, but Fergus made formations with his lips of a most extravagant nature, which, however, clearly spelt "Okématan." When he had finished, he nodded and turned his gaze again on the Crees.

Both men now understood that treachery was in the wind, and that a night attack was highly probable; and, of course, they felt desperately anxious to jump up and fly back to the camp to warn their comrades for their only fear was a surprise. The halfbreeds being far more numerous than the Indians, and well entrenched, there could be no fear for them if prepared.

Just then, as if to favour them, the moon retired behind a huge black cloud.

Without a moment's hesitation Dan began to creep away back, closely followed by Fergus. They gave a wide berth of course to the sentinel, and soon regained the hollow where the horses had been left. Here they breathed more freely.

"Who would have thought this of Okématan?" muttered Dan, as he hastily tightened his saddlegirths.



“The rascal!” exclaimed Fergus, in deep tones of indignation.

“You must gallop back to camp at once, Fergus,” said Dan, as they mounted. “I will go on to Red River alone.”

“What! will you not be coming with me?” asked the Highlander, in some surprise.

“There is no need, for there will be no fighting,” returned the other. “Our fellows far outnumber the Redskins, and when the latter find that we have been warned, and are on our guard, they won’t attack us, depend on it. But you’ll have to ride fast, for when such fellows make up their minds to strike they don’t usually waste time in delivering the blow. My business presses, I must go on.”

A minute later, and Dan Davidson was galloping towards the Settlement alone, while Fergus made the best of his way back to the camp of the buffalo runners.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

### **A Friend in Need is a Friend indeed**

Whether or not Okématan was as thorough a rascal as Fergus McKay thought him will be best shown by harking back, and setting down a little of what was said by some of the Cree braves at the time that Fergus and Dan were eavesdropping.

Standing in a dignified attitude worthy of an ancient Roman, with his blanket thrown togafashion over one shoulder, one of the braves looked round on the warrior band with a dark scowl before he began. His comrades were evidently impressed by his looks. Whether owing to a freak of fancy, a spice of eccentricity, or simple vanity, we know not, but this brave had, among other ornamental touches to his visage, painted his nose bright red. The effect on his brother braves was solemnising. It was not so impressive to his white observers, as it suggested to them the civilised toper.

“The great white chief,” began Rednose, with a slow deliberation that was meant to convey a settled and unalterable conviction, “is a fool!”

“Waugh!” exclaimed the audience with emphasis, for the language was strong, and uttered with intense vigour, and that quite accorded with their tastes, so they agreed with the sentiment without regard to its signification. This species of rhetoric, and its effects, are sometimes observed in connection with civilised gatherings.

The great white chief thus irreverently referred to, we regret to say, was Lord

Selkirk.

“The great white chief,” continued Rednose, availing himself of the force of emphatic repetition, “is a fool! He is a child! He knows nothing! He comes across the great salt lake from the rising sun, with the air and aspect of an owl, thinking to teach us the great Cree nation wisdom!”

“Waugh!” from the audience, one of whom, having a cold in his head, sneezed inadvertently, and was scowled at by the orator for full two minutes in absolute silence. If that Cree warrior he was on his first warpath possessed anything akin to the feelings of the Paleface he must have suffered martyrdom.

“Every one knows,” continued the orator, resuming, “that the Crees are wise. They can tell a fox from a buffalo. They understand the difference between fire and water. No Paleface sage needs to come from the rising sun to tell them to eat when they are hungry to drink when they are dry. But this Paleface chief comes with the eyes of the great northern owl, and says he comes to do us good. And how does he begin to do us good?”

Here there was a very decided “Waugh!” as though to say, “Ay, that’s the question,” and then a solemn pause for more during which the man with the cold drew the reins very tight.

“How does he begin to do us good?” proceeded the orator. “By entering into an agreement with us for the use of our lands and asking our enemies the Saulteaux to take part in that agreement!”

The sounds of indignation and ferocity that followed this statement are not translatable. After a gaze of unutterable meaning round the circle Rednose went on

“This, this is the way in which the owleyed chief of the Palefaces begins to do us good! If this is the way he begins, in what way will he continue, and,” here his voice deepened to a whisper “how will he end?”

The ideas suggested by his question were so appalling that for some minutes the orator appeared unable to find words to go on, and his audience glared at him in dread anticipation, as though they expected him to explode like a bombshell, but were prepared to sit it out and take the consequences. And he did explode, after a fashion, for he suddenly raised his voice to a shout that startled even the sentinel on the distant knoll, and said

“I counsel war to the knife! The great white chief the owleyed fool! will not blot from our agreement the names of the Saulteaux chiefs! there are no Saulteaux chiefs. All their braves are cowards, on the same dead level of

stupidity, and their women are are nothing, fit for nothing, can do nothing, and must soon come to nothing! What then? The duty of Cree warriors lies before us. We will drive the Saulteaux into Lake Winnipeg and the Palefaces off the face of the earth altogether! Waugh!”

