

The Lady of Little Fishing

CONSTANCE FENIMORE WOOLSON

IT was an island in Lake Superior. I beached my canoe there about four o'clock in the afternoon, for the wind was against me and a high sea running. The late summer of 1850, and I was coasting along the south shore of the great lake, hunting, fishing, and camping on the beach, under the delusion that in that way I was living "close to the great heart of nature,"—whatever that may mean. Lord Bacon got up the phrase; I suppose he knew. Pulling the boat high and dry on the sand with the comfortable reflection that here were no tides to disturb her with their goings-out and comings-in, I strolled through the woods on a tour of exploration, expecting to find bluebells, Indian pipes, juniper rings, perhaps a few agates along-shore, possibly a bird or two for company. I found a town.

It was deserted; but none the less a town, with three streets, residences, a meeting-house, gardens, a little park, and an attempt at a fountain. Ruins are rare in the New World; I took off my hat. "Hail, homes of the past!" I said. (I cultivated the habit of thinking aloud when I was living close to the great heart of nature.) "A human voice resounds through your arches" (there were no arches,—logs won't arch; but never mind) "once more, a human hand touches your venerable walls, a human foot presses your deserted hearth-stones." I then selected the best half of the meeting-house for my camp, knocked down one of the homes for fuel, and kindled a glorious bonfire in the park. "Now that you are illuminated with joy, O Ruin," I remarked, "I will go down to the beach and bring up my supplies. It is long since I have had a roof over my head; I promise you to stay until your last residence is well burned; then I will make a final cup of coffee with the meeting-house itself, and depart in peace, leaving your poor old bones buried in decent ashes."

The ruin made no objection, and I took up my abode there; the roof of the meeting-house was still water-tight (which is an advantage when the great heart of nature grows wet). I kindled a fire on the sacerdotal hearth, cooked my supper, ate

it in leisurely comfort, and then stretched myself on a blanket to enjoy an evening pipe of peace, listening meanwhile to the sounding of the wind through the great pine-trees. There was no door to my sanctuary, but I had the cosey far end; the island was uninhabited, there was not a boat in sight at sunset, nothing could disturb me unless it might be a ghost. Presently a ghost came in.

It did not wear the traditional gray tarlatan armor of Hamlet's father, the only ghost with whom I am well acquainted; this spectre was clad in substantial deer-skin garments, and carried a gun and loaded game-bag. It came forward to my hearth, hung up its gun, opened its game-bag, took out some birds, and inspected them gravely.

"Fat?" I inquired.

"They 'll do," replied the spectre, and forthwith set to work preparing them for the coals. I smoked on in silence. The spectre seemed to be a skilled cook, and after deftly broiling its supper, it offered me a share; I accepted. It swallowed a huge mouthful and crunched with its teeth; the spell was broken, and I knew it for a man of flesh and blood.

He gave his name as Reuben, and proved himself an excellent camping companion; in fact, he shot all the game, caught all the fish, made all the fires, and cooked all the food for us both. I proposed to him to stay and help me burn up the ruin, with the condition that when the last timber of the meeting-house was consumed, we should shake hands and depart, one to the east, one to the west, without a backward glance. "In that way we shall not infringe upon each other's personality," I said.

"Agreed," replied Reuben.

He was a man of between fifty and sixty years, while I was on the sunny side of thirty; he was reserved, I was always generously affable; he was an excellent cook, while I—well, I was n't; he was taciturn, and so, in payment for the work he did, I entertained him with conversation, or rather monologue, in my most brilliant style. It took only two weeks to burn up the town, burned we never so slowly; at last it came the turn of the meeting-house, which now stood by itself in the vacant clearing. It was a cool September day; we cooked breakfast with the roof, dinner with the sides, supper with the odds and ends, and

then applied a torch to the frame-work. Our last camp-fire was a glorious one. We lay stretched on our blankets, smoking and watching the glow. "I wonder, now, who built the old shanty," I said in a musing tone.

"Well," replied Reuben, slowly, "if you really want to know, I will tell you. I did."

"You!"

"Yes."

"You did n't do it alone?"

"No; there were about forty of us."

"Here?"

"Yes; here at Little Fishing."

"Little Fishing?"

"Yes; Little Fishing Island. That is the name of the place."

"How long ago was this?"

"Thirty years."

"Hunting and trapping, I suppose?"

"Yes; for the Northwest and Hudson Bay Companies."

"Was n't a meeting-house an unusual accompaniment?"

"Most unusual."

"Accounted for in this case by—"

"A woman."

"Ah!" I said in a tone of relish; "then of course there is a story?"

"There is."

"Out with it, comrade. I scarcely expected to find the woman and her story up here; but since the irrepressible creature would come, out with her by all means. She shall grace our last pipe together, the last timber of our meeting-house, our last night on Little Fishing. The dawn will see us far from each other, to meet no more this side heaven. Speak then, O comrade mine! I am in one of my rare listening moods!"

I stretched myself at ease and waited. Reuben was a long time beginning, but I was too indolent to urge him. At length he spoke.

