

Roger Burford Mason

The Beaver Picture

"Albert, you will write?"

It was an instruction rather than a question, which the man leaning out of the carriage window answered with a nod.

"As often as I can my dear," he said.

"Once a month shouldn't be too difficult," the young woman said tartly.

"And what about you, Amy? You'll write too?"

He rummaged in the pockets of his heavy Norfolk jacket for his pipe and tobacco pouch, and when he found them, began to pack his thick, dark, tobacco into the bowl of the pipe.

"When I get your address over there," she said. "And you needn't light that smelly thing up now. Wait 'til you're on your own."

Behind her, a small boy and girl were standing in bright sunshine against the brick wall of the station.

"I haven't seen a train before," the little girl said.

Her brother stopped picking moss from between the crumbling yellow bricks.

"That's because you're too young," he said. "I've seen them lots of times."

"Will we go on the train, when we go to Canada?" she asked.

"We'll have to," he said. "That's how you get there."

She skipped over to her mother and stood looking up at the carriage window.

"Daddy, when we come to Canada, we'll come on this train, won't we?"

He seemed startled to hear her voice.

"You will, you will my girl," he said, taking his unlit pipe from his mouth. "And when it stops, over there, I'll be waiting to meet you."

He smiled and winked.

"Adelaide," the girl's mother said sharply, "I think I told you to stand by the wall with your brother."

The little girl frowned.

"I forgot," she said.

Her mother looked sternly at her, and then at the wall where the boy stood with his hands over his eyes, peeping through his fingers at the bright sky. The little girl looked at her father, and then went slowly back to join her brother.

"Don't be too hard on them Amy," the man said with a sigh. "It's a difficult time for them. Who knows what they're thinking."

She looked at him for a moment, a look empty of feeling.

"I think I know how to bring up children Albert," she said icily. "And since it is to be left to me for the foreseeable future . . ."

"By your own wish," he interrupted.

". . . I imagine I shall have to do what is necessary, won't I?"

Albert Mays and Amy Campbell had married on a Saturday in February in 1909. They had met the previous spring when he had moved to the town to manage a printing works, and had begun attending the church where her family had owned a named pew for more than one hundred years.

Albert, the first eligible bachelor to have joined the congregation for many years, and an independent and determined Amy, seemed drawn to each other by a mutual interest. From his first tentative addresses at the church door after morning service, it had been only a month until she had forced her mother and father to invite Albert to join them for Sunday dinner, and shortly after that, the two had begun to walk out. They were married before each found the other to be more, and less, than what they had imagined.

Where, during their courtship, Albert had found Amy's wit and quick tongue engaging, in marriage he found her sharp-tongued and difficult to please. She took slight easily, and nursed grudges, and was constantly critical of his dress and manners, in both of which, she felt, he failed to

live up to the standards she thought appropriate for people in their position in society.

For her part, volatile and opinionated herself, Amy quickly grew irritated with her husband's easygoing, phlegmatic nature. He would never get on, never be more than someone else's manager, she told him scornfully, unless he developed more "push."

By the time there were two children, their marriage had become a formal arrangement of church attendance, an annual holiday beside the sea, and the quotidian life of two yoked, but not interdependent, people. When he stopped going to church and began to attend Masonic functions, she stopped eating with him: When he began to drink in the evenings, either at home, or with his friends at the pub near his printing works, and sometimes in both places, she moved into the spare bedroom of the villa her father had given them as a wedding present.

Consequently, when he agreed to her suggestion that he should emigrate to Canada and try to build a new life for them, it came as a relief to them both. As he made his arrangements—he intended to go first, to find work and establish a home, and then to send for them—they became more civil to each other than they had been since the early days of the marriage, each seeing their impending separation as offering different benefits.

"Mind the doors, please," the stationmaster shouted, as he made his way along the platform.

Though she had not been close to the carriage door, Amy stepped back automatically.

"Here we go then," Albert said.

Amy said nothing, and ignored the hand he held out towards her.

"Children," she called, turning towards them. "Come and say goodbye to your father."

The children ran to her side.

"Goodbye papa," Edward said gravely. "I hope you have a comfortable and interesting voyage."

His father smiled to realize they had both prepared speeches for each other.

"Thank you Edward, and you be a good boy. You'll have to be the man about the house, so be very good to your mama, won't you. And don't forget to work hard and do well at school. Canada is just the place for a bright, well-educated young man to make his mark."

While he spoke, Adelaide stood waiting patiently. Now he turned his smile to her and impulsively, she jumped on the step of the carriage and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I wish you didn't have to go, papa."

"Adelaide." Her mother lifted her off the step. "You silly goose."

She held the little girl up so that she could kiss her father.