Having thus given vent to the opinions and feelings that consumed him, Rednose sat down, his audience breathed freely, the distant sentinel recovered his composure, and the young novitiate brave with the cold in his head sneezed with impunity.

It would be tedious to recount all that was said at that council of war. The next brave that rose to “address the house” very much resembled the first speaker, both in sentiment and personal appearance, except that he had chosen skyblue for his nose instead of red. The only additional matter that he contributed worth noting was the advice that they should begin their bloody work by an immediate attack, in the dead of night, on the camp of the buffalo runners.

This advice was hailed with a good many “Waughs,” as well as approving nods and looks, and it seemed as if the plan were about to be carried into action without delay, when, as we have seen, Okématan arose to address the assemblage.

Okématan was a great chief much greater in the estimation of his tribe than the whites with whom he had been associating in Red River were aware of. He had purposely reserved his address till near the conclusion.

“The Cree warriors,” he said, with an air of quiet dignity that was far more effective than the more energetic tones and gestures of the previous speakers, “know very well that the Cree nation considers itself the wisest in creation. Far be it from Okématan to say otherwise, for he does not know. Okématan is a child! His eyes are only beginning to open!”

He paused at this point, and looked round with solemn dignity; and the braves, unaccustomed to such selfdepreciative modes of address, gazed at him with equal solemnity, not unmingled with surprise, though the latter feeling was carefully concealed.

“When the last great palaver of the Cree braves was held on the BluePine Ridge,” continued Okématan, “the chiefs chose me to go to Red River, and learn all that I could find out about the Palefaces and their intentions. I went, as you know. I attached myself to a family named Daaveedsin, and I have found out found out much about the Palefaces much more that I did not know before, though I am a chief of the Cree nation.”

Okématan looked pointedly at Rednose as he said this. After a brief pause he

continued

“The great white chief,” meaning Lord Selkirk, “is not a fool. It is true that he is not a god; he is a man and a Paleface, subject to the follies and weaknesses of the Palefaces, and not quite so wise as it is possible to be, but he is a good man, and wishes well to the Indian. I have found weaknesses among the Palefaces. One of them is that their chiefs plansometimes wisely, sometimes foolishlybut they leave the carrying out of their plans to other men, and sometimes these other men care for nobody but themselves. They tell lies, they mislead the great white chief, and tell him to do what is wrong.

“So it was when our agreement came to be made. The great white chief found, when he came to Red River, a few families of Saulteaux whom we had permitted to hunt on our lands. He thought the land belonged to the Saulteaux as well as to the Crees. He was mistaken, ignorant; he knew no better, and the Palefaces who did know, did not put light into him; so the names of Saulteaux chiefs were put in the writing. Then the great white chief went away across the great salt lake to the lands of the rising sun, leaving his small chiefs to carry out his plans. Some of these are very small chiefs, unfit to carry out any plans. Others are bad small chiefs, that will carry out only such plans as are sure to benefit themselves. It is these men with whom we have to deal. It is these who deserve to be swept off the face of the earth.”

A number of emphatic nods and “waughs” at this point showed that Okématan had at last touched a keynote with which his braves could shout in harmony.

“But,” resumed the chief impressively, “we cannot sweep them off the earth; we cannot even sweep them off the banks of Red River. We might easily sweep the Saulteaux into Lake Winnipeg if we thought it worth while to try, but the Palefacesnever! Okématan has travelled far to the south and seen the Palefaces there. They cannot be counted. They swarm like our locusts; they darken the earth as our buffaloes darken the plains. They live in stone wigwams. I have seen one of their wigwams that was big enough to hold all the Crees’ wigwams bundled together. If we killed or scalped all the Palefaces in Red River the great white chief would come over the great salt lake with an army that would swallow us up as the buffalo swallows up a tuft of grass.

“Besides,” continued Okématan, with a slight touch of pathos in his tone, “there are good and bad men among the Palefaces, just as there are good and bad among ourselves. I have dwelt for many moons with a tribe called Scoshmin. Okématan loves the Scoshmin. They speak a wonderful language, and some of them are too fond of firewater; but their braves fear nothing, and their squaws are pretty and work hardalmost as hard as our squawsthrough they are not quite as goodlooking as ours. They are too whitetheir faces are like

buffalo fat!”

