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PERILS OF THE CAMP.

LOUISA'S father had gone up into the woods, sixty miles away, to make the camp before the winter's logging should begin. She felt very lonely as soon as he was out of sight, for more reasons than one. In the first place there was nobody at home but little Tim, who could dig the paths, to be sure, and look after the cattle; grandmother, who was companionable enough with her stories of old times, but a care more than a protector; and Suzette, who helped about the house, but was only a child. The second reason was that she had quarreled with Ben; and last, but not least, he and her uncle Simon had driven off on the ox team with her father. If there had ever been a time since their quarrel when she had felt disposed to make it up, it was when the ox team had disappeared from sight, and it was impossible to follow.

The fact of the case was that Ben had been looking upon Louisa as his own property ever since he could remember. He had beaued her to and from singing-school; he had helped her out with her hard problems at district school, and had carried her home on a sled; at quilting, sewing-circle, or pic-nic, he had chosen her for his partner in the dance, had paid his forfeits to her and had revolved about her daily. And she had seemed to relish the whole thing till she went away to the city one winter to work in a milliner's shop, and so came home quite out of conceit with country living and country men, and had rather given Ben the cold shoulder, refusing his gifts and attentions, and showing pretty plainly that she looked higher. But Ben, with the instincts of a free-born American, felt himself as good as anybody, and charged her one day with having come by hifalutin ideas of herself and life in the city, which didn't the least become her, and averred that she couldn't do better than to marry him.

"Well, Mr. Benjamin Thurman, I hope you're conceited enough," she answered him. "Marry you!—I won't say but you're well enough yourself; but to live in this slow, backwoods fashion forever would be the death of me; and not so much as a lecture or concert to while away the time; to be wearing homespun all my days, and worrying about the crops. Oh, dear, no, thank you; I've had enough of hard times. I believe I'll wait awhile before I settle down."

"Perhaps there's somebody else?" ventured Ben.

"No, I can't say that there is; though I don't mind telling you that I didn't come home single for a want of chance. He had a house, too, in the suburbs, and a housekeeper, and he said I never should bring the water to wash my hands."

"And why didn't you marry him?" asked Ben, frigidly.

"Oh, he didn't exactly suit me; he'd lost his front teeth and his hearing. 'There's as good fish in the sea as ever yet were caught," she sang, gaily.

"Well," said Ben, rising and looking blue lightning, "on the whole I am glad that you won't marry me, for you've got no more heart than an adder." And then he could have bitten his tongue out for saying what wasn't true, when his heart was almost breaking for love of her; and if she had showed that she was wounded, by word or look, he was ready to abase himself beneath her feet, and take it all back.

"You'r amazing polite, Mr. Thurman, I must say," she returned. "I'm sorry you asked for what you didn't want, because it would have been awkward if I hadn't refused. I didn't know that this was the way folks made love—calling names, when I've always treated you well."

"Treated me well with a vengeance!" cried Ben, his face white as a star, and his eyes like thunder-bolts. "Do you call it handsome treatment to let me go on loving you year after year, while it strengthened with my strength, without a hint that you couldn't return measure for measure? And then to go back upon a fellow and throw him over because he doesn't live like a nabob, though he loved the ground you walk on, and thought nothing too hard to do for you! If that's what you call treating me well, good bye—I don't want ever to see you again."

Lonisa had been looking at him with sparkling eyes, she rather liked to see him angry; it was vastly becoming. And then he loved her so desperately. She felt a strange, delightful thrill at her heart, as if it responded secretly. She had half a mind to go to him and hold out her arms and be clasped to his beating heart, and forget ambition and luxury and choose rather a heaven on earth; and while she had hesitated he had said, "Good bye—I don't want ever to see you again—good bye."

"I return the sentiment," said she, instead. "I believe I can live without you. Good bye." And when he was safely out of sight she took revenge in a good cry.

But now that he was gone, she began to find how much she had depended upon him, how much more his mere presence was to her than any dream of worldly prosperity, however golden. Perhaps but for this breach she might never have known how dear he was to her, nor how little she valued the superfluities of life in comparison.

