

XVIII.

THE WALKING HERMIT.

“**T**HEY have been these five\* days getting past Ste. Anne,” remarked Massawippa. “I could not have paddled against that current with the best of canoes. My father will soon follow; we dare scarcely stir until my father passes. He would see us if we did more than breathe; the Huron knows all things around him. And if he finds us, he will put us back into safety, after all our trouble.”

Claire was weeping on her damp arms, and lay quite as still as the younger woman could wish, while daylight, sunlight, and winged life grew around them.

\* “Furent arrêtés huit jours au bout de l’île de Montreal, dans un endroit très-rapide qu’ils avaient à traverser,” says the French chronicler. But for romancer’s purposes, the liberty is taken of shortening the time.

Hour after hour passed. Annahotaha’s canoes did not appear. Still the half-Huron stoic watched southward, lying with her cheek on the leaves, clasping her eyelids almost shut to protect her patient sight from the glare on the water.

“Madame, are you hungry?”

“In my heart I am,” said Claire.

“That is because we were so drenched. My father will soon pass; and when we have food and dry skins our courage will come up again. There is only one way to reach the north shore. If my father would go by, I could cut limbs for the raft.”

Claire gave listless attention.

“We must cut branches as large as we can with our knives, the hatchet being gone, and we shall be drenched again; but the river’s arm shall not hold us back.”

When the sun stood overhead without having brought Annahotaha, Claire could endure her stiff discomfort no longer.

“Lie still, madame,” begged Massawippa.

“My child,” returned Claire, fretfully, “I do not care if the Iroquois see me and scalp me.”

“And me also?”

“No, not you.”

“Have a little more patience, madame, for I do see specks like wild ducks riding yonder. They may be the Huron canoes.”

The little more patience, wrung like a last tax from exhaustion, was measured out, and not vainly.

The specks like wild ducks rode nearer, shaping themselves into Huron canoes.

In rigid calm the half-breed girl watched them approach, fly past with regular and beautiful motion of the paddles, and make their entrance into the Ottawa. Her eyes shone across the leaves, but Annahotaha, sweeping all the horizon with a sight formed and trained to keenest use, caught no sign of ambush or human life on the islands.

When the fleet was far off, his young daughter rose up and unsheathed her knife to cut raft-wood.

"My father is a great man," was the only weakness she allowed herself, and in this her gratified pride was restricted to a mere statement of fact.

The raft, made of many large branches bound securely together, occupied them some time. On this frail and uneasy flooring the half-breed placed her companion. Claire was instructed to hold to it though the water should rise around her waist.

The space betwixt island and north shore was a very dangerous passage for them. Massawippa swam and propelled the raft with the current, fighting for it midway, while Claire clung in desperation and

begged the brown face turned up to her from the water to let her go and to swim out alone.

When they finally stood on the north bank, streams of water running down their persons, Massawippa's black hair shining as it clung to her cheeks, and their raft escaping from their reach, they felt that a great gulf of experience divided them from the island and Jouaneaux's house.

"This time we lose our ropes," said the half-breed girl. "My hands were too numb. And now we have nothing left but our knives and tinder."

To Claire the rest of the day was a heavy dream. Giddy from fasting and exposure, with swimming eyes she saw the landscape. Sometimes Massawippa walked with an arm around her waist, sometimes held low boughs out of her way, introducing her to the deeper depths of Canadian forest. They did not talk, but reserved their strength for plodding; and thus they edged along the curves and windings of the Ottawa. Claire took no thought of Massawippa's destination for the night; they were making progress if they followed beside the track of the expedition.

Before dark she noticed that the land ascended, and afterwards they left the river below, for a glooming pile of mountain was to be climbed. Perhaps no wearier feet ever toiled up that steep during all the following years, though the mountain was piously

*Mynd*

named Calvary and its top held sacred as a shrine, to be visited by many a pilgrim.\*