A “Waugh,” which might be translated “Hear, hear,” greeted this statement of opinion.

“Now,” continued our chief, “if we swept away all the people of Red River, we would sweep away the good Scoshmin, which would be foolish, and we would gain nothing in the end, but would bring worse trouble on our heads. My counsel, therefore, is for peace. I advise that we should let the buffalo runners and the people of Red River alone; send a message with our grievances to the great white chief; ask him to come back over the great salt lake to put things right, and, in the meantime, wait with patience; attend to our own business; hunt, fish, eat, drink, sleep, and be happy.”

Having delivered his harangue, Okématan sat down amid murmurs of mingled applause and disapprobation. It was evident that he had created a serious division of opinion in the camp, and it seemed as if on the impression made by the next speaker would depend the great question of peace or war.

Presently an old warrior arose, and a profound silence followed, for they held him in great respect.

“My braves,” said the old man sententiously, “I have lived long, and my fighting days are nearly over. If wisdom has not accumulated on my head it must be my own fault, for I have had great experience both of war and peacemore of war, perhaps, than of peace. And the opinion that I have come to after long and very deep consideration is this: if there is something to fight for, fightfight well; if there is nothing to fight for, don’t fightdon’t fight at all.”

The old man paused, and there were some “Waughs” of approval, for the truth contained in his profound conclusion was obvious even to the stupidest Redskin of the bandsupposing that a stupid brave among Crees were possible!

“I have also lived to see,” continued the old man, “that revenge is nothingnothing at all, and therefore not worth fighting for.”

As this was flying straight in the face of the most cherished of Redskins’ beliefs, it was received in dead though respectful silence.

“My young braves do not believe this. I know it. I have been young myself, and I remember well how pleasant revenge was to me, but I soon found that the pleasure of revenge did not last. It soon passed away, yet the deed of revenge did not pass away, and sometimes the deed became to my memory very bitterinsomuch that the pleasantness was entirely swallowed up and forgotten in the bitterness. My young braves will not believe this, I know.

They go on feeling; they think on feeling; they reason on feeling; they trust to feeling. It is foolish, for the brain was given to enable man to think and judge and plan. You are as foolish as if you were to try to smell with your mouth and eat with your nose. But it is the way of youth. When experience teaches, then you will come to know that revenge is not worth fighting for its pleasantness will pass away, but the bitter it leaves behind will never pass away.

“What is the meaning of revenge?” continued this analytical old savage. “What is the use of it? Does it not mean that we give up all hope of getting what we want, and wildly determine to get what pleasure is still possible to us by killing those who have thwarted us? And when you have killed and got all the pleasure there is, what does it come to? Your enemy is dead, and scalped. What then? He does not know that he is dead. He does not care that he is dead and scalped. You cannot keep him alive for ever killing and scalping him. But you have made his wife and children miserable. What of that? It was not his wife and children who opposed you, therefore you have revenged yourself on the wrong persons. He does not know that you have rendered his wife and children miserable, and does not care; therefore, I ask, why are you pleased? If your enemy was a good man, your revenge has only done him a kindness, for it has sent him to the happy hunting grounds before his time, where you will probably never meet him to have the pleasure of being revenged on him there. If he was a bad man, you have sent him to the world of Desolation, where he will be waiting to receive you when you get there, and where revenge will be impossible, for men are not allowed to kill or scalp there. At least if they are I never heard of it and I am an old man now.

“There is nothing, then, to fight for with the Palefaces of Red River, and my counsel is, like that of Okématan, that we should decide on peace not war.”

Whatever may have been the private opinion of the braves as to this new and very unexpected style of address, the effect of it was pacific; for, after a little more palaver, the peace party carried the day, rather the night, and next morning, the Cree warriors went back to their tents and hunting avocations, leaving Okématan to return to the camp of his friends the buffalo runners.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

### **An Evening in the Camp**

It was daybreak when Fergus McKay galloped into camp with the startling news that an attack by hostile Indians might be expected that day or the following night. He was, of course, unaware of the fact that the peacemaking Okématan had been unwittingly following his tracks at a more leisurely pace.

Some readers may think that the Indian, with his traditional power of

following a trail, should have observed and suspected the fresh track of the hunter, but it must be remembered that some hundreds of buffalo runners had passed over the same track a day or two previously, and that Hawkeye, or Pathfinder himself, would have become helpless in the midst of such trampled confusion. Besides, Okématan had no reason to suspect that he had been followed; still less that the camp of the warparty had been accidentally discovered.