Well one of the three was to return before the winter season of logging began, in order to lay in provisions for the camp—as they had only taken up enough for a week or ten days—and perhaps Ben would be the one to come; in which case he could hardly avoid bringing her some word of her father and uncle. And then who would predict but he might think it worth his while to reiterate his love in his eloquent style? And then Louisa laughed wickedly at the prospect, and decided that if he was enough in love to do thus, it would be safe for her, beyond a peradventure, to take her own time about making up, to show a supreme indifference to his regard. No more heart than an adder, indeed! What was it then, that ached so, day after day as the dull, cold November wind sighed about the house, and touched the neighboring pines into Æolian harps and swept up the dead leaves only to scatter them again? Why was she always straining her eyes down the frost-whitened country road? And what was it that trembled in her bosom whenever a speck appeared against the frosty sky? But Louisa had reckoned without her host. Ben was not the man who was fond of reiterating a love that had been received so coldly. He didn't mean to leave the woods till March, if he could hold out so long. Moreover, it was Mr. Bruce himself who proposed to go back with the ox team and bring the supplies and hire the men.

"I don't feel quite right about the head," said he, "and I want Louisa to cosset me. Then I'll go out to Shopton and see Scales and Weight about the supplies, and be back before you and Si have eat up all this 'ere victuals."

"All right, sir," said Ben, smothering a twinge of disappointment which he wouldn't own to himself. "We'll get the hovel ready for the cattle while you are off, and take a tramp through the woods and spot the best timber for felling."

"There's enough to do," said Uncle Simon.

"You'll be back in five days, say?"

"If I'm lucky. How's the stores, Si?"

"Good for a week, I should say, such as they are. But the sooner you get back the better. It'll be easier for you if you can manage to get up before a heavy snow comes. You see, we have not had anything but spits, yet, though maybe we're going to have an open winter."

"Ay, ay," answered Mr. Bruce, as he drove off through the woods with the ox team. "Provisions for a week, eh! That'll tide ye over, I reckon. There's a sight of work to be got through with in a week's time. There's the supplies to be got, and the hands to be hired; lemmee see—five cutters, two teamsters and a cook; that's about it, and to have 'em ready to start when I do, and I ain't so young as I was. Heydey, it's rub and grind, a lumberman's life is!"

Alas! there was more to be gotten through with in a week's time than Mr. Bruce had an inkling of; so much that it ran over into the next week, as work has a trick of doing.

When Louisa saw that it was only her old father trudging along with the returning ox team her mercury went down to zero in half a second. She saw before her a weary three months of loneliness and longing, and she saw, too, that she deserved it.

"It's a deuced cold day for an old man," said Mr. Bruce, shivering before the wood fire, as if there should have been special sets of weather created to suit customers. "What's that you've got cooking on the crane, Lu? Stew? I ain't got no more appetite than a bear in August. Brindle and Trot were slow as cold molasses; they've seen their best days, I reckon like their master. Wish I'd swapped 'em to Dunn for the yearlings and boot; it would have been a good bargain. Si sent his love to you, Lu. I've got a cold; I reckon I'll turn in and sleep it off."

"They oughtn't have let you come," said Lu, indignantly, as she carried him a bottle of hot water for his feet. Uncle Si or Ben ought to have come instead."

"It wa'nt their fault; I thought I could drive a better bargain with the hands. Ben said he'd come in my place, but his heart wa'nt set on it," which assurance in no wise comforted Louisa.

Mr. Bruce was restless all night, and in the morning was out of his head, and didn't know his right hand from his left, called Louisa Ben, and asked grandma to put the oxen into the cart, mistaking her for Uncle Simon. And Louisa, half frightened to death, jumped upon old Roan's back and galloped all the way to Shopton for the nearest doctor.

"Ahem! Nothing more or less than a fever," said he, the instant he laid his eyes on Mr. Bruce.

"Is he dangerous?" asked Louisa.