"They were a rough set here at Little Fishing, all the worse for being all white men; most of the other camps were full of half-breeds and Indians. The island had been a station away back in the early days of the Hudson Bay Company; it was a

station for the Northwest Company while that lasted; then it went back to the Hudson, and stayed there until the company moved its forces farther to the north. It was not at any time a regular post; only a camp for the hunters. The post was farther down the lake. O, but those were wild days! You think you know the wilderness, boy; but you know nothing, absolutely nothing. It makes me laugh to see the airs of you city gentlemen with your fine guns, improved fishing-tackle, elaborate paraphernalia, as though you were going to wed the whole forest, floating up and down the lake for a month or two in the summer! You should have seen the hunters of Little Fishing going out gayly when the mercury was down twenty degrees below zero, for a week in the woods. You should have seen the trappers wading through the hard snow, breast high, in the gray dawn, visiting the traps and hauling home the prey. There were all kinds of men here, Scotch, French, English, and American; all classes, the high and the low, the educated and the ignorant; all sorts, the lazy and the hard-working. One thing only they all had in common,—badness. Some had fled to the wilderness to escape the law, others to escape order; some had chosen the wild life because of its wildness, others had drifted into it from sheer lethargy. This far northern border did not attract the plodding emigrant, the respectable settler. Little Fishing held none of that trash; only a reckless set of fellows who carried their lives in their hands, and tossed them up, if need be, without a second thought.”

“And other people’s lives without a third,” I suggested.

“Yes; if they deserved it. But nobody whined; there was n’t any nonsense here. The men went hunting and trapping, got the furs ready for the bateaux, ate when they were hungry, drank when they were thirsty, slept when they were sleepy, played cards when they felt like it, and got angry and knocked each other down whenever they chose. As I said before, there was n’t any nonsense at Little Fishing,—until *she* came.”

“Ah! the she!”

“Yes, the Lady,—our Lady, as we called her. Thirty-one years ago; how long it seems!”

“And well it may,” I said. “Why, comrade, I was n’t born then!”

This stupendous fact seemed to strike me more than my companion; he went on with his story as though I had not spoken.

“One October evening, four of the boys had got into a row over the cards; the rest of us had come out of our wigwams to see the fun, and were sitting around on the stumps, chaffing them, and laughing; the camp-fire was burning in front, lighting up the woods with a red glow for a short distance, and making the rest doubly black all around. There we all were, as I said before, quite easy and comfortable, when suddenly there appeared among us, as though she had dropped from heaven, a woman!

“She was tall and slender, the firelight shone full on her pale face and dove-colored dress, her golden hair was folded back under a little white cap, and a white kerchief lay over her shoulders; she looked spotless. I stared; I could scarcely believe my eyes; none of us could. There was not a white woman west of the Sault Ste. Marie. The four fellows at the table sat as if transfixed; one had his partner by the throat, the other two were disputing over a point in the game. The lily lady glided up to their table, gathered the cards in her white hands, slowly, steadily, without pause or trepidation before their astonished eyes, and then, coming back, she threw the cards into the centre of the glowing fire. ‘Ye shall not play away your souls,’ she said in a clear, sweet voice. ‘Is not the game sin? And its reward death?’ And then, immediately, she gave us a sermon, the like of which was never heard before; no argument, no doctrine, just simple, pure entreaty. ‘For the love of God,’ she ended, stretching out her hands towards our silent, gazing group,—‘for the love of God, my brothers, try to do better.’

“We did try; but it was not for the love of God. Neither did any of us feel like brothers.

“She did not give any name; we called her simply our Lady, and she accepted the title. A bundle carefully packed in birch-bark was found on the beach. ‘Is this yours?’ asked black Andy.

“‘It is,’ replied the Lady; and removing his hat, the black-haired giant carried the package reverently inside her lodge. For we had given her our best wigwam, and fenced it off with pine saplings so that it looked like a miniature fortress. The

Lady did not suggest this stockade; it was our own idea, and with one accord we worked at it like beavers, and hung up a gate with a ponderous bolt inside.

“‘Mais, ze can nevare farsen eet wiz her leetle fingares,’ said Frenchy, a sallow little wretch with a turn for handicraft; so he contrived a small spring which shot the bolt into place with a touch. The Lady lived in her fortress; three times a day the men carried food to her door, and, after tapping gently, withdrew again, stumbling over each other in their haste. The Flying Dutchman, a stolid Holland-born sailor, was our best cook, and the pans and kettles were generally left to him; but now all wanted to try their skill, and the results were extraordinary.

“‘She ’s never touched that pudding, now,’ said Nightingale Jack, discontentedly, as his concoction of berries and paste came back from the fortress door.

“‘She will starve soon, I think,’ remarked the Doctor, calmly; ‘to my certain knowledge she has not had an eatable meal for four days.’ And he lighted a fresh pipe. This was an aside, and the men pretended not to hear it; but the pans were relinquished to the Dutchman from that time forth.

