XVII.

JOUANEAUX'S HOUSE.

THE sun had almost described his arc before Claire and Massawippa reached the extremity of the island. Massawippa could have walked two leagues in half the day, but wisely did she forecast that the young Frenchwoman would be like a liberated canary, obliged to grow into uncaged use of herself by little flights and pauses. Besides, Jouaneaux's house would give them safe asylum until they crossed the river.

"That must be his barn," said Massawippa, pointing to a pile of hewed timbers, too far up the bank and too recently handled by man to be drift. They lay in angular positions, scarce an upright log marking the site of the little structure Jouaneaux had tried to erect for his granary.

Two slim figures casting long shadows eastward on the clearing, the girls stood trying to discern in those tumultuous waters where the Ottawa came in or where the St. Lawrence's own current wrestled around islands. The north shore looked far off, thick clothed with forests. Massawippa held her blanket out to canopy her eyes, anxiously examining the trackless way by which they must cross.

"But the first thing is to find Jouaneaux's house," she said, turning to Claire.

"I was thinking of that," Claire answered, "and counting the stumps in rows of five. All this land is covered with stumps, Massawippa."

"He said the row of five nearest the water."

"Did he tell you how to enter?"

"That I had no time to learn. But, madame, if a man went in and out of this underground house, surely you and I can do the same. Here be five stumps — the row nearest the river."

They went to the central stump. It had a nest of decayed yellow wood within, crumbled down by the tooth of the air, but probing could not make it hollow.

"Perhaps he deceived you about his house," said Claire.

Massawippa met her apprehension with dark seriousness.

"It would be the worst about the boat," she replied. "I counted on that boat all day, so that I have not thought what to do without it."

They moved along the bank, passing irregular groups of stumps, until one standing by itself, much smoke-stained, as if it had leaked through all its fibers, drew their notice. It was deeply charred and hollow. Claire took up a pebble and dropped it into the stump. It rattled down some unseen hopper and clinked smartly on a surface below. This was Jouaneaux's chimney.

"He himself forgot where it was!" sneered Massawippa.

"Or some one has occupied the house since," suggested Claire, "and taken the other stumps away."

This was matter for apprehension.

"But stumps are not easily moved, madame. They crumble away or are burned into their roots. Let us find the door."

Massawippa dropped on her knees, and it happened that the first spot of turf she struck with a stone reverberated. Claire stooped also, and like two large children playing at mud pies they scraped the loam with sticks and found a rusty iron handle. The door rose by the tugging of four determined arms and left a square dark hole in the ground.*

"Wait," said Claire, as Massawippa thrust her head within it. "Poison vapors sometimes lie in such vaults. And let us see if anything is down there."

* While Jouaneaux's house had historic existence, its elaboration, of course, had not.

Massawippa took flint and steel from her sack, and Claire gingerly held the bit of scorched linen which these were to ignite. The tinder being set on fire, Massawippa lighted a candle and carefully put out her bit of linen. They fastened a rope to the candle and let it down into the cell.

The flame burned up steadily, revealing pavement and walls of gray cement, a tiny hearth and flue of river stones, a flight of slab steps descending from the door, and a small birch canoe, in which Jouaneaux had probably slept.

Massawippa went down and set the candle securely on the hearth. Claire waited until Massawippa had returned and filled both cups at the river. Then they descended into Jouaneaux's house and carefully shut the door.

"Oh!" Claire exclaimed as this lid cut off the sun-lit world above her head, "do you suppose we can easily open it again from within?"

"Yes, madame; as easily as the Iroquois could raise it from without. Jouaneaux was skillful for a Frenchman. But he relied on secrecy, for there are no fastenings to his door. A fox he called himself."

"It would be charming," said Claire, "if we could carry this pit with us on our way."

Drift-bark and small sticks, half charred, were piled against the chimney-back. To these Massawippa set a light, blowing and cheering it until it

rose to cheer her and helped the candle illuminate their retreat.

"Sit on the bottom of this boat, madame," said Massawippa, folding her blanket and placing it there. "Let us eat now, instead of nibbling bits of bread."

Claire took up one of the cups and drank reluctantly of river water, saying, "I am so thirsty! While you are taking out the loaves and the meat, show me all you have in the sack, Massawippa."

Massawippa therefore sat on the floor with the sack's mouth spread in her lap, and Claire leaned forward from her seat on the boat.

"There were the cups and the candle and one rope and the tinder that we have taken out," said Massawippa. She did not explain that she despised the promiscuous use of pewter cups, and would not use one in common with the Queen of France.

Out of the bag, jostled by every step of the day's journey, came unsorted a loaf of bread, some cured eels, a second rope,—"I brought ropes for rafts," observed Massawippa,—a lump of salt, a piece of loaf sugar,—"For you, madame,"—more bread, more eels, another length of rope,—"I dared not buy all we needed at one place or at two places," explained Massawippa,—the tinder-box, a hatchet, and, last, half a louis in coin, which Massawippa now returned to Claire.

"Be my purse-bearer still," said Claire, pushing it back. "If there be things we need to buy in the wilderness, you will know how to select them."