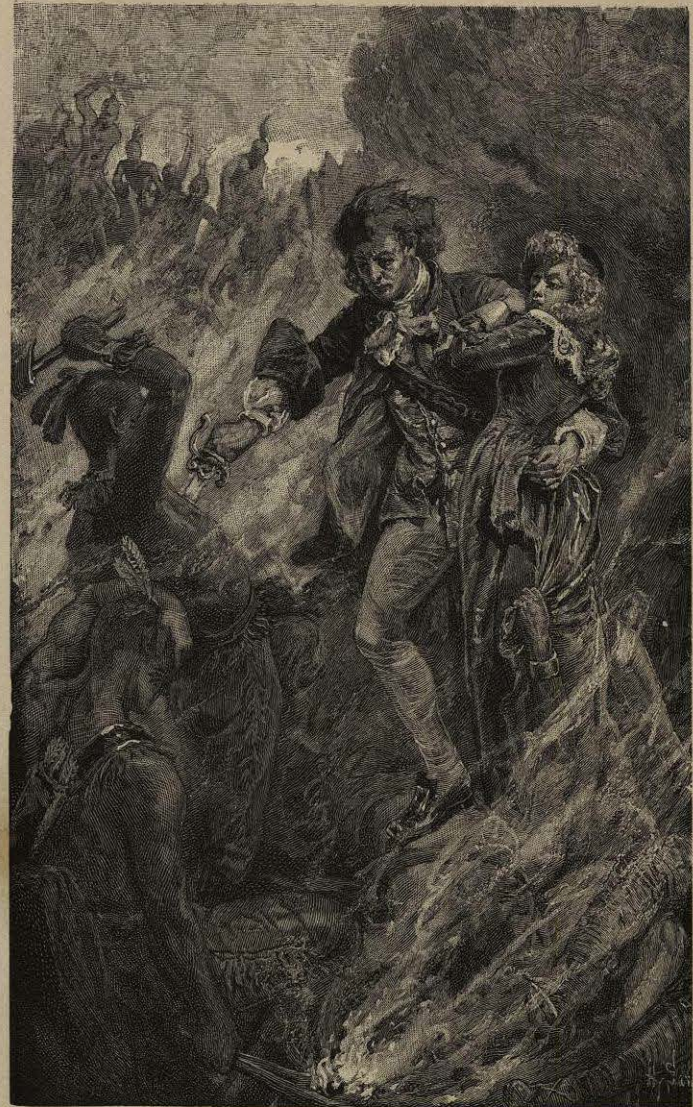
Sometimes the two girls hugged this rugged ascent, lying against it, and paused for breath. The rush and purr of the river went on below, and all the wilderness night sounds were magnified by their negations — the night silences.

At the summit of the mountain, starlight made indistinctly visible a number of low stone structures, each having a rough cross above its door. These were the seven chapels Massawippa had told about. Whether they stood in regular design or were dotted about on the plateau, Claire scarcely used her heavy eyes to discern. She was comforted by Massawippa's whisper that they must sleep in the first chapel, and by the sound of heavy hinges grating, as if the door yielded unwillingly an entrance to such benighted pilgrims.

The tomb-like inclosure was quite as chill as the mountain air outside. They stood on uneven stone flooring, and listened for any breathing beside their own.

"Let me feel all around the walls and about the altar, madame," whispered Massawippa.

\*"The large mountain was named Le Calvaire by the piety of the first settlers. At its summit were seven chapels,—memorials of the mystic seven of St. John's vision,—the scene of many a pilgrimage. Gallant cavalier and high-born lady from their fastness at Villemarie toiled side by side up the same weary height."— *Picturesque Canada*.



"Dollard held Claire with his left arm and fought with his sword."

"Let me continue with you, then," whispered back Claire. "Have you been in this place before?"

"I have been in all the chapels, madame."

Claire held to Massawippa's beaver gown and stepped grotesquely in her tracks as the half-breed moved forward with stretched, exploring fingers. When this blind progress brought them to the diminutive altar, they failed not to kneel before it and whisper some tired orisons.

After one round of the chapel they groped back to the altar, assured that no foe lurked with them.

The chancel rail felt like the smooth rind of a tree. Within the rail Massawippa said a wooden platform was built, on which it could be no sin against Heaven for such forlorn beings to sleep.

Their clothes were now nearly dry; but footsore and weak with hunger, Claire sunk upon this refuge, disregarding dust which had settled there in silence and dimness all the days of the past winter. Exhaustion made her first posture the right one. Scarcely breathing, she would have sunk at once to stupor, but Massawippa hissed joyful whispers through the dark.

"Madame!"