“The Lady wore always her dove-colored robe, and little white cap, through whose muslin we could see the glimmer of her golden hair. She came and went among us like a spirit; she knew no fear; she turned our life inside out, nor shrank from its vileness. It seemed as though she was not of earth, so utterly impersonal was her interest in us, so heavenly her pity. She took up our sins, one by one, as an angel might; she pleaded with us for our own lost souls, she spared us not, she held not back one grain of denunciation, one iota of future punishment. Sometimes, for days, we would not see her; then, at twilight, she would glide out among us, and, standing in the light of the camp-fire, she would preach to us as though inspired. We listened to her; I do not mean that we were one whit better at heart, but still we listened to her, always. It was a wonderful sight, that lily face under the pine-trees, that spotless woman standing alone in the glare of the fire, while around her lay forty evil-minded, lawless men, not one of whom but would have killed his neighbor for so much as a disrespectful thought of her.

“So strange was her coming, so almost supernatural her

appearance in this far forest, that we never wondered over its cause, but simply accepted it as a sort of miracle; your thoroughly irreligious men are always superstitious. Not one of us would have asked a question, and we should never have known her story had she not herself told it to us; not immediately, not as though it was of any importance, but quietly, briefly, and candidly as a child. She came, she said, from Scotland, with a band of God's people. She had always been in one house, a religious institution of some kind, sewing for the poor when her strength allowed it, but generally ill, and suffering much from pain in her head; often kept under the influence of soothing medicines for days together. She had no father or mother, she was only one of this band; and when they decided to send out missionaries to America, she begged to go, although but a burden; the sea voyage restored her health; she grew, she said, in strength and in grace, and her heart was as the heart of a lion. Word came to her from on high that she should come up into the northern lake-country and preach the gospel there; the band were going to the verdant prairies. She left them in the night, taking nothing but her clothing; a friendly vessel carried her north; she had preached the gospel everywhere. At the Sault the priests had driven her out, but nothing fearing, she went on into the wilderness, and so, coming part of the way in canoes, part of the way along-shore, she had reached our far island. Marvellous kindness had she met with, she said; the Indians, the half-breeds, the hunters, and the trappers had all received her, and helped her on her way from camp to camp. They had listened to her words also. At Portage they had begged her to stay through the winter, and offered to build her a little church for Sunday services. Our men looked at each other. Portage was the worst camp on the lake, notorious for its fights; it was a mining settlement.

“‘But I told them I must journey on towards the west,’ continued our Lady. ‘I am called to visit every camp on this shore before the winter sets in; I must soon leave you also.’”

“The men looked at each other again; the Doctor was spokesman. ‘But, my Lady,’ he said, ‘the next post is Fort William, two hundred and thirty-five miles away on the north shore.’”

“‘It is almost November; the snow will soon be six and ten feet deep. The Lady could never travel through it,—could

she, now?' said Black Andy, who had begun eagerly, but in his embarrassment at the sound of his own voice, now turned to Frenchy and kicked him covertly into answering.

"'Nevare!' replied the Frenchman; he had intended to place his hand upon his heart to give emphasis to his word, but the Lady turned her calm eyes that way, and his grimy paw fell, its gallantry wilted.

"'I thought there was one more camp,—at Burnt-Wood River,' said our Lady in a musing tone. The men looked at each other a third time; there was a camp there, and they all knew it. But the Doctor was equal to the emergency.

"'That camp, my Lady,' he said gravely,—'that camp no longer exists!' Then he whispered hurriedly to the rest of us, 'It will be an easy job to clean it out, boys. We 'll send over a party to-night; it 's only thirty-five miles.'

"'We recognized superior genius; the Doctor was our oldest and deepest sinner. But what struck us most was his anxiety to make good his lie. Had it then come to this,—that the Doctor told the truth?

"'The next day we all went to work to build our Lady a church; in a week it was completed. There goes its last cross-beam now into the fire; it was a solid piece of work, was n't it? It has stood this climate thirty years. I remember the first Sunday service: we all washed, and dressed ourselves in the best we had; we scarcely knew each other, we were so fine. The Lady was pleased with the church, but yet she had not said she would stay all winter; we were still anxious. How she preached to us that day! We had made a screen of young spruces set in boxes, and her figure stood out against the dark green background like a thing of light. Her silvery voice rang through the log-temple, her face seemed to us like a star. She had no color in her cheeks at any time; her dress, too, was colorless. Although gentle, there was an iron inflexibility about her slight, erect form. We felt, as we saw her standing there, that if need be she would walk up to the lion's jaws, the cannon's mouth, with a smile. She took a little book from her pocket and read to us a hymn,—'O come, all ye faithful,' the old 'Adeste Fideles.' Some of us knew it; she sang, and gradually, shame-facedly, voices joined in. It was a sight to see Nightingale Jack solemnly singing away about 'choirs of angels'; but it was a treat

to hear him, too,—what a voice he had! Then our Lady prayed, kneeling down on the little platform in front of the evergreens, clasping her hands, and lifting her eyes to heaven. We did not know what to do at first, but the Doctor gave us a severe look and bent his head, and we all followed his lead.