"We will keep it for the walking woman above Carillon," said the half-breed girl, sagely; and she put it in the careful bank of her tinder-box, bestowing this in the safest part of her dress.

They ate a hearty supper of eels and bread, and breaking the sugar in bits nibbled it afterwards, talking and looking at the coals on Jouaneaux's hearth.

Massawippa put their candle out. Their low voices echoed from the sides of the underground house and made a booming in their heads, but all sound of the river's wash so near them, or of the organ murmur of the forest trees, was shut away.

They cast stealthy occasional looks up at the trap-door, but neither said to the other that she dreaded to see a painted face peering there, or even apprehended the nuns' man.

While night and day were yet blended they turned the canoe over, and propped it in a secure position with the help of the paddle. Claire brought her cloak out of her packet, and this they made their cushion in the canoe.

The half-breed took the European's head upon her childish shoulder, wrapping the older dependent well with her own blanket. Of all her experiences Claire

thought this the strangest — that she should be resting like a sister on the breast of a little Indian maid in an underground chamber of the wilderness.

"If it were not for you, madame," spoke Massawippa, "I would put this canoe to soak in the water to-night. We must lose time to do it to-morrow. It has lain so long out of water it will scarcely be safe for us to venture across in."

"Massawippa, I thought we could take this boat and go directly up the Ottawa in it."

"Madame, you know nothing about the current. And at Carillon, above Two Mountains Lake, there is a place so swift that I could not paddle against it. We should have to carry around hard places. And there is the danger of meeting the Iroquois or being overtaken by some."

"For Dollard said there were hundreds coming up from the south," whispered Claire. "We must, indeed, hide ourselves from all canoes passing on the river. I took no thought of that."

"It will be best to go direct to the walking woman and get a boat of her. We have only to keep the river in sight to find the expedition. If they camp on the other shore, either below or above Carillon, we will have to go to Carillon for a boat. The Chaudière rapids will be hard for them to pass, madame."

"Who is this walking woman you speak of, Massawippa?"

"I do not know, madame. The Hurons say she is an Indian woman, and some French have claimed her for a saint of the Holy Church. She makes good birch canoes, which are prized by those who can get them. She is under a vow never to sit or lie down, and they say she goes constantly from Mount Calvary to Carillon, for at Carillon she lives or walks about working at her boats. On Mount Calvary are seven holy chapels built of stone, and the walking woman tends these chapels, but she is too humble to live near them. And even the Iroquois dare not touch her."

"Did you ever see her?"

"I saw her walking along the side of the mountain, bent over upon a stick like a very old woman. How tired she must be! for last summer it was told along the Ottawa that she had been years upon her feet."

"Were you afraid of her?"

"No, madame. I am not afraid of any holy person who lives in the woods."

"But did you ever see her face, Massawippa? What did she cover herself with?" inquired Claire, uncomfortably thinking of the recluse on St. Bernard.

"Far up the mountain I saw her face like a dot. She was covered, head and all, in a blanket the color of gray rock. And that is all I know about her, madame."

"Yet you count on getting a boat from her?"

"If she be a holy woman, madame, and sees us in trouble, will she not help us?"

The rosiness of glowing embers tinted the walls of Jouaneaux's house, and perfectly the smoke sought its flue.

Lying quite still in weariness, and holding each other for warmth and comfort, the two young creatures felt such thoughts rise and rush to speech as semi-darkness fosters when we are on the edge of great perils.

"Madame," said Massawippa, "do you understand how it will seem to be dead?"

"I was just thinking of it, Massawippa, and that we shall soon know. There is no imagining such a change; yet it may be no stranger than stripping off a glove of kid-skin and leaving the naked hand, which is, after all, the natural hand. Do you think it possible that anything has happened to the expedition yet? They are three days out from Montreal."

"They cannot be far up the Ottawa, madame. No, I think they have not met the Iroquois."

After such sleep as makes the whole night but a pause between two sentences, they opened their eyes to behold a hint of daylight glimmering down their stump chimney, and Claire exclaimed:

"Child, did you bear the weight of my head all night?"

"I don't know, madame," replied Massawippa, laughing. "This canoe floated us wondrously in sleep. If it but carry us on the Ottawa as well, we shall pass over without trouble."

They drew it up the steps of Jouaneaux's house before eating their breakfast, and carried it between them to the river. Massawippa fastened one of her ropes to it and knotted the other end around a tree. She crept down to the water's edge pushing the canoe, filled it with small rocks, and sunk it. They left their craft thus until late afternoon, while they staid cautiously underground, feeding the little fire with slab chips from Jouaneaux's barn, and exchanging low-voiced chat.

Such close contact in a common peril and endeavor was not without its effect on both of them. Claire from superior had changed to pupil, and seemed developing hardihood without losing her soft refinements. Massawippa, mature for her years, and exactly nice, as became a princess, in all her personal habits, had from the moment of meeting this European dropped her taciturn Indian speech. She unconsciously imitated while she protected a creature so much finer than herself.