"Stand back now," the stationmaster called down the platform. He blew his whistle and waved a flag, the train shuddered like a beast awakening, and then slid forward easily. In seconds, Albert's carriage was moving smoothly away, and in less than a minute, the train had taken the shallow bend beyond the station and his fluttering handkerchief was lost to sight.

Riding to the station and back into town in a cab was a treat that the children had looked forward to. Neither had ever ridden in an automobile before, though there had been some half-hearted talk of their father's buying one at one time. As they made their way past familiar landmarks, Edward wished aloud that some of his school friends could see him.

"Ostentation," his mother said. "I hate it."

Edward had been pressing his nose against the window as he described to Adelaide, seated between him and his mother, what he could see in the streets through which they were passing. Now he turned to give his mother a puzzled look.

"What does it mean, mama, 'ostentation?'"

She looked at him as if she was going to explain the word, and then bent to busy herself with the lace of one of Adelaide's boots, which was hanging loose.

"Keep your laces tight Adelaide," she said. "Or you may trip and fall, and hurt yourself."

There *had* been a time, a year or two earlier, when Albert had mentioned that he thought buying an automobile might be a good idea. It would enable him to travel further afield to drum up orders for the printing company, and it would certainly make him look more impressive, and the company more prosperous. Into the bargain, at the weekends they could all go for drives in the country, and have picnics, and visit relatives.

The automobile had been one scheme, and there had been others—buying a chicken farm; starting his own printing business;

becoming a partner in a road haulage company which a Masonic acquaintance intended to start, long-distance road transport obviously being the coming thing;—but she, and behind her, her father, had poured cold water on them all, unable to believe that he could profit from any venture that they had not suggested. In three years, Albert had brought home five or six proposals which he had thought to be sound business propositions, only to have her argue him out of them, while she and her father, in their turn, had made several proposals of their own which he, out of pride, had refused to consider.

It was to be a day of treats, Edward thought as he followed his mother and Adelaide through the big, almost-empty, dining room of the George Hotel. Probably to make up for their father's having left them.

The waitress led them to a table for four, taking away one of the table settings as they settled into their seats.

"We aren't going to make a habit of this," their mother said. "But it's a kind of celebration, isn't it?"

Adelaide looked grave.

"Are we celebrating because papa has gone to Canada?"

"No, Goose," her mother said, tucking a crisp, white napkin into the collar of her frock. "Not his *going*, but the fact that it is the first step in a new life for us all."

Edward looked round the dining room. Having lunch in a hotel was another first for him, and he wanted to take in every detail so that he could put it all down in his diary. The window beyond them looked out onto a corner of the market place. Being Tuesday, and not, therefore, market day, it was empty, but he could easily imagine what it would be like to look out of the window on a Saturday morning and see the square alive and noisy with cattle and chickens, and watch the toing and froing of the country people who filled the town on Saturdays.

His studying gaze took in the grand piano at the far end of the room, and the garish pictures of hunting scenes on the dining room walls, and he tried to examine the individuals in the two or three other groups seated at lunch in the echoing room without seeming impertinent, but when one bluff-looking man returned his stare with a scowl, Edward hurriedly turned his attention to his mother and sister.

Their mother had ordered for them all and now the waitress had brought bowls of brown soup and a salver of bread cut into thick slices.

"Isn't that papa's people," Edward said to his mother, directing her attention to a carved wooden sign on the wall above their table.

She followed his pointing finger and took in the plaque, which was decorated with Masonic symbols and said that Lodge 311 met at the hotel the third Friday of every month.

"I suppose it is," she said without enthusiasm. She shook Edward's napkin out for him and tucked it into his collar. "But I don't suppose he'll be cavorting with them any more."

"This is turning out to be a treat day Edward, isn't it?"

Edward was holding Adelaide's hand firmly as she led him through the store.

"Riding in the cab, and then having dinner at the hotel," she chattered happily. "And now we can spend a whole half-hour in the toy place."

They crossed the store, through racks of clothes, and shelves full of plates and saucepans and kitchen utensils, to a small flight of stairs, which they mounted quickly to a single room of books and toys and things for children.

There was nobody in the toy room but themselves.

"May we touch the toys, do you think?" Adelaide whispered.

"Probably not," Edward whispered back. "Just stand in front of them and look at them."

Adelaide pouted.

"There's not much fun in that," she whispered.

Suddenly a young woman appeared at a door they had not noticed between two tall shelves.

"May I help you, children?"

Edward stepped forward a pace, to establish himself as being in charge, but it was Adelaide who spoke.

"We're having a treat," she said. "But it won't be much fun if we can't touch them."

The young woman smiled, and looked at Edward for explanation.

"She means she would like to pick up some of the things and see what they do," he said, and then added. "It's her treat to spend half an hour in the toy department."