“When service was over and the door opened, we found that it had been snowing; we could not see out through the windows because white cloth was nailed over them in place of glass.

“‘Now, my Lady, you will have to stay with us,’ said the Doctor. We all gathered around with eager faces.

“‘Do you really believe that it will be for the good of your souls?’ asked the sweet voice.

“The Doctor believed—for us all.

“‘Do you really hope?’

“The Doctor hoped.

“‘Will you try to do your best?’

“The Doctor was sure he would.

“‘I will,’ answered the Flying Dutchman, earnestly. ‘I moost not fry de meat any more; I moost broil!’

“For we had begged him for months to broil, and he had obstinately refused; broil represented the good, and fry the evil, to his mind; he came out for the good according to his light; but none the less did we fall upon him behind the Lady’s back, and cuff him into silence.

“She stayed with us all winter. You don’t know what the winters are up here; steady, bitter cold for seven months, thermometer always below, the snow dry as dust, the air like a knife. We built a compact chimney for our Lady, and we cut cords of wood into small, light sticks, easy for her to lift, and stacked them in her shed; we lined her lodge with skins, and we made oil from bear’s fat and rigged up a kind of lamp for her. We tried to make candles, I remember, but they would not run straight; they came out hump-backed and sidling, and burned themselves to wick in no time. Then we took to improving the town. We had lived in all kinds of huts and lean-to shanties; now nothing would do but regular log-houses. If it had been summer, I don’t know what we might not have run to in the way of piazzas and fancy steps; but with the snow five feet deep, all we could accomplish was a plain, square log-house,

and even that took our whole force. The only way to keep the peace was to have all the houses exactly alike; we laid out the three streets, and built the houses, all facing the meeting-house, just as you found them.”

“And where was the Lady’s lodge?” I asked, for I recalled no stockaded fortress, large or small.

My companion hesitated a moment. Then he said abruptly, “It was torn down.”

“Torn down!” I repeated. “Why, what—”

Reuben waved his hand with a gesture that silenced me, and went on with his story. It came to me then for the first time, that he was pursuing the current of his own thoughts rather than entertaining me. I turned to look at him with a new interest. I had talked to him for two weeks, in rather a patronizing way; could it be that affairs were now, at this last moment, reversed?

“It took us almost all winter to build those houses,” pursued Reuben. “At one time we neglected the hunting and trapping to such a degree, that the Doctor called a meeting and expressed his opinion. Ours was a voluntary camp, in a measure, but still we had formally agreed to get a certain amount of skins ready for the bateaux by early spring; this agreement was about the only real bond of union between us. Those whose houses were not completed scowled at the Doctor.

“Do you suppose I’m going to live like an Injun when the other fellows has regular houses?” inquired Black Andy, with a menacing air.

“By no means,” replied the Doctor, blandly. “My plan is this: build at night.”

“At night?”

“Yes; by the light of pine fires.”

“We did. After that, we faithfully went out hunting and trapping as long as daylight lasted, and then, after supper, we built up huge fires of pine logs, and went to work on the next house. It was a strange picture: the forest deep in snow, black with night, the red glow of the great fires, and our moving figures working on as complacently as though daylight, balmy air, and the best of tools were ours.

“The Lady liked our industry. She said our new houses showed that the ‘new cleanliness of our inner man required a

cleaner tabernacle for the outer.' I don't know about our inner man, but our outer was certainly much cleaner.

"One day the Flying Dutchman made one of his unfortunate remarks. 'De boys t'inks you 'll like dem better in nize houses,' he announced when, happening to pass the fortress, he found the Lady standing at her gate gazing at the work of the preceding night. Several of the men were near enough to hear him, but too far off to kick him into silence as usual; but they glared at him instead. The Lady looked at the speaker with her dreamy, far-off eyes.

"'De boys t'inks you like dem,' began the Dutchman again, thinking she did not comprehend; but at that instant he caught the combined glare of the six eyes, and stopped abruptly, not at all knowing what was wrong, but sure there was something.

"'Like them,' repeated the Lady, dreamily; 'yea, I do like them. Nay, more, I love them. Their souls are as dear to me as the souls of brothers.'

"'Say, Frenchy, have you got a sister?' said Nightingale Jack, confidentially, that evening.

"'Mais oui,' said Frenchy.

"'You think all creation of her, I suppose?'

"'We fight like four cats and one dog; *she* is the cats,' said the Frenchman concisely.

"'You don't say so!'" replied Jack. 'Now, I never had a sister,—but I thought perhaps—' He paused, and the sentence remained unfinished.

"The Nightingale and I were house-mates. We sat late over our fire not long after that; I gave a gigantic yawn. 'This lifting logs half the night is enough to kill one,' I said, getting out my jug. 'Sing something, Jack. It 's a long time since I 've heard anything but hymns.'

"Jack always went off as easily as a music-box: you had only to wind him up; the jug was the key. I soon had him in full blast. He was giving out

'The minute gun at sea,—the minute gun at sea,'

with all the pathos of his tenor voice, when the door burst open and the whole population rushed in upon us.

