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Title: The Intriguers

Author: Harold Bindloss

Release date: December 21, 2004 [EBook #14406]

Most recently updated: December 18, 2020

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE INTRIGUERS ***

Produced by Al Haines

[Frontispiece: "All had gone well the first day"]

The Intriguers

By HAROLD BINDLOSS

Author of "Ranching for Sylvia," "Alton of Somasco,"
"Thurston of Orchard Valley," "By Right of Purchase,"
Etc.

With Frontispiece in Colors By

D. C. HUTCHISON

A. L. BURT COMPANY, PUBLISHERS

114-120 East Twenty-third Street New York

Published by Arrangement With Frederick A. Stokes Company

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February, 1914

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THE INTRIGUERS

CHAPTER I

THE BLAKE AFFAIR

On a fine morning early in July Mrs. Keith sat with a companion, enjoying the sunshine, near the end of Dufferin Avenue, which, skirts the elevated ground above the city of Quebec. Behind her rose the Heights of Abraham where the dying Wolfe wrested Canada from France; in front, churches, banks, offices and dwellings, curiously combining the old and the very new, rose tier on tier to the great red Frontenac Hotel. It is a picturesque city that climbs back from its noble river; supreme, perhaps, in its situation among Canadian towns, and still retaining something of the exotic stamp set upon it by its first builders whose art was learned in the France of long ago.

From where she sat Mrs. Keith could not see the ugly wooden wharves. Her glance rested on the flood that flowed toward her, still and deep, through a gorge lined with crags and woods, and then, widening rapidly, washed the shores of a low, green island. Opposite her white houses shone on the Levis ridge, and beyond this a vast sweep of country, steeped in gradations of color that ended in ethereal blue, rolled away toward the hills of Maine.

Mrs. Keith and her companion were both elderly. They had played their part in the drama of life, one of them in a strenuous manner, and now they were content with the position of lookers-on. So far, however, nothing had occurred since breakfast to excite their interest.

"I think I'll go to Montreal by the special boat tonight," Mrs. Keith said with characteristic briskness. "The hotel's crowded, the town's full, and you keep meeting people whom you know or have heard about. I came here to see Canada, but I find it hard to realize that I'm not in London; I'm tired of the bustle."

Mrs. Ashborne smiled. She had met Margaret Keith by chance in Quebec, but their acquaintance was of several years' standing.

"Tired?" she said. "That is sorely a new sensation for you. I've often envied you your energy."

Age had touched Mrs. Keith lightly, though she had long been a childless widow and had silvery hair. Tall and finely made, with prominent nose and piercing eyes, she was marked by a certain stateliness and a decided manner. She was blunt without rudeness, and though often forceful was seldom arrogant.

Careless of her dress, as she generally was, Margaret Keith bore the stamp of refinement and breeding, "Ah!" she said; "I begin to feel I'm old. But will you come to Montreal with me to-night?"

"I suppose I'd better, though the boat takes longer than the train, and I hear that the Place Viger is full. I don't know anything about the other hotels; they might not be comfortable."

"They'll no doubt be able to offer us all that we require, and I never pamper myself," Mrs. Keith replied. "In fact, it's now and then a relief to do something that's opposed to the luxuriousness of the age."

This was a favorite topic, but she broke off as a man came toward her, carrying one or two small parcels which apparently belonged to the girl at his side. He was a handsome man, tall and rather spare, with dark eyes and a soldierly look. His movements were quick and forceful, but a hint of what Mrs. Keith called swagger somewhat spoiled his bearing. She thought he allowed his self-confidence to be seen too plainly. The girl formed a marked contrast to him; she was short and slender, her hair and eyes were brown, while her prettiness, for one could not have, called her beautiful, was of an essentially delicate kind. It did not strike one at first sight, but grew upon her acquaintances. Her manner was quiet and reserved and she was plainly dressed in white, but when she turned and dismissed her companion her pose was graceful. Then she handed Mrs. Keith some letters and papers.

"I have been to the post-office, and Captain Sedgwick made them search for our mail," she said. "It came some time ago, but there was a mistake through its not being addressed to the hotel."