“Now, boys,” said Fergus, after detailing his adventures during the night, “we will hev to give up all notion o’ buffalo runnin’ this day an’ putt the camp in a state o’ defence.”

There was a good deal of grumbling at this, especially among some of the younger men; for they were very keen to commence the sport, and had not much belief in the power of a small band of savages to do them harm. Some of them even suggested that half of their number should remain behind to guard the camp while the other half should go after the buffalo. This proposal, however, was not received with favour, as it would certainly be a matter of disagreement which half was to go out, and which to remain behind!

“Where is Kateegoose?” asked Dechamp at this crisis.

“Stuffin’ ’imself, of course!” said Fred Jenkins, amid a general laugh. “I’ve noticed, since we set sail on this trip, that Kateegoose always turns out at daybreak, lights the galley fire, an’ begins the dooties o’ the day by stuffin’ ’imself.”

“Ay, and I’ve noticed,” observed one of the young hunters, “that it takes a deal o’ stuffin’ to fill him out properly, for he keeps on at it most part o’ the day.”

“Except,” remarked another, “when he stops to smoke what o’ the stuffin’ has been already shoved down.”

“Moreover,” added the seaman, “I’ve noticed that François La Certe always keeps ’im company. He’s a sympathetic sort o’ man is François, fond o’ helpin’ his matesspecially when they’re eatin’ an’ smokin’.”

At this moment Kateegoose, having been called, came forward. He was an illfavoured savage, with various expressions on his ugly visage which were not so much Nature’s gifts as the result of his own evil passions. Jealousy was one of them, and he had often turned a green eye on Okématan. There were indications about his mouth and fingers, as he came forward, that justified the commentaries on his habits, and betrayed recent acquaintance with fat pork.

“You hear the reports that have just been brought in?” said Dechamp.

“Kateegoose hears,” was the laconic answer.

“Kateegoose is a Cree,” continued Dechamp; “he knows the spirit that dwells in the hearts of his tribe. What does he think?”

“The thoughts of the Indian are many and deep. He has for many moons watched the behaviour of Okématan, and he has long suspected that the heart of the serpent dwells in the breast of that chief. Now he is sure.”

“But what about your people?” demanded the campchief. “They are not at war with us. Are they all villains because one among them turns out to be bad?”

Kateegoose drew himself up with a look of dignity, and pouted his greasy lips as he replied

“The Crees have always been a brave and true and upright people. They never attack friends until, by their conduct, these friends have become enemies. But the Crees are human. They are not perfectneither are the Palefaces. There are bad men among thema few; not manyas well as young men and foolish. Sometimes, when on the warpath, a clever bad man can reason with them till he blinds them, and they are ready to do wrong. It may be so now. Okématan is clever. Kateegoose does not know what to advise.”

“Kateegoose was not asked to advise,” returned Dechamp sternly. “He may return to his tent.”

Thus summarily dismissed, this hangeron or campfollower returned to his pork and pipe with a feeling that somehow he had failed to make the exact impression on the leader that he desired. La Certe, however, consoled him, and helped him to continue the duties of the day.

“Come with me, McKay,” said Dechamp, after giving all needful directions regarding the safety of the camp. “I don’t believe that rascal Kateegoose. He’s a greedy idler, something like La Certe, but by no means so harmless or goodnatured. Moreover, I find it hard to believe that Okématan has turned traitor.”

“I agree with you,” said Fergus. “It iss ferry hard to believe that a man who has been so long among us, and got such a good character, should suddenly turn against usan’ that, too, without provocation. But what will you be sayin’ to what Taniel and myself has seen with our two eyes?”

“It looks bad, I confess,” answered Dechamp, as they paced to and fro in a retired part of the camp; “but you must remember that your two eyes are not your two ears, and that you heard nothing that you could understand.”



“Fery true, Dechamp. But the language of the eye is sometimes as clear and understandable as the language of the ear. No wan could mistake the meanin’ o’ some o’ the warriors when they scowled an’ pointed in the direction of our camp here, an’ gripped the handles o’ their scalpin’ knives and tomahawks. Moreover, Okématan also pointed in the same direction, though I am bound to say he did not grip his knife. Whether he scowled or not I do not know, for he was standin’ wi’ his back to us.”

“Well, I cannot tell. I’m not willin’ to believe Okématan a traitor; but what you have seen is enough to make me put the camp in defence instead of startin’ out to hunt”

At that moment the sharp click of a gun was heard as a neighbouring sentry put his piece on full cock.

Dechamp and Fergus hastened towards him.

“Have a care, André; don’t be too quick with your gun,” said the former. “I see only one man coming. He can do us no harm.”