"'What do you mean by shouting this way, in the middle of the night?'

“Shut up your howling, Jack?”

“How do you suppose any one can sleep?”

“It ’s a disgrace to the camp!”

“Now then, gentlemen,” I replied, for my blood was up (whiskey, perhaps), ‘is this my house, or is n’t it? If I want music, I ’ll have it. Time was when you were not so particular.’

“It was the first word of rebellion. The men looked at each other, then at me.

“I ’ll go and ask her if she objects,” I continued, boldly.

“No, no. You shall not.”

“Let him go,” said the Doctor, who stood smoking his pipe on the outskirts of the crowd. ‘It is just as well to have that point settled now. The Minute Gun at Sea is a good moral song in its way,—a sort of marine missionary affair.’

“So I started, the others followed; we all knew that the Lady watched late; we often saw the glimmer of her lamp far on towards morning. It was burning now. The gate was fastened, I knocked; no answer. I knocked again, and yet a third time; still, silence. The men stood off at a little distance and waited. ‘She shall answer,’ I said angrily, and going around to the side where the stockade came nearer to the wall of the lodge, I knocked loudly on the close-set saplings. For answer I thought I heard a low moan; I listened, it came again. My anger vanished, and with a mighty bound I swung myself up to the top of the stockade, sprung down inside, ran around, and tried the door. It was fastened; I burst it open and entered. There, by the light of the hanging lamp, I saw the Lady on the floor, apparently dead. I raised her in my arms; her heart was beating faintly, but she was unconscious. I had seen many fainting fits; this was something different; the limbs were rigid. I laid her on the low couch, loosened her dress, bathed her head and face in cold water, and wrenched up one of the warm hearth-stones to apply to her feet. I did not hesitate; I saw that it was a dangerous case, something like a trance or an ‘ecstasis.’ Somebody must attend to her, and there were only men to choose from. Then why not I?

“I heard the others talking outside; they could not understand the delay; but I never heeded, and kept on my work. To tell the truth, I had studied medicine, and felt a genuine enthusiasm over a rare case. Once my patient opened her eyes and looked at me, then she lapsed away again into unconsciousness

in spite of all my efforts. At last the men outside came in, angry and suspicious; they had broken down the gate. There we all stood, the whole forty of us, around the deathlike form of our Lady.

“What a night it was! To give her air, the men camped outside in the snow with a line of pickets in whispering distance from each other from the bed to their anxious group. Two were detailed to help me,—the Doctor (whose title was a sarcastic D. D.) and Jimmy, a gentle little man, excellent at bandaging broken limbs. Every vial in the camp was brought in,—astonishing lotions, drops, and balms; each man produced something; they did their best, poor fellows, and wore out the night with their anxiety. At dawn our Lady revived suddenly, thanked us all, and assured us that she felt quite well again; the trance was over. ‘It was my old enemy,’ she said, ‘the old illness of Scotland, which I hoped had left me forever. But I am thankful that it is no worse; I have come out of it with a clear brain. Sing a hymn of thankfulness for me, dear friends, before you go.’

“Now, we sang on Sunday in the church; but then she led us, and we had a kind of an idea that after all she did not hear us. But now, who was to lead us? We stood awkwardly around the bed, and shuffled our hats in our uneasy fingers. The Doctor fixed his eyes upon the Nightingale; Jack saw it and cowered. ‘Begin,’ said the Doctor in a soft voice; but gripping him in the back at the same time with an ominous clutch.

“‘I don’t know the words,’ faltered the unhappy Nightingale.

“‘Now thank we all our God,
With hearts and hands and voices,’

began the Doctor, and repeated Luther’s hymn with perfect accuracy from beginning to end. ‘What will happen next? The Doctor knows hymns!’ we thought in profound astonishment. But the Nightingale had begun, and gradually our singers joined in; I doubt whether the grand old choral was ever sung by such a company before or since. There was never any further question, by the way, about that minute gun at sea; it stayed at sea as far as we were concerned.

“Spring came, the faltering spring of Lake Superior. I won’t go into my own story, but such as it was, the spring brought it back to me with new force. I wanted to go,—and yet I did n’t. ‘Where,’ do you ask? To see her, of course,—a woman, the most beautiful,—well, never mind all that. To be brief, I loved her; she scorned me; I thought I had learned to hate her—but—I was n’t sure about it now. I kept myself aloof from the others and gave up my heart to the old sweet, bitter memories; I did not even go to church on Sundays. But all the rest went; our Lady’s influence was as great as ever. I could hear them singing; they sang better now that they could have the door open; the pent-up feeling used to stifle them. The time for the bateaux drew near, and I noticed that several of the men were hard at work packing the furs in bales, a job usually left to the *voyageurs* who came with the boats. ‘What ’s that for?’ I asked.

“You don’t suppose we ’re going to have those bateaux rascals camping on Little Fishing, do you?’ said Black Andy, scornfully. ‘Where are your wits, Reub?’