Mrs. Keith took the letters and gave Mrs. Ashborne an English newspaper.

"The bobcat has torn a hole in the basket," the girl went on, "and I'm afraid it's trying to get at the mink."

"Tell some of the hotel people to take it out at once and see that the basket is sent to be mended."

The girl withdrew and Mrs. Ashborne looked up.

"Did I hear aright?" she asked in surprise. "She said a bobcat?"

Mrs. Keith laughed.

"I am making a collection of the smaller American animals. A bobcat is something like a big English ferret. It has high hindquarters, and walks with a curious jump—I suppose that is how it got its name. I'm not sure it lives in Canada; an American got this one for me. I find natural history very interesting."

"I should imagine you found it expensive. Aren't some of the creatures savage?"

"Millicent looks after them; and I always beat the sellers down. Fortunately, I can afford to indulge in my caprices. You can consider this my latest fad, if you like. I am subject to no claims, and my means are hardly large enough to make me an object of interest to sycophantic relatives."

"Is your companion fond of attending to wild animals?" Mrs. Ashborne inquired. "I have wondered where you got her. You have had a number, but she is different from the rest."

"I suppose you mean she is too good for the post?" Mrs. Keith suggested. "However, I don't mind telling you that she is Eustace Graham's daughter; you must have heard of him."

"Eustace Graham? Wasn't he in rather bad odor—only tolerated on the fringe of society? I seem to recollect some curious tales about him."

"Toward the end he was outside the fringe; indeed, I don't know how he kept on his feet so long; but he went downhill fast. A plucker of plump pigeons, an expensive friend to smart young subalterns and boys about town. Cards, bets, loans arranged, and that kind of thing. All the same, he had his good points when I first knew him."

"But after such a life as his daughter must have led, do you consider her a suitable person to take about with you? What do your friends think? They have to receive her now and then."

"I can't say that I have much cause to respect my friends' opinions, and I'm not afraid of the girl's contaminating me," Mrs. Keith replied. "Besides, Millicent lost her mother early and lived with her aunts until a few months before her father's death. I expect Eustace felt more embarrassed than grateful when she came to take care of him, but, to do him justice, he would see that none of the taint of his surroundings rested on the girl. He did wrong, but I think he paid for it, and it is better to be charitable."

She broke off, and glanced down at the big liner with cream-colored funnel that was slowly swinging across the stream.

"I must send Millicent to buy our tickets for Montreal," she said. "The hotel will be crowded before long with that steamer's noisy passengers. I shall be glad to escape from it all. Let us hope that Montreal will be quieter, and we shall have a chance to see a bit of Canada."

Mrs. Ashborne opened the *Morning Post*, and presently looked up at her companion.

"A marriage—between Blanche Newcombe and Captain Challoner—at Thornton Holme, in Shropshire," she read out. "Do you know the bride?"

"I know Bertram Challoner better," Mrs. Keith replied, and was silent for a minute or two, musing on former days. "His mother was an old friend of mine—a woman of imagination, with strong artistic tastes; and Bertram resembles her. It was his father, the Colonel, who forced him into the army, and I'm somewhat astonished that he has done so well."

"They were all soldiers, I understand. But wasn't there some scandal about a cousin?"

"Richard Blake?" said Mrs. Keith, making room for Millicent Graham, her companion, who rejoined them. "It's getting an old story, and I always found it puzzling. So far as one could judge, Dick, Blake should have made an excellent officer; his mother, the Colonel's sister, was true to the Challoner strain, his father a reckless Irish sportsman."

"But what was the story? I haven't heard it."

"After Blake broke his neck when hunting, the Colonel brought Dick up, and, as a matter of course, sent him into the army. He became a sapper, entering the Indian service. There he met his cousin, Bertram, who was in the line, somewhere on the frontier. They were both sent with an expedition into the hills, and there was a night attack. It was important that an advanced post should be defended, and Dick had laid out the trenches. In the middle of the fight an officer lost his nerve, the position was stormed, and the expedition terribly cut up. Owing to the darkness and confusion there was a doubt about who had led the retreat, but Dick was blamed and made no defense. In spite of this, he was acquitted at the inquiry, perhaps because he was a favorite and Colonel Challoner was well known upon the frontier; but the opinion of the mess was against him. He left the service, and the Challoners never speak of him."