The young woman looked them both over—to see if she can trust us, Edward thought—and then nodded.

"You can't get a good look at them if you don't pick them up, can you?"

She stepped into the room and took Adelaide by the hand.

"Wouldn't you like to hold one of the dolls?"

She steered the willing little girl to the dolls, while Edward went to look at the clockwork train, and the model farm, which he remembered from their previous visit to the toy room at Christmas.

Having made a few necessary purchases, Amy was giving herself a treat. She loved to embroider, and it was her idea of relaxation to sit by the fire in the evenings to sew a pattern. On a shelf in her kitchen cupboard she had a box of colored threads—brilliant greens and golds, rich, deep reds, and vibrant blues and yellows—and just spreading them out on the kitchen table gave her immense pleasure. Indeed, when she was unhappy, or tired, simply looking at her silks could revive her spirits.

She stood beside a stack of fabric squares, cushion covers with coarsely-printed pictures, which were stacked neatly, one on top of the other, so that all she had to do was peel each one back halfway to see what pattern lay beneath it. She had done the country cottage with flowers round the door, and the galleon sailing into the sunset, and she didn't like the flower-girl with her basket of rioting flowers, so she folded them back quickly as she came to them. She didn't have any clear idea of what it was she was looking for, but she knew it would have to be something special. Something which, in the future, she would remember starting on the day her husband went away.

"Hello Mrs. Mays. God be with you in your troubles."

Amy looked round, startled, into the sympathetic face of her neighbor, Mrs. Attlee.

"Good afternoon Mrs. Attlee," she said stiffly. "I was not aware that I had any troubles."

Though they lived next door to each other, and pretended to be neighborly, neither liked the other enough to be more than civil. Amy found the Attlee woman nosy and false; Mrs. Attlee resented Amy's educated manner and her unwillingness to gossip, both of which seemed to her like haughtiness, though with a husband who drank, and probably worse, she thought that Amy had nothing to be proud about.

"I saw you and the little ones going off with Mr. Mays," she said, sighing as if the departure were her own sorrow. "It'll be many a long month before you four sit down to dinner together again, I'll be bound."

Amy looked at her balefully.

"Of course it will," she said, speaking as if she were explaining something simple to a very stupid person. "Canada is a very long way away you know."

Mrs. Attlee recognized the insult and drew her lips into a thin line.

"Well, at least with him over there," she said, "that'll be some of the weight off your mind."

She smiled maliciously at Amy.

"A weight off my mind, Mrs. Attlee?" Amy said coldly. "I'm not at all sure I understand your meaning."

She turned her back squarely towards Mrs. Attlee and picked up the corner of a cushion pattern.

But she did know. Once, when Albert had come home drunk from a Masonic function one evening, he had barely managed to stumble through the garden gate and up the veranda steps before he had fallen over and passed out. Though she had heard him, she had made no effort to bring him inside, and he had spent the whole night in a drunken sleep in front of his own front door. Mrs. Attlee, an early riser, had found him there the following morning at a quarter to six and had taken pleasure in knocking to wake Amy, pretending solicitousness, but smiling her mocking, canting smile.

"I expect you'll be packing and the like soon?"

"All in good time, Mrs. Attlee," Amy said. "I'll be sure to tell you when I begin."

She felt Mrs. Attlee's animosity at her back.

"Please don't let me keep you," she said, without turning round. Behind her, Mrs. Attlee seemed about to reply, but then turned on her heel and stalked away.

Amy was surprised to see that her hand was trembling as she held the corner of a cushion cover.

"Insufferable woman," she said to herself as she turned a hessian square back.

And then she found the beaver picture, as the children came to call it, and realized that it was exactly what she wanted.

The children were in bed and the house was still and quiet, as if breathing lightly after the day's exertions. Amy sat for a while in her chair by the fire, staring at the glowing coals and reviewing the day. It pleased her that she felt neither lonely, nor afraid of being alone, for though they were conditions Albert's life in recent years had accustomed her to, in those days she had known he would be home eventually—he was absent rather than gone. But from the moment his train had disappeared from view, she had felt truly alone, and it did not concern her at all.

She shook her head slightly, as if to shake those thoughts from it, and went to the cupboard to take out her embroidery box. Returning with it to the kitchen table, she unrolled the cushion cover and spread it out.

The hessian square was crudely printed with the outline of a beaver, sitting upright on a log, with a scene of water and trees behind it. Beneath the picture, ornate script spelled out the legend, *The beaver, symbol of Canadian industry and ingenuity*. She studied it for a while, the faintest of smiles illuminating her habitually serious face, and then began to lay out the skeins of silken thread, offering the various colors to the different parts of the picture, testing one against another, composing the finished picture in her mind as she matched its elements. Her choices made, she selected a needle and threaded it with royal blue, and then sat back in her chair with the embroidery on her knee.