As the approaching figure drew near, it was seen to be that of an Indian on horseback. He rode carelessly at a jogtrot.

“It looks like Okématan!” said Dechamp, glancing at his companion in surprise.

“It iss Okématan,” returned Fergus.

Before another word could be spoken, a shot was heard in the camp, and horse and man were seen to roll upon the ground. The latter rose immediately, but the horse lay stiffly shot dead. For a few seconds profound silence followed the incident, as if men were too much taken by surprise to think and act. Then, when the dismounted Indian was seen to walk leisurely, as if unhurt, towards them, there was a hubbub in the camp, while men, women, and boys ran towards the spot whence the shot seemed to have been fired, but no one was to be found there. Only a very faint puff of smoke overhead told where the marksman had stood. It had been a wellchosen spot, where a low bush or two mingled with several carts that had been rather carelessly drawn up, and several horses had been picketed together. These had afforded concealment enough for at least a few moments.

The tent of La Certe was not far from this corner. At the time the shot was heard, the selfindulgent halfbreed was inside, recumbent on his back in the enjoyment of a pipe.

“That’s odd,” he said to Slowfoot, who was seated opposite to her lord scraping the remnants of something out of a tin kettle with the point of a scalpingknife. “Somebody’s gun gone off by accident, I suppose. I hear some one at our fire. Look out, Slowfoot, and ask what has happened.”

Slowfoot finished the scraping of the kettle before obeying; then lifted the curtain that closed the opening of their tent, and peeped out.

“It is Kateegooseloading his gun, I think.”

La Certe got up, with a sigh of regret at the necessity for exertion, and, lifting the curtaindoor, stepped out.

“What are they firing at, Kateegoose?”

The Indian did not know. Some one, he thought, might have let off his gun by accident. He thought it wise, however, to be ready, and had just sent the ramrod down the barrel of his gun to make sure that it was loaded with ball. To make still surer that all was ready, the Indian shook the priming out of the pan of his gun, wiped it, and reprimed. Then he laid the weapon down by his side, and resumed the pipe which he had apparently laid down to enable him to perform these operations more conveniently, and, at the same time, with more safety.

At that moment Dechamp walked smartly towards the fire in front of La Certe’s tent.

“Does Kateegoose know who fired that shot?” he asked with a keen glance, for his suspicions had been aroused.

“Some one over there,” answered the Indian languidly, as he pointed in the right direction.

“It does not need a medicineman to tell me that,” said Dechamp, sternly. “I heard the shot, and saw the smoke. Have you any idea who fired it, La Certe?”

“I have not,” replied the halfbreed. “I was lying in my tent when I heard it. Kateegoose was smoking beside the fire. We both thought it was an accident, or some one trying his gun, till we heard the shouting and running. Then I jumped up, seized my gun, and sprang out to see what it was all about. I found Kateegoose equally on the qui vive. He was shoving his ramrod down to make sure his gun was loaded when you came up. What is it all about?”

“Only that the horse of Okématan has been shot under him by some one, and that there is a wouldbe murderer in the camp.”

“Okématan! Has the traitor ventured to return?” exclaimed Kateegoose, with an expression of surprise that was very unusual in an Indian.

“Ay, he has ventured,” responded Dechamp, “and some one has ventured to fire at him with intent to kill. By good luck he was a bad shot. He missed the man, though he hit and killed the horse. But I shall find the rascal out before long he may depend on that!”

So saying, the commandant left the spot.

“Do you know anything about this?” asked La Certe, turning full on the Indian.

“Kateegoose is not a medicineman. He cannot be in two places at once. He knows nothing.”

For a sly man La Certe was wonderfully credulous. He believed the Indian, and, returning to his tent, lay down again to finish the interrupted pipe.

“Kateegoose was trying his gun to see if it was loaded,” he said to his better half.

“That’s a lie,” returned Slowfoot, with that straightforward simplicity of diction for which she was famous.

“Indeed! What, then, was he doing, my Slowfoot?”

“He was loading his gunnot trying it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Am I sure that our little child loves tobacco?”

“Well, I suppose you are. At any rate, the child often asks you for a pipe, and gets it too. Hm! if Kateegoose fired that shot he must be a bad man. But our chief is sure to find it out and it is no business of mine. Fetch me the tobacco, Slowfoot.”

