

CHAPTER V.

THE WORK-FIELD REACHED.

THE next morning early found Esther and her companion on their way, and after a hard day's riding they approached what Mr. Simpson said was a cross-road, on entering which, he told Esther that they had only seven miles to go before they reached home. But such a seven miles! A plough had never been through here, she was informed, and readily believed, for stumps and stones of large size lay directly in the middle of the way; and if Esther had not been pretty courageous she might have feared an overturn.

The path seemed to her quite difficult to follow, and several openings, through which she had imagined that they must go, her companion informed her were logging roads, used only in the winter, and pointed out to her one or two fallen trees, which were intended as warnings to travellers not to enter there. They had, however, gone over so many trees, which Mr. Simpson had told her were "windfalls," that she had not supposed these were placed there intentionally. Her companion informed her that one of these roads led into a poke hogin, which he further explained, as a sort of quagmire, very easy to get into, but very difficult to leave.

The tall trees made the road seem very gloomy, and the two hours which it took to pass through this cross road seemed very long to Esther; and she rejoiced with her companion, when he pointed out to her a house, situated on a little hill, as his home. The lights which streamed from the windows seemed inviting them to hasten, and offering them welcome, and soon they halted before the door.

Loud shouts of "Father's come! Father's come!" were heard, as a troop of boys, of various sizes, rushed out, on hearing Mr. Simpson's sonorous "whoa!"

The greeting which the new comers received indoors was equally cordial, and Mrs. Simpson, with the assistance of a tall, awkward-looking girl, whom she called Elvira, soon had a smoking-hot supper prepared for them.

Esther was really very much fatigued, and her rough ride had given her an appetite, so that she readily agreed with Mr. Simpson, who declared himself "as hungry as a bear," and in thinking it a very nice supper.

Meanwhile the children kept running backwards and forwards, from the kitchen to the parlor (for these were the only apartments on the first floor), peeping curiously at Miss Hastings, and occasionally breaking into a low giggle outside of the door.

"Young uns, go to bed!" exclaimed Mrs. Simpson, as she nearly stumbled over the youngest, Sammy, as he was called. "You'll be the death of me yet! They fly round like a hen with her head cut off," she continued, to her husband; who replied, "Oh, wall,

young uns must be young uns ; taint no use trying to make old men and women on um."

Supper was soon over, and the dishes washed, for the latter was speedily accomplished by Mrs. Simpson and her brisk assistant, Elvira, and they seated themselves before the large fire-place, where huge logs of wood were crackling, with a pleasant, cheerful sound.

"Wall, you look most beat out, Miss Hastings," exclaimed Mrs. Simpson ; "p'raps you want to go to bed?"

Esther replied, that she was indeed very tired ; and Elvira at once arose, lighted a tallow candle, which reposed in an iron candlestick, and signified her readiness to show Esther her chamber.

Bidding the family good-night, they were ascending a flight of stairs, when Mrs. Simpson called after them, "to be sure and put the light out."

The staircase led into an unfinished chamber, where several beds were made upon the floor, and loud breathing denoted that they were already occupied. They passed silently along to the farther end of the apartment, where was a thin partition ; a patchwork quilt formed the door, which Elvira lifted, and they entered.

The room was unfinished, the boards of the floor rattled under their tread, and the light revealed rafters overhead ; a strip of rag carpeting was laid before the bed, which, with a few chairs, a rickety washstand, and a small table, over which hung a cracked looking-glass, comprised the furniture of the chamber.

Esther was about to bid her companion good-night, but saw that she was preparing to sleep with her ; and as she well knew that a request to be allowed a bed alone would only be set down as pride, and feeling herself above her companion, she said not a word.

Elvira was soon snugly ensconced in bed, and her curious black eyes watched closely all Esther's movements. Such close scrutiny was rather unpleasant, and Esther hesitated for a moment, whether to kneel in prayer before retiring ; but, despising herself, she did so, and after her devotions were concluded, as she was about to extinguish the candle, Elvira exclaimed, "Don't *blow* the light out, *put* it out."