. . . arrived here after an uneventful and, for the most part, quiet voyage. The Bay of Biscay was very rough and a lot of the fellows with us were quite ill, though not I.

I am writing this to you from Montreal. I have been here a few days now and it is a very lively town. Bustling, you might even say, though there seems to be a lot of strain between the English contingent and their French neighbors. I will probably not stay here, but head for Toronto, where I understand there is much more work to be had in my line. I made enquiries today and there are regular trains between the two cities, though I must say that in spite of being at sea for so long, I rather fancy taking a steamer down the river and through Lake Ontario instead. It would certainly take longer, but I think it would be much more fun. The lodge in Montreal, to which I repaired almost as soon as I was off the ship, will put me in touch with the Toronto lodge, which is a very big

one, I understand. That should be a big help; you know how these things work . . .

There were some delicate and personal matters in Albert's letter, which had arrived almost exactly a month after he had left England, and Amy read aloud just those parts of it she thought appropriate as the children sat at the kitchen table in their night clothes.

"So as you can see," she said, looking at them in turn over the top of her spectacles. "Papa, has begun his new life in Canada."

"I'll bet the boat trip was fun," Edward said. "I can't wait to see what it's like."

He turned to his sister.

"Imagine, a terrible storm in the Bay of Biscay. Would you like that Adelaide? Would you like being buffeted about in waves as big as the house?"

Adelaide looked at him with wide eyes and shook her head.

"Will I be ill too, mama?"

Her mother looked sternly at the boy.

"Pipe down Edward," she said sharply. "Don't go scaring your sister with your wild imagination."

"But papa said," Edward protested. "In his letter . . ."

"That's enough," his mother said. She turned to her daughter. "I'm sure the sea is usually calm," she said. "Much more often than it is stormy."

The children went to bed and she went upstairs to tuck them in and read them a story, a new development which they all enjoyed, though it was something she had never done before their father left.

Back in her chair by the kitchen fire, she took up the letter again. Re-reading the passages she had not read aloud to the children, passages in which Albert had written with warm memories of the early years of their marriage, she felt tears welling up in her eyes, but she wiped them away fiercely with the back of her hand.

"Not for you, Albert Mays," she said aloud. "I won't cry; not for you."

She went to the cupboard and took down her embroidery box.

The water—contrasting areas of dark and light blue, streaked with white and cream—was complete, and she had started on the trees and rocks which made up the background.

She made tiny, perfectly even stitches, passing the needle backwards and forwards through the hessian with quick stabs as the trunk of a tree grew under her fingers. Scarcely seeing what she was doing, though never for a moment losing control of it, her mind returned to Albert's letter. She wondered about Toronto, wondered if it were like Birmingham, or London, with cars and trams, and factory whistles. Wondered how you would live so far from all you had ever known.

Despite her instructions to him at the train, Albert did not write every month, and it was two months before she received another letter from him, from Toronto, where he gave her the name of a hotel as his new address.

After his first letter had arrived, the children had spoken of little other than Canada for perhaps a week, imagining aloud when they would go, and what their lives would be like there. But by the middle of the second week they had tired of the topic, and within a month, they had stopped speaking of it, or their father, altogether. By the time his letter came from Toronto, they had not mentioned him, Canada, nor his absence, for nearly six weeks, and Amy thought it wiser not to disturb the equilibrium they had established by reading his letter to them, or even by letting them know of its arrival.

The Albert of this, his second letter, sounded distant, though it was nothing concrete which gave Amy this impression. Rather, among the welter of information about his new job, and what the city was like, and how easygoing and hardworking his Canadian workmates were, Amy detected a new and jaunty boldness which was, for someone like Albert, a kind of liberation.

I'm getting along famously, you'll be glad to know. The hotel is clean and quiet and does a good breakfast and evening meal, and Devereaux's is a modern shop with all the latest equipment—you'd be pushed to find its like with most printers in England. Of course, I'm not manager, nor won't be for some time yet, I'd say. Though old Mr. D. spoke quite warmly to me last week and said he'd been told how things had been improving with the comps and stone hands since I was appointed. I flatter myself I'm good going between the men and the front office, so I manage to get things done properly, and without a lot of hurly-burly. Last week the comps were going to walk off the job because of the dust coming

down from upstairs, where they were restacking the paper warehouse, but I got them to stay at their randoms for a couple of cents an hour extra. Of course, it was to be just for the duration, but everyone seemed pleased to have it resolved without unpleasantness. Even Mr. Parizeau, who told me my first day he didn't like what he calls "Anglos," had to admit I hadn't done a bad job. I'm not sure how long he'll be with us. I don't think the Devereauxs like his attitude too much, so if I can keep things rolling and the jobs coming off the presses, who knows . . .