That same morning, Archie Sinclair was seated beside his brother, Little Bill, in the tent that was shared by Fred Jenkins and several young halfbreeds. He was alone with his brother, Jenkins having gone out with the blunderbuss to assist, if need be, in the defence of the camp. He was manufacturing a small bow for his brother to amuse himself with while he should be away “seein’ the fun,” as he said, with the hunters. The instant the sailor left, however, he looked at Billie mysteriously and said, in a low voice

“Little Bill, although you’re not good for much with your poor little body,

you've got a splendid headpiece, and are amazing at giving advice. I want advice just now very bad. You've heard what they've all been saying about this shot that was fired at Okématan, and some o' the men say they think it must have been Kateegoose that did it. Now, Billie, I am sure that it was Kateegoose that did it."

"Oh!" exclaimed Little Bill, making his eyes and mouth into three round O's. "How d'ye know that? Did you see him do it?"

"Noit's that that bothers me. If I had seen him do it I would have gone straight and told Dechamp, but I didn't quite see him, you see. I was in Lamartine's cart at the time, rummagin' about for a piece o' wood to make this very bow, an' the moment I heard the shot I peeped out, an' sawnothing!"

"That wasn't much," remarked Little Bill, innocently.

"Ay, but I soon saw something," continued Archie, with increasing solemnity; "I saw Kateegoose coming slinking round among the carts, as if he wanted not to be seen. I saw him only for a momentgliding past like a ghost."

"It's a serious thing," said Little Bill, musing gravely, "to charge a man with tryin' to kill another man, if that's all you've got to tell, for you know it's a way the Redskins have of always glidin' about as if they was for ever after mischief."

"But that's not all, Little Bill," returned his brother, "for I'm almost certain that I saw a little smoke comin' out o' the muzzle of his gun as he passedthough I couldn't exactly swear to it."

Archie had overrated his brother's powers in the way of advice, for, although they talked the matter over for some time, they failed to arrive at any satisfactory conclusion.

Meanwhile Okématan, having entered the camp, was met by Dechamp, and led by him to a retired part.

"You have an enemy here, Okématan," he said, inquiringly.

"It would seem so," returned the Indian gravely. "Friends do not shoot each other's horses; and if the poor horse had not tossed his head when the shot was fired, his rider would have bit the dust."

"I fear it looks something like that," said Dechamp; "but I hope Okématan believes that I know nothing of the matternor can I tell who the cowardly villain is that did it."

“Okématan knows that,” answered the Indian, sternly. “No halfbreed fired the shot.”

“There is no Indian in the camp but Kateegoose,” rejoined the other, quickly; “surely you don’t think that a man of your own tribe would try to kill you?”

“I know not. Kateegoose hates me. No other man in the camp hates me.”

“It is strangeunaccountable,” returned Dechamp. “If the Indian did it, he shall forfeit his horse and leave the camp. But tell me,” here the halfbreed commandant turned a searching gaze on his companion, “why did Okématan leave us, and spend all night alone on the prairie? Did he spend the night in conversation with the buffaloor in the company of his departed forefathers?”

No sign of surprise, or of any other emotion, was visible on the countenance of the Redman as he replied: “Okématan went out to meet a party of his tribe on the warpath.”

Dechamp was not so successful in concealing his own surprise at this answer.

“Does the Cree chief,” he asked, with something of doubt in his tone and look, “choose the hours of night to consult with warriors about secret assaults and surprises on friends?”

“He does not!” answered the Indian, decidedly but calmly though he was unquestionably astonished at being questioned so pointedly and correctly as to his recent proceedings, and felt that he must have been followed. He was not the man, however, to betray his feelings, or to commit himself in any way; therefore he took refuge in silence.

“Come now, Okématan,” said his companion in a confidential tone. “Don’t let a misunderstanding arise between you and me. What is this that I have heard? You spent last night, as you admit, with a party of Crees on the warpath. You were seen and heard, and the men of the camp think you have turned traitor, and they are even now expecting an attack from this warparty. Is it true that we are to be attacked?”

“You say I was heard,” answered the Indian, looking the halfbreed straight in the face. “If so, those who heard must know what I said.”

“Nay, they did indeed hear, but they did not understand, for they know not your language; but they know the language of signs, and, by the looks and gestures of the warriors, they guessed what was said and planned.”

“Is it likely,” asked the Indian in a low voice, “that Okématan would return to your camp alone, and put himself in your power, if an attack was intended?”

“True, true,” returned Dechamp with a hearty air; “and, to say truth, I myself did not do not believe you false. If you tell me the truth, Okématan, and give me your word that this report is a mistaken one, I will believe you and trust you.”

The Indian seemed pleased with the assurance thus heartily given, but still maintained his dignified gravity, as he said

“Okématan always tells the truth. He had hoped that the folly of some young braves of his tribe should never have been known to any one; but since it has been found out, he will tell all he knows to his palefaced brother.”