"What is it?"

"Madame, I have been feeling the top of the altar."

"Do no sacrilege, Massawippa."

"But last summer the walking woman put bread and roasted birds on the altars for an offering. She has put some here to-day. Take this."

Claire encountered a groping hand full of something which touch received as food. Without further parley she sat up and ate. The very gentle sounds of mastication which even dainty women may make when crisp morsels tempt the hound of starvation that is within them could be heard in the dark. Claire's less active animal nature was first silenced, and in compunction she spoke.

"If the hermit put these things on the altar for an offering, we are robbing a shrine."

"She was willing for any pilgrim to carry them away, madame. The *coureurs de bois* visit these chapels and eat her birds. She is alive, madame! She is not dead! We shall find her at Carillon and get our canoe of her; and the saints be praised for so helping us!"

They finished their meal and stretched themselves upon the platform. Not a delicious scrap which could be eaten was left, but Massawippa piously dropped the bones outside the chancel rail.

"We are in sanctuary," said Claire, her eyes pressed by the weight of darkness. Venturing with checked voice, the sweeter for such suppression and necessity of utterance, she sung above their heads into the low arching hollow a vesper hymn in monk's Latin; after which they slept as they had slept in Jouaneaux's house, and awoke to find the walking woman gazing over the rail at them.

She was so old that her many wrinkles seemed carved in hard wood. Her features were unmistakably Indian; but from the gray blanket loosely draping her, and even from her inner wrappings of soft furs, came the smell of wholesome herbs. She held a long flask in one hand, evidently a bottle lost or thrown away by some passing ranger, and she extended it to Claire, her eyes twinkling pleasantly.

Being relieved of it she turned and tapped with her staff—for her moccasins were silent—slowly around the chapel, mechanically keeping herself in motion. She was so different from fanatics who bind themselves in by walls that in watching her Claire forgot the flask.

Massawippa uncorked it.

"This is a drink she brews, madame. I have heard in my father's camp that she brews it to keep herself strong and tireless."

Claire tasted and Massawippa drank the liquid, with unwonted disregard of a common bottle mouth. It was too tepid to be refreshing, but left a wild and spicy tang, delicious as the cleansed sensation of returning health.

"Good mother," said Claire as she gave the hermit's flask back, "have you seen white men in canoes on the river?"

The walking woman leaned lower on her staff with keen attention. Massawippa repeated Claire's words

in Huron, and added much inquiry of her own. The walking woman moved back and forth beside the rail, making gestures with her staff and uttering gutturals, until she ended by beckoning to them and leading them out of the chapel.

Massawippa interpreted her as saying that she had seen the white men and the Hurons following them, and had heard a voice in the woods speak out, "Great deeds will now be done." She would take care of all whom the saints sheltered behind their altar, but she chid Massawippa for prying into mysteries when the girl asked if she had foreseen their coming. They were to go with her to Carillon and get a canoe.

She had breakfast for them down the mountain north of the chapels.

The world is full of resurrections of the body. It was nothing for two young creatures to rise up from their hard bed and plunge heartily into the dew and gladness of morning—the first morning of May.

But the miracle of life is that coming of a person who instantly unlocks all our resources, among which we have groped forlorn and disinherited. Friend or lover, he enriches us with what was before our own, yet what we never should have gathered without the solvent of his touch.

In some degree the walking woman came like such a prophet to Claire. As she brushed down the mountain-side with Massawippa, followed by woman and

clinking staff, all things seemed easy to do. The healing of the woods flowed over her anxiety, and like an urchin she pried under moss and within logs for an instant's peep at life swarming there. Never before had she felt turned loose to Nature, with the bounds of her past fallen away, and the freedom which at first abashed her now became like the lifting of wings. Sweet smells of wood mold and damp greenery came from this ancient forest like the long-preserved essence of primeval gladness. It did not have its summer density of leafage, but the rocks were always there, heaving their placid backs from the soil in the majesty of everlasting quiet.

The walking woman lifted her stick and struck upon their rocky path, which answered with a hollow booming, as if drums were beaten underground. She gave Claire a wrinkled smile.

"The rocks do the same far to the eastward," said Massawippa. "It is the earth's heart which answers—we walk so close to it here. And, madame, I never saw any snakes in this fair land."