“And they packed every skin, rafted them all over to the mainland, and waited there patiently for days, until the train of slow boats came along and took off the bales; then they came back in triumph. ‘Now we ’re secure for another six months,’ they said, and began to lay out a park, and gardens for every house. The Lady was fond of flowers; the whole town burst into blossom. The Lady liked green grass; all the clearing was soon turfed over like a lawn. The men tried the ice-cold lake every day, waiting anxiously for the time when they could bathe. There was no end to their cleanliness; Black Andy had grown almost white again, and Frenchy’s hair shone like oiled silk.

“The Lady stayed on, and all went well. But, gradually, there came a discovery. The Lady was changing,—had changed! Gradually, slowly, but none the less distinctly to the eyes that knew her every eyelash. A little more hair was visible over the white brow, there was a faint color in the cheeks, a quicker step; the clear eyes were sometimes downcast now, the steady voice softer, the words at times faltering. In the early summer the white cap vanished, and she stood among us crowned only with her golden hair; one day she was seen through her open door sewing on a white robe! The men noted all these things

silently; they were even a little troubled as at something they did not understand, something beyond their reach. Was she planning to leave them?

“‘It ’s my belief she ’s getting ready to ascend right up into heaven,’ said Salem.

“Salem was a little ‘wanting,’ as it is called, and the men knew it; still, his words made an impression. They watched the Lady with an awe which was almost superstitious; they were troubled, and knew not why. But the Lady bloomed on. I did not pay much attention to all this; but I could not help hearing it. My heart was moody, full of its own sorrows; I secluded myself more and more. Gradually I took to going off into the mainland forests for days on solitary hunting expeditions. The camp went on its way rejoicing; the men succeeded, after a world of trouble, in making a fountain which actually played, and they glorified themselves exceedingly. The life grew quite pastoral. There was talk of importing a cow from the East, and a messenger was sent to the Sault for certain choice supplies against the coming winter. But, in the late summer, the whisper went round again that the Lady had changed, this time for the worse. She looked ill, she drooped from day to day; the new life that had come to her vanished, but her former life was not restored. She grew silent and sad, she strayed away by herself through the woods, she scarcely noticed the men who followed her with anxious eyes. Time passed, and brought with it an undercurrent of trouble, suspicion, and anger. Everything went on as before; not one habit, not one custom was altered; both sides seemed to shrink from the first change, however slight. The daily life of the camp was outwardly the same, but brooding trouble filled every heart. There was no open discussion, men talked apart in twos and threes; a gloom rested over everything, but no one said, ‘What is the matter?’

“There was a man among us,—I have not said much of the individual characters of our party, but this man was one of the least esteemed, or rather liked; there was not much esteem of any kind at Little Fishing. Little was known about him; although the youngest man in the camp, he was a mooning, brooding creature, with brown hair and eyes and a melancholy face. He was n’t hearty and whole-souled, and yet he was n’t an out-and-out rascal; he was n’t a leader, and yet he was n’t

follower either. He would n't be; he was like a third horse, always. There was no goodness about him; don't go to fancying that that was the reason the men did not like him; he was as bad as they were, every inch! He never shirked his work, and they could n't get a handle on him anywhere; but he was just—unpopular. The why and the wherefore are of no consequence now. Well, do you know what was the suspicion that hovered over the camp? It was this: our Lady loved that man!

“It took three months for all to see it, and yet never a word was spoken. All saw, all heard; but they might have been blind and deaf for any sign they gave. And the Lady drooped more and more.

“September came, the fifteenth; the Lady lay on her couch, pale and thin; the door was open and a bell stood beside her, but there was no line of pickets whispering tidings of her state to an anxious group outside. The turf in the three streets had grown yellow for want of water, the flowers in the little gardens had drooped and died, the fountain was choked with weeds, and the interiors of the houses were all untidy. It was Sunday, and near the hour for service; but the men lounged about, dingy and unwashed.

“A'n't you going to church?’ said Salem, stopping at the door of one of the houses; he was dressed in his best, with a flower in his button-hole.

“See him now! See the fool,’ said Black Andy. ‘He ’s going to church, he is! And where ’s the minister, Salem? Answer me that!’

“Why,—in the church, I suppose,’ replied Salem, vacantly.

“No, she a'n't; not she! She ’s at home, a-weeping, and a-wailing, and a-ger-nashing of her teeth,’ replied Andy with bitter scorn.

“What for?’ said Salem.

“What for? Why, that ’s the joke! Hear him, boys; he wants to know what for!’

“The loungers laughed,—a loud, reckless laugh.

“Well, I ’m going any way,’ said Salem, looking wonderingly from one to the other; he passed on and entered the church.

“I say, boys, let ’s have a high old time,’ cried Andy, savagely. ‘Let ’s go back to the old way and have a jolly Sunday. Let ’s have out the jugs and the cards and be free again!’

“The men hesitated; ten months and more of law and order held them back.