"I once met Lieutenant Blake," Millicent broke in, with a flush in her face. "Though he spoke only a word or two to me, he did a very chivalrous thing; one that needed courage and coolness. I find it hard to believe that such a man could ever be a coward."

"So do I," Mrs. Keith agreed. "Still, I haven't seen him since he was a boy."

"I saw him in London just before he went to India," Mrs. Ashborne said. "It's strange I have never heard the story before; although I have had whispers of the scandal from several quarters. It seems to be a sort of skeleton in the closet' for the Challoners."

"The disgrace was a great blow to the Colonel. He has never got over it."

"I saw some one in the hotel last night that reminded me strongly of young Blake. But I suppose it couldn't have been."

"No one knows where he is," Mrs. Keith replied. "I believe he went to East Africa, and from there he may have drifted to America. The Colonel never hears from him."

She picked up one of her letters which had not yet been opened.

"This," she said, "is from Frances Foster—you know her. I'm sure it will contain news of the Challoner wedding."

She tore open the envelope and Mrs. Ashborne turned again to her English newspaper. Millicent sat looking out over the gorge, while her thoughts went back to a dimly lighted drawing-room in a small London apartment, where she was feeling very lonely and half dismayed, one evening soon after she had joined her father. A few beautiful objects of art were scattered among the shabby furniture; there were stains of wine on the fine Eastern rug, an inlaid table was scraped and damaged, and one chair had a broken leg. All she saw spoke of neglect and vanished prosperity. Hoarse voices and loud laughter came from an adjoining room, and a smell of cigar smoke accompanied them. Sitting at the piano, she restlessly turned over some music and now and then played a few bars to divert her troubled thoughts. Until a few weeks before, she had led a peaceful life in the country, and it had been a painful

surprise to her to find her father of such doubtful character and habits. She was interrupted by the violent opening of the door, and a group of excited men burst into the room. They were shouting with laughter at a joke which made her blush, and one dragged a companion in by the arm. Another, breaking off from rude horse-play, came toward her with a drunken leer. She shrank from his hot face and wine-laden breath as she drew back, wondering how she could reach her father, who stood in the doorway trying to restrain his guests. Then a young man sprang forward, with disgust and anger in his brown face, and she felt that she was safe. He looked clean and wholesome by contrast with the rest, and his movements were swift and athletic. Millicent could remember him very well, for she had often thought of Lieutenant Blake with gratitude. Just as the tipsy gallant stretched out his hand to seize her, the electric light went out; there was a brief scuffle in the darkness, the door banged, and when the light flashed up again only Blake and her father were in the room. Afterward her father told her, with a look of shame on his handsome, dissipated face, that he had been afraid of something of the kind happening, and she must leave him. Millicent refused, for, worn as he was by many excesses, his health was breaking down; and when he fell ill she nursed him until he died. She had not seen Lieutenant Blake since.

Mrs. Keith's voice broke in upon her recollections. "It's possible we may see Bertram and the new Mrs. Challoner. She is going out with him, but they are to travel by the Canadian Pacific route and spend some time in Japan before proceeding to his Indian station." Referring to the date of her letter she resumed, "They may have caught the boat that has just come in; she's one of the railway Empresses, and there's an Allan liner due to-morrow. We will go to the hotel and try to get a list of the passengers."

She rose, and they walked slowly back along the avenue.

CHAPTER II

ON THE RIVER BOAT

Dusk was falling on the broad river, and the bold ridge behind the city stood out sharp and black against a fading gleam in the western sky. A big, sidewheel steamer, spotlessly white, with tiers of decks that towered above the sheds and blazed with light, was receiving the last of her passengers and preparing to cast off from her moorings. Richard Blake hurried along the wharf and, on reaching the gangplank, stood aside to let an elderly lady pass. She was followed by her maid and a girl whose face he could not see. It was a few minutes after the sailing time, and as the lady stepped on board a rope fell with a splash. There was a shout of warning as the bows, caught by the current, began to swing out into the stream, and the end of the gangplank slipped along the edge of the wharf. It threatened to fall into the river, and the girl was not yet on board. Blake leaped upon the plank. Seizing her shoulder, he drove her forward until a seaman, reaching out, drew her safe on deck. Then the paddles splashed and as the boat forged out into the stream, the girl turned and thanked Blake. He could not see her clearly, for an overarching deck cast a shadow on her face.