As to a house, my dear, I have been looking, but without much success. It will not be a quick nor an easy job, to find somewhere for our little family to be together again. I'm keen to try and find something close to the lake, which is an awe-inspiring sight. The children will love to run and play on the beach, and you will be able to have flowers and vegetables in your garden, though be warned, what grows well in England won't necessarily survive the extremes here. It gets bitterly cold in winter I'm told, what with the wind whipping in off the lake.

There were some more sentences which Amy read with a stony face, and then,

. . . so keep a stiff upper lip and encourage the children to read all they can about this country. They ought to try and know as much as they can before they arrive; it would be very useful, though the schools here run very much on "old country" lines, as I understand it. Please remember me to them, with my love. Perhaps you could get them to write when you do. You did say you'd write regularly, but perhaps you've been too busy?

Amy put the letter down on the table and bent over her embroidery, her head only inches from it, as the daylight faded. When she could no longer see what she was doing, she lit the oil lamp which stood at the centre of the table and sat back for a moment, renewing the pleasure its spreading, yellowing light always gave her.

As the silent evening progressed, the tiny, perfect stitches grew under her hand as she worked on foliage which was a miracle of light and shade. By the time she packed her work away to make her supper, she had finished almost half the pattern. The water seemed alive with rills

and ripples, lapping against rocks as old as time itself, while the wiry jack pine she had recently completed seemed the very spirit of tenacity.

She sat sipping her cocoa and spread the cushion cover in her lap to survey it. What she had done pleased her very much and she contemplated her next task, the long, intricate embroidery of the beaver itself. A mixture of shades of brown, with some white, and perhaps a thread or two of gold, she thought, would be enough to bring it alive in the same way the scenery had taken on vitality from her careful use of color.

Idly, as she planned her approach to the beaver, she picked up Albert's letter and then began to read it again, but after a few paragraphs, she threw it back onto the table with an impatient gesture and thereafter, ignored it completely until she stood to put her work away, when she folded the letter into a small rectangle and put it in the bottom of her button box, where his first letter had been since shortly after it had arrived.

After his departure, she had moved back into the master bedroom. That night, before she got into the big, rattling bed they had shared until she changed rooms, she took their wedding photograph off the bedside table at his side of the bed, where it had stood since they had moved into the house, and put it on her dresser, at the back, behind her pots and lotions. Only by looking over the top of them could she see it, and even then, he was almost totally obscured.

For some time after that evening, Amy did no work on the beaver picture, though the children often asked her to take it out and show it to them.

"We'll probably go to Canada when the beaver picture is finished," Edward frequently proposed to Adelaide, and while his mother neither agreed nor disagreed with his assessment, she smiled at the neatness of the analogy he was creating.

What kept her from her embroidery was the holiday her father and mother insisted she and the children share with them. He had owned a house in Wales, overlooking the Irish Sea, since Amy and her sister had been small children, where the whole family had spent summer vacations which Amy remembered as times of complete happiness. She had not been there since she and Albert had married, but from the moment his son-in-law had left England, her father had pestered Amy to agree to join

them in August for the habitual two weeks which had once been the warmly-remembered family vacation.

And it had been as wonderful as Amy remembered. Their mornings and afternoons had been occupied with long walks on the cliffs which towered over three broad bays, and along the shore where the children had paddled in rock pools and collected shells, and after her mother had gone to bed in the middle of the evening, Amy and her father had sat long into the night, talking, and listening to the sea crashing on the rocks below the house.

Sitting together companionably, as they had always done in the years before the marriage, their conversations would range widely, for Amy's father had never sought to underestimate or patronize women. But as the two weeks diminished to one, and then to a few days, he would increasingly try to steer the conversation around to the subject of her impending emigration with the children, always questioning whether Albert would ever manage to make the kind of life for them in Canada that he could invite them to join.

Amy had not given him any hint that she shared his doubts, answering him every time with the same reassurances, and gently deflecting his unsubtle invitations to consider refusing to go by reminding him of a wife's duty, and the undoubted need of the children to be reunited with their father. She had not told him that they had not mentioned their father for nearly three months, nor that she had stopped reading their father's letters to them.

She was in the cramped little kitchen of the cottage, helping her mother to prepare lunch, on the last day of their holiday. Conversation with her mother had never been easy because it had never developed into an exchange of equals. To her mother, Amy was always a child, dependent on her parents for ideas as much as everything else. Now, with the holiday drawing to a close and an unimaginable separation looming, her mother was both distant and touchy, hiding her feelings behind sharp words and finicking criticism of the way Amy was doing things. And then suddenly, as she was standing at the sink, tears had begun to roll down her cheeks and she had cried noiselessly.