“‘What are you afraid of?’ said Andy. ‘Not of a canting hypocrite, I hope. She ’s fooled us long enough, I say. Come on!’ He brought out a table and stools, and produced the long-unused cards and a jug of whiskey. ‘Strike up, Jack,’ he cried; ‘give us old Fiery-Eyes.’

“The Nightingale hesitated. Fiery-Eyes was a rollicking drinking song; but Andy put the glass to his lips and his scruples vanished in the tempting aroma. He began at the top of his voice, partners were chosen, and, trembling with excitement and impatience, like prisoners unexpectedly set free, the men gathered around, and made their bets.

“‘What born fools we ’ve been,’ said Black Andy, laying down a card.

“‘Yes,’ replied the Flying Dutchman, ‘porn fools!’ And he followed suit.

“But a thin white hand came down on the bits of colored pasteboard. It was our Lady. With her hair disordered, and the spots of fever in her cheeks, she stood among us again; but not as of old. Angry eyes confronted her, and Andy wrenched the cards from her grasp. ‘No, my Lady,’ he said, sternly; ‘never again!’

“The Lady gazed from one face to the next, and so all around the circle; all were dark and sullen. Then she bowed her head upon her hands and wept aloud.

“There was a sudden shrinking away on all sides, the players rose, the cards were dropped. But the Lady glided away, weeping as she went; she entered the church door and the men could see her taking her accustomed place on the platform. One by one they followed; Black Andy lingered till the last, but he came. The service began, and went on falteringly, without spirit, with palpable fears of a total breaking down which never quite came; the Nightingale sang almost alone, and made sad work with the words; Salem joined in confidently, but did not improve the sense of the hymn. The Lady was silent. But when the time for the sermon came she rose and her voice burst forth.

“‘Men, brothers, what have I done? A change has come over the town, a change has come over your hearts. You shun me! What have I done?’

“There was a grim silence; then the Doctor rose in his place and answered,—

“‘Only this, madam. You have shown yourself to be a woman.’

“‘And what did you think me?’

“‘A saint.’

“‘God forbid!’ said the Lady, earnestly. ‘I never thought myself one.’

“‘I know that well. But you were a saint to us; hence your influence. It is gone.’

“‘Is it all gone?’ asked the Lady, sadly.

“‘Yes. Do not deceive yourself; we have never been one whit better save through our love for you. We held you as something high above ourselves; we were content to worship you.’

“‘O no, not me!’ said the Lady, shuddering.

“‘Yes, you, you alone! But—our idol came down among us and showed herself to be but common flesh and blood! What wonder that we stand aghast? What wonder that our hearts are bitter? What wonder (worse than all!) that when the awe has quite vanished, there is strife for the beautiful image fallen from its niche?’

“The Doctor ceased, and turned away. The Lady stretched out her hands towards the others; her face was deadly pale, and there was a bewildered expression in her eyes.

“‘O, ye for whom I have prayed, for whom I have struggled to obtain a blessing,—ye whom I have loved so,—do *ye* desert me thus?’ she cried.

“‘*You* have deserted us,’ answered a voice.

“‘I have not.’

“‘You have,’ cried Black Andy, pushing to the front. ‘You love that Mitchell! Deny it if you dare!’

“There was an irrepressible murmur, then a sudden hush. The angry suspicion, the numbing certainty had found voice at last; the secret was out. All eyes, which had at first closed with the shock, were now fixed upon the solitary woman before them; they burned like coals.

“‘Do I?’ murmured the Lady, with a strange questioning look that turned from face to face,—‘do I?—Great God! I do.’ She sank upon her knees and buried her face in her trembling hands. ‘The truth has come to me at last,—I do!’

“Her voice was a mere whisper, but every ear heard it, and

every eye saw the crimson rise to the forehead and redden the white throat.

“For a moment there was silence, broken only by the hard breathing of the men. Then the Doctor spoke.

“‘Go out and bring him in,’ he cried. ‘Bring in this Mitchell! It seems he has other things to do,—the blockhead!’

“Two of the men hurried out.

“‘He shall not have her,’ shouted Black Andy. ‘My knife shall see to that!’ And he pressed close to the platform. A great tumult arose, men talked angrily and clinched their fists, voices rose and fell together. ‘He shall not have her,—Mitchell! Mitchell!’

“‘The truth is, each one of you wants her himself,’ said the Doctor.

“There was a sudden silence, but every man eyed his neighbor jealously. Black Andy stood in front, knife in hand, and kept guard. The Lady had not moved; she was kneeling, with her face buried in her hands.

“‘I wish to speak to her,’ said the Doctor, advancing.

“‘You shall not,’ cried Andy, fiercely interposing.

“‘You fool! I love her this moment ten thousand times more than you do. But do you suppose I would so much as touch a woman who loved another man?’

“The knife dropped; the Doctor passed on and took his place on the platform by the Lady’s side. The tumult began again, for Mitchell was seen coming in the door between his two keepers.

“‘Mitchell! Mitchell!’ rang angrily through the church.

“‘Look, woman!’ said the Doctor, bending over the kneeling figure at his side. She raised her head and saw the wolfish faces below.