Venturing forth when shadows were stretching from the west across that angry mass of waters, they emptied their canoe from its wetting and wiped it out with the hempen sack. But Massawippa still shook her head at it.

"Madame, I am afraid this canoe will not carry us well. Can you swim?"

"No, Massawippa; I never learned to do anything useful," replied Claire.

"We might make a raft of those barn timbers. But, madame, the canoe would take us swiftly, and the raft is clumsy in such swirls and cross-waters as these. You must take one of the cups in your hand and dip out the water while I paddle. Shall we wait until to-morrow?"

"Oh, no!" urged Claire. "We have lost one day for it. If the canoe will carry us at all, Massawippa, I believe it will carry us now."

They accordingly put their supplies back into the bag, but Massawippa cautiously wound all the ropes around her waist and secured them like a girdle. She brought the paddle from Jouaneaux's house, and perhaps with regret closed for the last time its trap-door above it.

Woods, rocks, islands, and water were steeped in a wonderful amber light. The two girls sat down close by the river edge and ate a supper before embarking. Then Massawippa launched the canoe and carefully placed herself and Claire over the keel.

"Unfasten your cloak and let it fall from your shoulders, madame. You see my blanket lies on the sack. We must have nothing to drag us under in case of mischance."

So, dipping with skillful rapidity, she ventured out across the current.

They fared well until far on in their undertaking. Immediately the little craft oozed as if its entire skin had grown leaky; but Claire bailed with desperate swiftness; the paddle dipped from side to side, flashing in the sun, which now lay level with the rivers.

Massawippa felt the canoe settling, turned it towards the nearest island, and tore the water with her speed.

"Madame!" she cried, her cry merging into one with Claire's "O Massawippa, we are going down!"

They were close to the island's ribbed side when a bubbling and roaring confusion overtook Claire's ears, and she was drenched, strangled, and still gulping in her death until all sensation passed away.

Life returned through hearing; her head was filled with humming noises, she was giving back the water which had been forced upon her, and lying across a rock supported by Massawippa. In the midst of her chill misery she noted that shadow was settling on the river, and all the cheerful ruddiness of western light was gone.

"Madame, are you able to get up the rocks now?" anxiously spoke Massawippa. "We must hide on this island to-night."

"How did we reach it?" Claire gasped.

"I swam, and dragged you."

"Then here had been the end of my expedition but for you, Massawippa."

"There was the end of our supplies. All gone, madame, except the ropes I put around my waist, and they would have drowned me with their weight if the island had not been almost under our feet. It is well we ate and filled ourselves, for the saints alone know where we shall get breakfast."

Claire turned her face on the rock.

"My packet of linen and clean comforts, Massawippa!" she regretted.

"The cloak and the blanket were of more account, madame. The Frenchman's boat played us a fine trick. But we are here. And we have still our knives and tinder."

Before the long northern twilight had double-dyed itself into night, they crept up the island's rocky side, explored its small circumference, and found near the western edge a dry hollow, the socket of an uprooted tree. Into this Massawippa piled all the loose leaves she could find, and cut some branches full of tender foliage from the trees to shelter them. Had her tinder been dry, she dared not make a light to be seen from the river.

Drenched and heavy through all their garments, they nestled closely down together and shivered in the chill breath of night. An emaciated moon lent them enough cadaverous light to make them apprehensive

of noises on the rushing water. Sometimes they dozed, sometimes they whispered to each other, sometimes they startled each other by involuntary shivers. But measured by patient breath, by moments of endurance succeeding one another in what then seemed endless duration, this second night of their journey passed away, and nothing upon the island or upon the two rivers terrified them.

Just at the pearl-blue time of dawn canoes grew on the southward sweep of the St. Lawrence.

Claire touched Massawippa, and Massawippa nodded. They dared scarcely breathe, but watched along the level of the sward, careful not to rear a feature above the dull leaves.

Nearer and nearer came the canoes. A splash of unskillful paddling grew distinct; familiar outlines projected familiar faces.

"Oh, it is Dollard!" Claire's whisper was a strangled scream. "There are the men of the French expedition! There is my—"

"Hush!" whispered Massawippa. "Madame, do you want them to see us, and turn and send us back to Montreal?"

"O my Dollard!" Claire clasped her own hand over her mouth while she sobbed. "Drowned and wretched and homesick for you, must I see you pass me by, never turning a glance this way?"

"Hush, madame," begged Massawippa, adding

her hand to Claire's. "Sound goes like a bird over water."

"This is our one chance to reach him," struggled Claire. "Oh, the woods, and the rivers, and the Iroquois—they are all coming between us again!"

"It is no chance at all, madame. I know what my father would do."

"O my Dollard!" groaned Claire in the dead leaves. "Oh, do not let him go by! Must he flit and flit from me—must I follow him so through space forever when we are dead?"

Almost like dream-men, wreathed slowly about by mists, their alternating paddles making no sound which could be caught by the woman on the island living so keenly in her ears, the expedition passed into the mouth of the Ottawa. When they could be seen no more, Claire lay in dejection like death.