At first Amy had stood helplessly watching, afraid of her mother's grief, but then she had put down the cutlery she had collected to set the table, and had gone to hold her.

But she found that she had no comforting words for her. Instead, she stood inertly with her arms around her mother, saying mechanically, "Don't cry. Please don't cry."

Once, when they had been children, Amy's father had taken her and her sister to the museum of natural history in Birmingham. Among the stuffed animals, the skeletons, and the dioramas of birds in their habitat, what had impressed Amy most had been the drawers upon drawers of moths, butterflies and insects, and particularly some beetles, she had seen, trapped in amber or resin of some kind, and she had marvelled at their having been preserved for millions of years looking exactly as they had looked at the moment they had died.

That discovery came to mind now, only she felt that it was the two of them—she and her mother—who were trapped in a perfect moment, from which they could neither of them break free, while all the influences of the outside world were concentrated into the cry of gulls and the surge of the sea on the rocks, which they could always hear inside the cottage.

"Mama! Grandmama! Come and see what Edward has made!"

Adelaide, dressed in a green woollen bathing suit, her skin shining, and as brown as a nut, was calling to them before she was halfway to the back door from the gate which led to the path down to the beach. Amy and her mother drew apart without a word, and Amy's mother picked up a towel to dab her eyes. By the time Adelaide came bursting into the kitchen, repeating her call, but now including her grandfather in it too, mother and daughter were at opposite sides of the small kitchen, studiously engaged in domestic chores.

"What has Edward made," Amy said, forcing a smile. "It's almost lunchtime, so perhaps it could wait."

"No, it can't."

Adelaide was adamant, taking her mother by the hand to drag her out of the kitchen.

"You too, Grandmama," she said eagerly. "You must come. And Grandpapa."

Overriding their objections, she gathered the three adults and led them, protesting good-humoredly, down the path to the beach.

"What is it that we are coming to see?"

"It's a secret Grandpapa," Adelaide said, clutching his hand. "It's a treat for mama."

When they reached the beach there was no sign of Edward.

"Adelaide." Her mother's tone carried an unspoken warning. "I hope you are not wasting our time."

She looked around.

"Where is Edward?"

Adelaide laughed.

"There!"

She pointed, and then they say him.

Some gnarled lengths of driftwood rose vertically from among a pile of boulders and Edward, his body darkened by sand, crouched in front of them.

"It's the beaver picture," Amy shouted, jumping up and down in her excitement.

The children returned to school in September and life resumed its familiar pattern. Albert had been gone for six months and Amy had received six letters, two having arrived within days of each other after her return from Wales.

In the first letter, he had described Toronto, and his life there. It was hot and humid in the city for most of the summer; he often went swimming in the lake after work, and sometimes went to a ball game, though it was hard to follow. Saturday afternoons, he went walking with a group of men in the valleys and ravines which carved through the city, and on Sundays he had his Sunday dinner at a small dining room which was owned by a couple who had emigrated to Canada from a village in England close to the one he had grown up in. In closing, he had chided her for her not writing to him—she had written only two letters to his five, he pointed out.

Later, as she sat embroidering, she suddenly stopped and put her work down. Taking up the letter and rereading it from beginning to end, she confirmed the idea which had suddenly come to her as she stitched. It was the first letter in which he had made no mention of the children.

Albert's sixth letter, which arrived a few days later, rectified the omission of the previous one insofar as he asked after the children and hoped they were getting on well at school. It was, Amy perceived, almost a formality, lost as it was amid paragraphs about his work, his discovery of the city, and the increasing conviction he had that this had been the best move he had ever made in his life.

I now take my midday meals at the Weatherheads' diner (as Canadians call these little restaurants) every day except Saturday. I can see you shaking your head at my extravagance Amy, but it isn't really. A week or two ago I happened to mention that I was still living in a hotel, having been unable to find suitable accommodations, and Mr. Weatherhead offered to rent me the spare room in their apartment above the diner. They are very kind and sociable people, and it is certainly much nicer to be there than in the hotel where I have been living. I pay them my weekly rent and that includes midday dinner each day at a rate far below what it would cost if I were paying them for each meal. Knowing that I am away from home and family, they often invite me to join them in their sitting room, and then we play cards, or Mrs. W. sings and I play the piano—though you will remember how badly I do that! They have a daughter, Rachel, who looks on me as quite the jovial uncle, and I am teaching her to sing a little too. She is very attentive. She only has to see me come in and sit down in the diner, and she insists on taking my order and serving me. We chat, and I tell her about England, and we get along famously, though she is sometime quite silly.