"Dangerous? Oh, I guess he'll pull through. I'll leave this prescription, and be round to-morrow. There's Mr. Maverick, of the tavern — Maverick's tavern, at our place—had the same symptoms a week ago, and he's about to-day. There's no telling about these things; different constitutions take diseases differently. At least, you needn't be alarmed at present. Good morning," with an emphasis on the good. Louisa thought it was anything but a good morning, after the comfort of his professional presence was withdrawn. But the next day her father was no better, nor yet the next day, though the doctor assured her that he was doing as well as could be expected, whatever that might be.

Louisa was too busy and weary with watching and nursing, cooking and looking after the house and seeing to grandma's cold, and keeping order and quiet among the children, to take note of the sick man's delirious words, though he was constantly talking about the camp, sixty miles away—where her own thoughts wandered whenever she had time to think them—bargaining with imaginary teamsters, haggling with Scales & Weight over groceries, and repeating, "Provisions for a week, for a week," and counting the days on his fingers and losing the count, and beginning over again and again, as if it were a puzzle, upon the solution of which his life depended. And so the fever ran to the ninth day and turned, and the patient fell into a quiet sleep, and awoke too weak and languid to put words together, or to remember anything but that he had suffered a fearful nightmare and it was over. It was perhaps the third day after the fever turned that he suddenly took up the thread of life where he had drooped it, and asked, "How long have I been a-laying here, Lu?"

"Twelve days."

"Where's Ben and Uncle Si?"

"Why, you left them in camp, father."

"Left them in camp! Twelve days ago," he gasped, "with a week's provisions. I shouldn't wonder if they were both in Heaven by this time!—What hev you been thinking of all this while, eh?"

"I didn't know they had only a week's provisions," said Louisa, showing a ghastly face; "and I had to look after you and the fever."

"Well, don't wait another minute round me; just harness up old Roan and Quickstep, and take some coffee, clothing, provisions and things—and don't let 'em short. Come, start yourself, and don't be standing still like a ghost and folks a-dying for lack of you."

"And you?"

"I'll take care of myself, and so'll grandma. Roan and Quickstep can do the distance by nightfall. Take my gun to keep off the wolves, and little Tim, and a lantern."

"But how shall I find the way?" Louisa was already inside her pelisse and mufflers.

"Bless you, a baby couldn't miss it; the trees are blazed with a star every half mile, on the left hand side. There, take Tim and be off."

And as there was not an able-bodied man short of Shopton at that season who wasn't off logging, and as grandma and Susette could take care of her patient, and Ben was starving without her, what could she do but go?"

And how were they faring in the camp, sixty miles away in the heart of the wood, which were almost like a primeval forest?" After Mr. Bruce's departure they had gone about their work with a will; while Uncle Simon was busy on the hovel for the cattle, Ben had walked miles and miles through the sweet-scented wood, spotting the timber; and suns had risen and set, when one morning, before the week was out, Uncle Simon was surprised to see the bottom of the meal-chest.

"Tough luck!" said he, briefly; "but there's swamp pork to eke it out." And he plunged his hand confidently into the pickle and had something of a chase after two or three insignficant pieces.—The two men looked at each other in dismay for an instant.

"But he'll be back day after to-morrow," said Ben.

"But what if he shouldn't?" asked the older man, not so sanguine.

"What can keep him? At any rate, we've got legs of our own."

"Precious stiff ones mine are! It would be a nice excursion, sixty miles afoot. Why we should freeze to death."

"Well, let's wait; no use running from your shadow."

And so they waited.

"He'll be sure to come to-morrow," was the assurance with which they comforted each other; and when to-morrow passed without bringing him, "We'll wait another day; perhaps the oxen were disabled on the road." For a storm had set in, cold blustering, not much snow; just enough to make the world lovely. The wind sang among the pines like the voice of an angry water-course, and splintered great boughs in the forest, and up-rooted blasted trees, and seemed like an invisible presence haunting the recesses of the wood—some impersonation of Thor, whose touch was a blow; and all the while the snow built up its Aladdin palaces, crystal by crystal; wreathed about the living green, tapestried every boulder, hid the dead leaves and hollows under the screen, for it was by no means deep; the weather was too bitter cold for more than a light fall, just enough to drape nature gracefully in its folds, and give a promise of more to come.