"Glad to have been of assistance; but I don't think you could have fallen in," he said. "The guy-rope they had on the gangplank might have held it up."

Turning away, he entered the smoking-room, where he spent a while over an English newspaper that devoted some space to social functions and the doings of people of importance, noticing once or twice, with a curious smile, mention of names he knew. He had the gift of making friends, and before he went to India he had met a number of men and women of note who had been disposed to like him. Then he had won the good opinion of responsible officers on the turbulent frontier and had made acquaintances that might have been valuable. Now, however, he had done with all that; he was banished from the world in which they moved, and if they ever remembered him it was, no doubt, as one who had gone under.

Shaking off these thoughts, he joined some Americans in a game of cards, and it was late at night when he went out into the moonlight as the boat steamed up Lake St. Peter. A long plume of smoke trailed across the cloudless sky, the water glistened with silvery radiance, and, looking over the wide expanse, he could see dark trees etched faintly on the blue horizon. Ahead, the lights of Three Rivers twinkled among square, black blocks of houses and tall sawmill stacks.

A few passengers were strolling about, but the English newspaper had made Blake restless, and he

wanted to be alone. Descending to a quieter deck, he was surprised to see the girl he had assisted sitting in a canvas chair near the rail. Nearby stood several large baskets, from which rose an angry snarling.

"What is this?" he asked, with the careless abruptness which usually characterized him. "With your permission."

He raised a lid, while the girl watched him with amusement.

"Looks like a menagerie on a small scale," he remarked. "Are these animals yours?"

"No; they belong to Mrs. Keith."

"Mrs. Keith?" he said sharply. "The lady I saw at the Frontenac, with the autocratic manners? It's curious, but she reminds me of somebody I knew, and the name's the same. I wonder——"

He broke off, and Millicent Graham studied him as he stood in the moonlight. She did not think he recognized her, and perhaps he was hardly justified in supposing that his timely aid at the gangway dispensed with the need for an introduction, but she liked his looks, which she remembered well. She had no fear of this man's presuming too far; and his surprise when she mentioned Mrs. Keith, had roused her interest.

"Yes," she said; "I believe it was my employer you knew."

He did not follow this lead.

"Are you supposed to sit up all night and watch the animals for her?" he asked.

"Only for an hour or two. The steamboat people refused to have them in the saloon, and the maid should have relieved me. She was tired, however, with packing and running errands all day, and I thought I'd let her sleep a while."

"Then it can't be much of an intrusion if I try to make you more comfortable. Let me move your chair nearer the deckhouse, where you'll be out of the wind; but I'll first see if I can find another rug."

He left her without waiting for a reply, and, returning with a rug, placed her chair in a sheltered spot; then he leaned against the railing.

"So you are Mrs. Keith's companion," he observed. "It strikes me as rather unfeeling of her to keep you here in the cold." He indicated the baskets. "But what's her object in buying these creatures?"

"Caprice," Millicent smiled. "Some of them are savage, and they cost a good deal. I can't imagine what she means to do with them; I don't think she knows herself. One of them, however, has been growling all day, and as it's apparently unwell it mustn't be neglected."

"If it growls any more, I'll feel tempted to turn yonder hose upon it, or try some other drastic remedy."

"Please don't!" cried Millicent in alarm. "But you mustn't think Mrs. Keith is inconsiderate. I have much to thank her for; but she gets very enthusiastic over her hobbies."

"Do you know whether she ever goes down to a little place in Shropshire?"

"Yes; I have been with her. Once she took me to your old home." The color crept into Millicent's face. "You don't seem to remember me, Lieutenant Blake."