"That was what I was going to do," replied Esther.

"No! no!" repeated Elvira ; "*set* it outside of the quilt for Miss Simpson ; she'll be up arter it in a few minutes."

Esther did as she was requested, and once in the good, comfortable bed, was soon fast asleep.

"Breakfast's most ready!" were the first sounds which greeted Esther's ears the following morning. "Hadn't you better be a gittin up?"

"Yes, Elvira," replied Esther, "I will be ready in a few moments." She soon found, however, that the washstand was merely intended for ornament, as there was no water in the pitcher ; and as Elvira had disappeared, she was obliged to defer her ablutions till she went below ; resolving, however, as Mrs. Simpson, in answer to her inquiries, pointed her to the sink in the kitchen, that she would effect a reform in this one particular, if in no other.

The table was already set, and Esther had hardly finished her ablutions when quite a number of men, dressed in red shirts, entered, headed by Mr. Simpson. These, Elvira told her, were the occupants of the beds on the floor, up stairs, as they were on their way to get things in readiness for logging operations in the winter. They had come up timber hunting, and had come out to the settlement to spend the night.

All now sat down to the table, upon which was a smoking brown bread loaf, and a large plate of pork, an equally large plate of beans, also another plate heaped with boiled potatoes, and still another, filled with warm biscuits. The ware was white, with blue edges, and everything looked bright and clean, except the knives, which appeared entirely unacquainted with brick-dust, or any similar polisher. The coffee looked very dark, and was rather thick. Esther soon found that its dark hue was not owing to its strength, but to its having been sweetened with molasses; as Mrs. Simpson said, she "alus biled in a cup of molasses, it made it so much better; but she didn't know as it was sweet enough for Miss Hastings," and offered her the bowl of molasses, to add a little more if necessary. This, Esther declined.

All at the table were now requested, by Mr. Simpson, "to take hold and help themselves," which they immediately did, helping themselves to butter with their own knives, and cutting the brown bread loaf in the same manner. Mrs. Simpson helped Esther, telling her "not to be bashful, and to make herself at home." With the exception of this remark, very lit-

tle was said by any one during the meal, which was speedily dispatched.

As it was Sunday morning, after breakfast was over, Esther inquired if there was to be a meeting in the vicinity.

"No," replied Mrs. Simpson, "we don't hev no preachin, except Elder Rider onct in a while, about onct in six weeks. They haint no stiddy meeting this side of Patten."

"I wisht they was," remarked Elvira, "for Sunday's a dreadful long day, with nothin to do, and the men-folks stragglin round in the way, most all the time."

Sol, the oldest hope of Mr. Simpson, a tall awkward boy of nineteen, now entered, saying, "Virey, where's my fishin line?"

"How do you spose I know," responded Elvira, rather tartly; "you're always leavin your traps round. I spose I tucked it into a box in the closet."

"Wall, wall, don't get mad, and snap a feller's head off," replied Sol, opening the closet door, and soon finding the missing line.

On looking out of the window, Esther saw, to her surprise, several men examining their guns, and one or two with fish-hooks and lines, as if preparing for sport.

"Where are these people going?" she asked of Elvira, as they started across the fields.

"Some on um gunnin, and some on um fishin," coolly answered Vira. "We don't know much about Sundays here," she continued, seeing Esther's look of surprise. "I'm going to clear up here a little," she

went on, "and then, if you're a mind to, I'll go in to some of the neighbors with you. Miss Simpson!" she called out, "come in here, and help me turn up the bed."

Mrs. Simpson obeyed the summons; and to Esther's surprise (for she had noticed the bed, but could not imagine what they were about to do), pulled the outer quilt down to the foot of the bed, and slowly lifted the bedstead till it rested against the wall, arranging the quilt so as to cover it quite nicely.