Before the sky had cleared the last mouthful of food had vanished, and, except for a partridge that Ben had made shift to kill with a club—for there were no fire-arms yet in camp—and a rabbit, taken in a rude trap of their own constructing, they had not eaten anything for two days. But they were robust men, who would have a tough fight with starvation before succumbing; and then there was no lack of water.

In the meanwhile they were almost as much concerned for Mr. Bruce as themselves. He might have lost his way, they feared, or been overtaken by the storm or the wolves; he might come into camp at any moment too far reduced to help himself, and need their weak assistance. Since their stomachs were idle, their brains became correspondingly active with fearful imaginations. Every day they proposed setting out to walk home—but perhaps he would come to-morrow; and then they hated to desert their post; besides, the weather was stinging cold, and, reduced by hunger, they might faint by the way, frost-bitten, or, unarmed, encounter Indian devils and wolves! Whatever he might be able to endure himself, Ben felt there Uncle Simon's strength was utterly inadequate to the struggle. They were beset with a thousand peradventures; they was not only a lion in the way, but all manner of perils, real and imaginary.—So they waited, perforce, watching the days vanish in a tender color, and the stars make their silent journey across deeps of heaven, and the morning dawn as the rose blooms. They busied themselves still about the camp and hovel, giving a thousand last touches, such as they would never have thought of giving at another time, gathering fire-wood and setting the rabbit trap in vain. And one day the axe fell from Ben's resolute hand, and he just dragged himself inside the camp and stretched himself before the fire. Uncle Simon had already given out.

"Walking home could hardly have been worse," Ben said, simply. Perhaps he was thinking of somebody who might have met him kindly at the journey's end, in view of the danger he had passed.

"Perhaps Bruce'll come yet," returned Uncle Simon.

Through a chink in the camp door Ben watched the sunset fade like a fire among the woods, and one by one the stars shine out, each in its appointed solitude, and the northern lights palpitate rosily among the sky. The howling of wolves echoed dismally, while now and then a branch cracked in the forest, and the wind trembled among the pines. Inside the fire made a comfortable glow, under the influence of which he was soon nodding off to sleep, when through the fog of his semi-consciousness he seemed to hear a sort of ringing in his ears, at first a mere thread of sound, then louder and nearer, as if every tree in the forest was a church steeple with all its bells a swinging. Then he heard no more till a smothered groan from Uncle Simon caused him to raise himself upon his elbow. The fire was still snapping and blazing brightly, and the form and profile of a woman was shadowed forth upon the wall of the camp—a very familiar face and figure it was, too, that appeared to be bending over something that was cooking on the fire. Was it the excited action of his brain that photographed Louisa Bruce on the wall? If so, he prayed that it might last forever. Then he turned his head languidly towards the fire, and met a pair of eyes that had shone for him all his life with the fascination of a will-o'-the wisp. Were they still to haunt him across the confines of this world?"

"If you are awake, Ben, you had better taste this gruel that I have made for you," said Louisa, quietly. "You must be nearly famished."

"How came you here?" was all the answer Ben vouchsafed.

"You are mighty polite if you are most starved. Who else could come, and father not able to lift his head? I brought Tim; he is putting up the horses. It's no such pleasant journey, either, I can tell you, between the wolves and the frost, not to mention a cold welcome. Come, ain't you going to take something? Here's broth and coffee and gruel—take your choice."

"No—you shall choose for me," said Ben. "Listen. Unless you take back the words you spoke when we met last, unless you give me back love for love, I swear I will not taste a morsel of anything you have to offer. I'll stay here and starve rather than take a crumb of comfort from your hand."

"What did I say?" asked Louisa meekly.

"You said that you could live without me."

"Oh, yes, I suppose I could, but I should not want to."

"But you refused to marry me."

"Certainly; because you didn't want to marry a girl with no more heart than an adder, Ben."

"I want to marry you, heart or no heart."

"Very well; have some broth first, won't you?"

And then Tim came in, and Uncle Simon awoke, and there was an end of starvation in camp.