Hereupon he related all that had transpired at the council of war, and the final success of his own speech, with that of the old warrior, in producing a peaceful solution.

“But are you sure they will follow your advice?” asked Dechamp.

“Yes, Okématan is quite sure.”

“Well, then, as I said, I will trust you,” returned Dechamp, extending his hand, which the Indian gravely grasped; “and I will give you undeniable proof, by giving my young men orders to start after the buffalo at once without further delay.”

## **Chapter Seventeen**

### **The Buffalo Hunt**

In accordance with the assurance given to Okématan Antoine Dechamp at once gave orders to make preparation for an immediate start after the buffalo much to the satisfaction of the hunters, especially the young ones.

Buffaloes or, to speak more correctly, bison roamed over the North American prairies at the time we write of in countless thousands; for the Indians, although extremely wasteful of animal life, could not keep their numbers down, and the aggressive whiteman, with his deadly gun and rifle, had only just begun to depopulate the plains. Therefore the hunters had not to travel far before coming up with their quarry.

In a very brief space of time they were all drawn up in line under command of their chosen leader, who, at least up to the moment of giving the signal for attack, kept his men in reasonably good order. They had not ridden long when the huge ungainly bison were seen like black specks on the horizon.

Still the horsemen each armed with the muzzleloading, singlebarrelled, flintlock gun of the period advanced cautiously, until so near that the animals began to look up as if in surprise at the unwonted intrusion on their great solitudes.

Then the signal was given, the horses stretched out at the gallop, the buffalo began to run at first heavily, as if great speed were impossible to them; but gradually the pace increased until it attained to racing speed. Then the hunters gave the rein to their eager steeds, and the long line rushed upon the game like a tornado of centaurs.

From this point all discipline was at an end. Each man fought for his own hand, killing as many animals as he could, so that ere long the plain was strewn with carcasses, and the air filled with gunpowder smoke.

We have said that all the hunters set out, but this is not strictly correct, for three were left behind. One of these had fallen sick; one had sprained his wrist, and another was lazy. It need scarcely be told that the lazy one was François La Certe.

“There is no hurry,” he said, when the hunters were assembling for the start; “plenty of time. My horse has not yet recovered from the fatigues of the journey. And who knows but the report of the buffalo being so near may be false? I will wait and see the result. Tomorrow will be time enough to begin. Then, Slowfoot, you will see what I can do. Your hands shall be busy. We will load our cart with meat and pemmican, pay off all our debts, and spend a happy winter in Red River. What have you got there in the kettle?”

“Pork,” answered Slowfoot with characteristic brevity.

“Will it soon be ready?”

“Soon.”

“Have you got the tea unpacked?”

“Yes.”

“Send me your pipe.”

This latter speech was more in the tone of a request than a command, and the implied messenger from the opposite side of the fire was the baby Baby La Certe. We never knew its name, if it had one, and we have reason to believe that it was a female baby. At the time, baby was quite able to walk at least to waddle or toddle.

A brief order from the maternal lips sent Baby La Certe toddling round the fire towards its father, pipe in hand; but, short though the road was, it had time to pause and consider. Evidently the idea of justice was strongly developed in that child. Fair wage for fair work had clearly got hold of it, for it put the pipe which was still alight, in its mouth and began to draw!

At this the father smiled benignly, but Slowfoot made a demonstration which induced a rather prompt completion of the walk without a reasonable wage. It sucked vigorously all the time, however, being evidently well aware that François was not to be feared.

At that moment the curtain of the tent lifted, and little Bill Sinclair limped in. He was a favourite with La Certe, who made room for him, and at once offered him the pipe, but Billie declined.

“No, thank you, La Certe. I have not learned to smoke yet.”

“Ha! you did not begin young enough,” said the halfbreed, glancing proudly at his own offspring.

We may explain here once for all that, although he had lived long enough in the colony to understand French, Billie spoke to his friend in English, and that, although La Certe understood English, he preferred to speak in French.

“What have you been doing?” he asked, when the boy had seated himself.

“I’ve been shooting at a mark with my bow and arrowbrother Archie made it for me.”

“Let me seeyes, it is very well made. Where is brother Archie?”

“Gone after the buffalo.”

“What!on a horse?”

“He could not go very well after them on footcould he?” replied the boy quietly. “Dan Davidson lent him a horse, but not a gun. He said that Archie was too young to use a gun on horseback, and that he might shoot some of the people instead of the buffalo, or burst his gun, or fall off. But I don’t think so. Archie can do anything. I know, for I’ve seen him do it.”