"Didn't you never see a turn-up bed afore?" she asked of Esther, who replied in the negative.

"Wall, they're mighty convenient things for folks that haint got much room."

Elvira had soon swept the apartment, and cleared up, as she called it, a process which Esther thought consisted in tucking everything out of sight, most of them going into the box where Sol had found his fishing line.

This finished, Elvira again offered to make some neighborly calls. This invitation Miss Hastings declined, but proposed taking a walk into the woods, which were now in all the glory of the Indian summer.

Elvira readily consented, taking a knife with her, as she said she wanted to "get some broom-stuff, for the broom she had now was a miserable thing, made of hemlock, and that wan't fit for nothin, they was so many sproozles. Cedar was the stuff for her."

They walked a short distance in silence, for Esther was absorbed in the beauty of the scenery. They were now in a rough road, which led directly through

the forest. The wind sighed through the branches, and the birds were singing their pleasantest songs; the faint drumming of the partridge was heard occasionally, and the quiet humming of insects, united with these sounds, forming one of those delightful melodies that a poet has so beautifully called "Nature's Voluntaries."

Crossing a gridiron bridge, as these rude structures of logs are called, which are laid in marshy spots, they soon came in full view of the Aroostook river, which flowed gently on, fringed by almost every variety of the undergrowth of the forest.

A beautiful meadow was formed there, which Elvira said was called an "*enterval*," further explaining that it was a tract of land which, during the spring freshet, was overflowed and much enriched by this temporary deluge.

"So do the waters of affliction, flowing over it, enrich the heart," thought Esther, for it was a habit of her mind to seek analogies between the material and the spiritual world.

"Is that an island opposite?" she asked, of her companion.

"Oh, no; that's the main land. You see this river crooks round like, and makes what they call the ox-bow. We are in the ox-bow now. You've seen an ox-yoke, haint you? so you know now what shape this ere land is. Folks say you can see Katahdin from here; p'raps you can."

Esther looked fixedly in the direction indicated by

Elvira, and either saw, or imagined she did, the misty outline of that high and snow-capped peak.

Her heart glowed with pride in her native State as she stood there. She felt as if she would challenge the world to produce a wilder, and yet more quietly beautiful scene, than that on which she gazed; and this was but one, and by no means the most beautiful view that she had seen in Maine. Here was all the glory of Vermont's forests and hills, and, added to that, the river, which lends so much beauty to any landscape. The purity of an Italian sky, with, if travellers say aright, greater and more beautiful changes.

She thought of the rocky shores of the upper Penobscot, and its frequent rapids, as it flows towards the sea, gaining, like the human character, new strength from the obstacles which it encounters; and, flowing in a deeper and calmer current, ever onward to the sea, as does our life river mingle at last with eternity's ocean.

But her mind was recalled from the various pictures that memory was summoning before her, dissimilar indeed in their character, yet alike in the silent lessons of truth and beauty which they teach, by the voice of Vira, who asked, abruptly, "Be you a professor?"

"Yes," replied Esther, who understood the technical term which most of the backwoods people apply to Christians.

"Wall, I thought you was, when I see you kneel last night," returned Elvira.

"And do you never ask God's protection through

the night, and his forgiveness for your sins through the day?" asked Esther.

"Wall, no, I aint apt to," replied Vira. "I spose I'd orter, but folks don't alus do as well as they know."

"That is very true, Elvira," said Esther; "still it is no excuse for us, when we do wrong, that others do the same. I hope," she continued, "that you will begin to do what you know is right, in this one thing at least."

Several children now scampered by, looking back shyly. "Whose children are those?" asked Miss Hastings.

"Oh! some on um's Emery's, and some on um's Haley's; they're alus racing round, all over the lot, Sundays."

Esther made no reply, but mentally resolved that she would attempt to make a slight reform in this manner of spending the Sabbath. A Sunday school she determined to establish, if possible; and, building many a pleasant air-castle, she returned to the house.