In November, Edward caught influenza and became very ill. The doctor was worried that Adelaide might catch it too, and so she was sent to stay with Amy's sister. For the next three weeks, Amy spent long nights nursing her son, sitting at his bedside for hour after hour, stitching in the light of the flickering candle, and days trying to tempt him to eat and drink, for the doctor had prescribed fluids as frequently as Edward would take them.

Day after day, night after night, as the boy's breathing labored, and she bathed his face and arms with a cool flannel, or brought him tidbits of food and beakers of milk, the beaver picture developed steadily, the shadows of the animal's muscles and sinews filling in, the plump body rounding out.

One night, Edward woke and sat bolt upright in bed.

"Papa, wait for me," he called in a strong voice.

He fell asleep again immediately, but Amy was terrified by the brief illumination of his febrile mind. For half an hour she could barely control her shaking hands, and then she put away her embroidery and wrote a long letter to her husband.

From that moment, Edward began to shake off the influenza, but he remained weak throughout the winter and could not return to school, though once the danger of contagion was over, Adelaide returned from her aunt's.

Albert had written once since his letter in September had spoken of his moving to the Weatherheads' apartment, a letter which had intensified Amy's sense that he was changing in ways she could not quite describe. He wrote almost exclusively about himself and his experiences, and of his feeling increasingly at home in Toronto. He regretted that he had not gone to Canada years before, for he felt he had lost a lot of ground to men of his age who were ahead of him in consideration, but nowhere did he mention the children, and neither did he reply to the issues Amy had raised in the letter she had written on the night of Edward's crisis.

At Christmas he sent a card, but did not write, and then there was nothing until late in March, by which time Edward was fully recovered and working hard in the evenings to make up for the classes he had missed during his winter of illness.

Much against her father's will, Amy had decided to find a job. It had become more than clear that the possibility of a quick removal to Toronto was no longer to be entertained—none of Albert's letters suggested even a small chance of their being reunited in Canada in any determinate time—and since he sent no money to her from Toronto, claiming that he needed everything he earned to live and to save for a house, Amy and the children were forced to rely on her father's support which, though willingly given, seemed an incursion against her that made her chafe.

One afternoon at the end of a raw and depressing March day, Amy returned by bus from Birmingham, where she had successfully attended an interview for a position in a welfare organization for distressed miners and their families.

The bus stop was at the corner of her street, just a few steps from her house, but by the time she had let herself in and lit the oil lamp on the kitchen table to illuminate the small room, she was thoroughly cold and felt damp through to her bones.

She took off her hat and coat, folding her gloves neatly and tucking them into her coat pocket. It was 4 p.m. and the children were due home from school at any moment, so she rolled up her long sleeves, riddled yesterday's ashes out of the firepit, and lit a new fire with the twigs and

kindling wood Edward always left in the fire bucket before he went to school in the morning.

When the fire had taken hold, she filled the smoke-blackened kettle at the top and put it on the hob to boil for tea. She had washed her hands and begun to set the table for supper when she heard Edward letting himself in the front door, talking noisily with Adelaide.

The children came through into the kitchen and greeted their mother boisterously.

"Mr. McKenna, my teacher, says it will snow before the weekend," Edward said. "That will be good won't it Adel. We shall be able to sled down Hollow Hill."

He threw a letter down on the table.

"This was on the doormat, Mama," he said.

She glanced at them. He had not even remarked that the envelope bore a Canadian stamp.

"I have to do my homework," he said. "If you make a cup of tea, shall Adelaide bring me one upstairs?"

Adelaide pouted.

"I'm not your servant," she snapped.

But her mother touched her arm.

"Adelaide, say sorry to Edward. That was not nice."

Adelaide smiled broadly.

"I'm sorry Edward," she said mischievously. "That was not nice."

Edward stuck his tongue out at her and disappeared to his room with his satchel, while Adelaide helped her mother to prepare the supper table, fetching knives and forks and setting out the water glasses.

"This letter is from papa, isn't it?" she said, picking up the envelope and showing it to her mother.

Amy paused, wondering what her daughter was thinking, and then she nodded noncommittally.

"Are you getting very impatient to go to Canada?" she asked gently.

Adelaide looked at her mother and then at the envelope.

"No," she said suddenly, flipping the letter back where she had found it. "Not at all. I almost don't think I'll go."

Amy was surprised, but said nothing.

After supper, they played snap and patience, and then, just before bedtime, Amy told them she had a surprise for them.

She made them sit at the kitchen table in their chairs, while she went to the cupboard and took out her embroidery box.

She put the roll of hessian on the table.

"It's the beaver picture," Adelaide said, clapping her hands. "Is it finished mama? Do show it to us."