“‘They have had ten months of your religion,’ he said.

“‘It was his revenge. Bitter, indeed; but he loved her.

“In the mean time the man Mitchell was hauled and pushed and tossed forward to the platform by rough hands that longed to throttle him on the way. At last, angry himself, but full of wonder, he confronted them, this crowd of comrades suddenly turned madmen! ‘What does this mean?’ he asked.

“‘Mean! mean!’ shouted the men; ‘a likely story! He asks what this means!’ And they laughed boisterously.

“The Doctor advanced. ‘You see this woman,’ he said.

“‘I see our Lady.’

“‘Our Lady no longer; only a woman like any other,—weak and fickle. Take her,—but begone.’

“‘Take her!’ repeated Mitchell, bewildered,—‘take our Lady! And where?’

“‘Fool! Liar! Blockhead!’ shouted the crowd below.

“‘The truth is simply this, Mitchell,’ continued the Doctor, quietly. ‘We herewith give you up our Lady,—ours no longer; for she has just confessed, openly confessed, that she loves you.’

“‘Mitchell started back. ‘Loves me!’

“‘Yes.’

“‘Black Andy felt the blade of his knife. ‘He ’ll never have her alive,’ he muttered.

“‘But,’ said Mitchell, bluntly confronting the Doctor, ‘I don’t want her.’

“‘You don’t want her?’

“‘I don’t love her.’

“‘You don’t love her?’

“‘Not in the least,’ he replied, growing angry, perhaps at himself. ‘What is she to me? Nothing. A very good missionary, no doubt; but *I* don’t fancy woman-preachers. You may remember that *I* never gave in to her influence; *I* was never under her thumb. *I* was the only man in Little Fishing who cared nothing for her!’

“‘And that is the secret of *her* liking,’ murmured the Doctor. ‘O woman! woman! the same the world over!’

“‘In the mean time the crowd had stood stupefied.

“‘He does not love her!’ they said to each other; ‘he does not want her!’

“‘Andy’s black eyes gleamed with joy; he swung himself up on to the platform. Mitchell stood there with face dark and disturbed, but he did not flinch. Whatever his faults, he was no hypocrite. ‘I must leave this to-night,’ he said to himself, and turned to go. But quick as a flash our Lady sprang from her knees and threw herself at his feet. ‘You are going,’ she cried. ‘I heard what you said,—you do not love me! But take me with you,—oh, take me with you! Let me be your servant—your slave—anything—anything, so that I am not parted from you, my lord and master, my only, only love!’

“She clasped his ankles with her thin, white hands, and laid her face on his dusty shoes.

“The whole audience stood dumb before this manifestation of a great love. Enraged, bitter, jealous as was each heart, there was not a man but would at that moment have sacrificed his own love that she might be blessed. Even Mitchell, in one of those rare spirit-flashes when the soul is shown bare in the lightning, asked himself, ‘Can I not love her?’ But the soul answered, ‘No.’ He stooped, unclasped the clinging hands, and turned resolutely away.

“‘You are a fool,’ said the Doctor. ‘No other woman will ever love you as she does.’

“‘I know it,’ replied Mitchell.

“He stepped down from the platform and crossed the church, the silent crowd making a way for him as he passed along; he went out into the sunshine, through the village, down towards the beach,—they saw him no more.

“The Lady had fainted. The men bore her back to the lodge and tended her with gentle care one week,—two weeks,—three weeks. Then she died.

“They were all around her; she smiled upon them all, and called them all by name, bidding them farewell. ‘Forgive me,’ she whispered to the Doctor. The Nightingale sang a hymn, sang as he had never sung before. Black Andy knelt at her feet. For some minutes she lay scarcely breathing; then suddenly she opened her fading eyes. ‘Friends,’ she murmured, ‘I am well punished. I thought myself holy,—I held myself above my kind,—but God has shown me I am the weakest of them all.’

“The next moment she was gone.

“The men buried her with tender hands. Then, in a kind of blind fury against Fate, they tore down her empty lodge and destroyed its every fragment; in their grim determination they even smoothed over the ground and planted shrubs and bushes, so that the very location might be lost. But they did not stay to see the change. In a month the camp broke up of itself, the town was abandoned, and the island deserted for good and all; I doubt whether any of the men ever came back or even stopped when passing by. Probably I am the only one. Thirty years ago,—thirty years ago!”

“That Mitchell was a great fool,” I said, after a long pause.

“The Doctor was worth twenty of him; for that matter, so was Black Andy. I only hope the fellow was well punished for his stupidity.”

“He was.”

“O, you kept track of him, did you?”

“Yes. He went back into the world, and the woman he loved repulsed him a second time, and with even more scorn than before.”

“Served him right.”

“Perhaps so; but after all, what could he do? Love is not made to order. He loved one, not the other; that was his crime. Yet,—so strange a creature is man,—he came back after thirty years, just to see our Lady’s grave.”

“What! Are you—”

“I am Mitchell,—Reuben Mitchell.”