Blake had learned self-control and he did not start, though he came near doing so as he recalled a scene in which he had taken part some years earlier.

"It would have been inexcusable if I had forgotten you," he responded with a smile. "Still, I couldn't quite place you until a few moments ago, when you faced the light. But you were wrong in one thing: I'm no longer Lieutenant Blake."

She appreciated the frankness which had prompted this warning, and she saw that she had made a tactless blunder, but she looked at him steadily.

"I forgot," she said; "forgive me. I heard of—what happened in India—but I knew that there must have been some mistake." She hesitated for a moment. "I think so now."

Blake made a sudden movement, and then leaned back against the railing.

"I'm afraid that an acquaintance which lasted three or four minutes could hardly enable you to judge: first impressions are often wrong, you know. Anyway, I don't complain of the opinion of gentlemen who knew more about me."

Millicent saw that the subject must be dropped.

"At our first meeting," she said, "I had no opportunity for thanking you; and you gave me none tonight. It's curious that, while I've met you only twice, on both occasions you turned up just when you were needed. Is it a habit of yours?"

Blake laughed.

"That's a flattering thing to hint. The man who's always on hand when he's wanted is an estimable person."

He studied her with an interest which she noticed but could not resent. The girl had changed and gained something since their first meeting, and he thought it was a knowledge of the world. She was, he felt, neither tainted nor hardened by what she had learned, but her fresh childish look which suggested ignorance of evil had gone and could not come back. Indeed, he wondered how she had preserved it in her father's house. This was not a matter he could touch upon; but presently she referred to it.

"I imagine," she said shyly, "that on the evening when you came to my rescue in London you were surprised to find me—so unprepared; so incapable of dealing with the situation."

"That is true," Blake answered with some awkwardness. "A bachelor dinner, you know, after a big race meeting at which we had backed several winners! One has to make allowances."

Millicent smiled rather bitterly.

"You may guess that I had to make them often in those days; but it was on the evening we were speaking of that my eyes were first opened, and I was startled. But you must understand that it was not by my father's wish that I came to London and stayed with him—until the end. He urged me to go away; but his health had broken down and he had no one else to care for him. When he was no longer able to get about, everybody deserted him, and he felt it."

"I was truly sorry to hear of his death," Blake said. "Your father was once a very good friend to me. But, if I may ask, how was it he let you come to his flat?"

"I forced myself upon him. My mother died long ago, and her unmarried sisters took care of me. They lived very simply in a small secluded country house: two old-fashioned Evangelicals, gentle but austere, studying small economies, giving all they could away. In winter we embroidered for missionary bazaars; in summer we spent the days in a quiet, walled garden. It was all very peaceful, but I grew restless; and when I heard that my father's health was failing I felt that I must go to him. My aunts were grieved and alarmed, but they said they dare not hinder me if I thought it my duty."

Stirred by troubled memories and perhaps encouraged by the sympathy he showed, she had spoken on impulse without reserve, and Blake listened with pity. The girl, brought up, subject to wholesome Puritanical influences, in such surroundings as she had described, must have suffered a cruel shock when suddenly plunged into the society of the rakes and gamblers who frequented her father's flat.

"Could you not have gone back when you were no longer needed?" he asked.

"No," she said; "it would not have been fair. I had changed since I left my aunts. They were very sensitive, and I think the difference they must have noticed in me would have jarred on them. I should have brought something alien into their unworldly life. It was too late to return; I had to follow the path I had chosen."

Blake mused a while, watching the lights of Three Rivers fade astern and the broad white wake of the paddles stream back across the glassy surface of the lake. The girl must have learned much of human failings since she left her sheltered home, but he thought the sweetness of character which could not be spoiled by knowledge of evil was greatly to be admired. He was, however, a man of action and not a philosopher.

"Well," he said, "I appreciate your letting me talk to you; but it's cold and getting late, and you have sat on deck long enough. I'll see that somebody looks after the animals."

Millicent felt dubious, though she was sleepy and tired.

"If anything happened to her pets, Mrs. Keith would not forgive me."

"I'll engage that something will happen to some of them very soon unless you promise to go to your room," Blake laughed. Then he called a deckhand. "What have you to do?"