“And so he has left you in camp all by yourself. What a shame, Billie!”

“No, François, it is not a shame. Would you have me keep him from the fun just because I can’t go? That would indeed be a shame, wouldn’t it?”

“Well, perhaps you’re right, Billie.”



“I know I’m right,” returned the boy, with a decision of tone that would have been offensive if it had not been accompanied with a look of straightforward gentleness that disarmed resentment. “But, I say, François, why are you not out with the rest?”

“Oh, becausebecauseWell, you know, my horse is tired, andand, I’m not quite sure that the buffalo really have been seen as near as they say. And I can go tomorrow just as well. You see, Billie, there is no need to hurry oneself.”

“No, I don’t see that. I think there’s always need for hurry, specially with men like you. I know the reason you don’t go out better than yourself, François.”

“Yeswhat is it?” asked the halfbreed with a slight laugh.

“It’s laziness. That’s what it is, and you should be ashamed of yourself.”

The large mild eyes and low voice, and pale earnest face of the plainspoken invalid were such that it would have been impossible for any one to be offended with him, much less La Certe, whose spirit of indignation it was almost impossible to arouse. He winced a little at the homethrust, however, because he knew it to be true.

“You’re hard on me, Little Bill,” he said with a benignant look, as he picked a stick from the fire and inserted its glowing end in his pipe.

“No, I’m not hard,” returned the boy gravely. Indeed he was always grave, and seldom laughed though he sometimes smiled faintly at the jokes and quips of his volatile brother and Fred Jenkins the seaman: “I’m not half hard enough,” he continued; “I like you, François, and that’s the reason why I scold you and try to get you to mend. I don’t think there’s such a lazy man in the whole Settlement as you. You would rather sit and smoke and stuff yourself with pork all day than take the trouble to saddle your horse and get your gun and go out with the rest. Why are you so lazy, François?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, Little Bill, unless it be that I’m born to be lazy. Other people are born, I suppose, to be active and energetic. They like activity and energy, and so they do it. I like repose and quiet, andso I do that. Not much difference after all! We both do what we like best!”

Little Bill was perplexed. Although philosophical in tendency he had not had sufficient experience in sophistical reasoning to enable him to disentangle the sinuosities of bad logic. But he was a resolute little fellow, and not easily quelled.

“What would happen,” he asked, “if everybody in the world did as you do?”

“Well, I suppose everybody would enjoy themselves. There would be no more fightings or wars, or any trouble of that sort, if everybody would only take things easy and smoke the pipe of peace.”

“Hm! I don’t know about that,” returned the boy, doubtfully; “but I’m quite sure there would not be much pemmican in Red River this winter if all the hunters were like you. I wonder you’re not ashamed, François. Sometimes I think that you’re not worth caring about; but I can’t help it, you know we can’t force our likings one way or other.”

La Certe was a good deal taken aback. He was not indeed unaccustomed to plain speaking, and to the receipt of gratuitous abuse; but his experience invariably was to associate both with more or less of a stern voice and a frowning brow. To receive both in a soft voice from a delicate meekfaced child, who at the same time professed to like him, was a complete novelty which puzzled him not a little.

After a few minutes’ profound consideration, he put out his pipe and arose quickly with something like an appearance of firmness in his look and bearing.

Slowfoot, whose utter ignorance of both French and English prevented her understanding the drift of the recent conversation, was almost startled by the unfamiliar action of her lord.

“Where go you?” she asked.

“To follow the buffalo,” answered La Certe, with all the dignity of a man bursting with good resolutions.

“Are you ill?” asked his wife, anxiously.

To this he vouchsafed no reply, as he raised the curtain and went out.

Little Bill also went out, and, sitting down on a package, watched him with his large solemn eyes, but said never a word until the halfbreed had loaded his gun and mounted his horse. Then he said: “Good luck to you, François!”

La Certe did not speak, but with a grave nod of his head rode slowly out of the camp. Little Bill regarded him for a moment. He had his bow and a bluntheaded arrow in his hand at the time. Fitting the latter hastily to the bow he took a rapid shot at the retreating horseman. The arrow sped well. It descended on the flank of the horse with considerable force, and, bounding off, fell to the ground. The result was that the horse, to La Certe’s unutterable surprise, made a sudden demivolt into the air without the usual persuasionalmost unseated its rider, and fled over the prairie like a thing

possessed!

“Clever boy!” she said, patting him on the back, “come into the tent and have some grub.”

She said this in the Cree language, which the boy did not understand, but he understood well enough the signs with which the invitation was accompanied. Thanking her with an eloquent look, he reentered the tent along with her.



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