Amy unrolled the picture slowly. First the tops of the trees appeared, beautifully embroidered and looking for all the world as if their foliage was dappled by sunlight and shifting in the breeze. Then the dun-colored, veined rocks began to appear, lapped by the vivid, shifting blue water, and finally the beaver itself, seated on its haunches and looking directly out of the picture, from its intelligent head with its bright eye, to its long, flat, muscular-looking tail.

"Mama, it's beautiful," Edward said. "Look Adel. Look at how tiny the stitches are."

Adelaide leaned forwards and brushed her fingertips across the beaver's body.

"It feels like real fur," she said at last.

Amy brimmed with pleasure at their praise.

"It's not quite finished," she said, amid their protests that it looked perfectly complete. "I just have to sew in a little blue bead for its eye, and I bought that this afternoon while I was in the city."

They discussed what should happen with the picture when it was truly finished. Adelaide wanted her mother to frame it and hang it; Edward, to complete the cushion and have it on his father's chair beside the kitchen range, which he had recently adopted as his own. By bedtime they had not decided, and their mother said that she, in any case, would have the final say.

By the time Amy had read the children a story and washed and put away the supper crockery and cutlery, it was almost 9 o'clock before she found time to sit quietly to read her letter.

. . . and the outcome of all of this is that, with special permission I may apply for Canadian citizenship, which I shall do this spring, and can expect to have completed the process by early in the summer . . .

She skimmed the first pages of inconsequential news and opinions she had become used to in his letters.

. . . And now I come to the news I think you have been waiting for.

Amy paused, unsure whether she could read on, aware that her breathing had become shallow and that her heart was beating rapidly.

When I agreed to come to Canada it was because you, Amy, had left me in little doubt about your opinion of my ability to make a go of things back home. You will agree that we were not the happiest of couples; I have lost count of how long it had been since we last lived together as man and wife. You did not like my interest in the Masons, and you condemned my drinking. For my part, I am sure I was not very easy to live with, but neither were you.

Be those things as they may, you will recall telling me that emigrating would give me many new opportunities to get ahead, and no doubt you thought that you would probably be better without me for a while too.

Well, opportunities I have had, and grasped, and I flatter myself I have made rather a good go of things here. I am poised to become the manager of the printing office; I enjoy the life I lead here in Toronto, and have made many good new friends, though, alas, among the kind of people I do not think you would be comfortable with. Nevertheless, it is a new life, and I think, a good life, and I am impatient for you and the children to come and join me in it.

So, what do you think? I have made a deposit on a little house—well, not so little, it has three bedrooms and a parlor, a dining room and a big kitchen. Not quite so grand as the house you are currently living in, but in a good area, and altogether a good place to start our life together in Canada.

He described where the house stood in relation to the city, and the kind of neighborhood. It was a substantial house in a substantial street of professional people, managers, and the better class of tradesmen.

I shall write more about it when I have had a chance to return to it and take in more details, but isn't it splendid? Our life apart is nearly over, and I can hardly wait to see you all again, and to begin to show you what a fine city this is. Dear Amy, you can begin to make plans to join me here, perhaps in the summer. Your father will help you to obtain tickets, and to dispose of our affairs in England. Do, do begin to make

plans soon. I want to know that you have set the wheels in motion. Write soon, and let me know how you are getting on.

Amy let the hand holding the letter fall to her side as she stared into the dying coals. In the cold front parlor, rarely used during the years of their marriage, and never since Albert had gone to Canada, the melodic chiming clock, a wedding present from the employees where Albert was working at that time, struck eleven.

Hearing it, counting the strikes absently, Amy stirred. She lifted her sewing box from the table to her lap and took out all of Albert's carefully folded letters. One by one, as if looking for a clue—or for confirmation of an opinion she had already formed—she read each one carefully, and when she had finished reading it, threw it into the fire.

Falling on the red coals, the pages curled, darkened, and then suddenly took fire and burned briefly. When the last—the most recent—letter was burned, she riddled out the ashes and opened the draught-plate.

In a few moments, the coals had drawn and were glowing brightly. She shook out the beaver picture and threw it onto the fire.

At first, it smouldered, sending up tendrils of thin grey smoke. The edges singed first, fiercely, down into the tops of the embroidered trees, and from each side towards the boulders and water, and Amy was surprised that, even as the flames engulfed them, the colors retained their brilliance. But suddenly, like the letters, the whole thing burst into flames, and burnt with a roar.

Soon the whole picture was consumed with flames which filled the belly of the fireplace, and raced up the chimney, though the body of the beaver, being the most thickly embroidered, took the longest to burn.

Amy sat in her chair and watched her work disappear and then, when it was no more than dull, dirty ashes, she methodically packed her embroidery away and put it all on the top shelf of the tall cupboard.