"Stand here until the watch is changed."

"Then, you can keep an eye on these baskets. If any of the beasts makes an alarming noise, send to my room, the second, forward, port side. Look me up before we get to Montreal."

"That's all right, sir," replied the man.

Blake turned to Millicent and held out his hand as she rose.

"Now," he said, "you can go to rest with a clear conscience."

She left him with a word of thanks, wondering whether she had been indiscreet, and why she had told him so much. She knew nothing to his advantage except one chivalrous action, and she had not desired to arouse his pity, but he had an honest face and had shown an understanding sympathy which touched her, because she had seldom experienced it. He had left the army with a stain upon his name; but she felt very confident that he had not merited his disgrace.

CHAPTER III

THE COUSINS

Dinner was over at the Windsor, in Montreal, and Mrs. Keith was sitting with Mrs. Ashborne in the square between the hotel and St. Catharine's Street. A cool air blew uphill from the river, and the patch of grass with its fringe of small, dusty trees had a certain picturesqueness in the twilight. Above it the wooded crest of the mountain rose darkly against the evening sky; lights glittered behind the network of thin branches and fluttering leaves along the sidewalk, and the dome of the cathedral bulked huge and shadowy across the square. Downhill, toward St. James's, rose towering buildings, with the rough-hewn front of the Canadian Pacific station prominent among them, and the air was filled with the clanging of street-cars and the tolling of locomotive bells. Once or twice, however, when the throb of the traffic momentarily subsided, music rose faint and sweet from the cathedral, and Mrs. Keith turned to listen. She had heard the uplifted voices before, through her open window in the early morning when the city was silent and its busy toilers slept, and now it seemed to her appropriate that they could not be wholly drowned by its hoarse commercial clamor.

The square served as a cool retreat for the inhabitants of crowded tenements and those who had nowhere else to go, but Margaret Keith was not fastidious about her company. She was interested in the unkempt immigrants who, waiting for a west-bound train, lay upon the grass, surrounded by their tired children; and she had sent Millicent down the street to buy fruit to distribute among the travelers. She liked to watch the French Canadian girls who slipped quietly up the broad cathedral steps. They were the daughters of the rank and file, but their movements were graceful and they were tastefully dressed. Then the blue-shirted, sinewy men, who strolled past, smoking, roused her curiosity. They had not acquired their free, springy stride in the cities; these were adventurers who had met with strange experiences in the frozen North and the lonely West. Some of them had hard faces and a predatory air, but that added to their interest. Margaret Keith liked to watch them all, and speculate about their mode of life; that pleasure could still be enjoyed, though, as she sometimes told herself with humorous resignation, she could no longer take a very active part in things.

Presently, however, something that appealed to her in a more direct and personal way occurred, for a man came down the steps of the Windsor and crossed the well-lighted street with a very pretty English girl. He carried himself well, and had the look of a soldier; his figure was finely proportioned; but his handsome face suggested sensibility rather than decision of character, and his eyes were dreamy. His companion, so far as Mrs. Keith could judge by her smiling glance as she laid her hand upon his arm when they left the sidewalk, was proud of him, and much in love with him.

"Whom are you looking at so hard?" Mrs. Ashborne inquired.

"Bertram Challoner and his bride," said Mrs. Keith. "They're coming toward us yonder."

Then a curious thing happened, for a man who was crossing the street seemed to see the Challoners and, turning suddenly, stepped back behind a passing cab. They had their backs to him when he went on, but he looked around, as if to make sure he had not been observed, before he entered the hotel.

"That was strange," said Mrs. Ashborne. "It looked as if the fellow didn't want to meet our friends. Who can he be?"

"How can I tell?" Mrs. Keith answered. "I think I've seen him somewhere, but that's all I know."

Looking around as Millicent joined them, she noticed the girl's puzzled expression. Millicent had obviously seen the stranger's action, but Mrs. Keith did not wish to pursue the subject then; and the next moment Challoner came up and greeted her heartily, while his wife spoke to Mrs. Ashborne.

"We arrived only this afternoon, and must have missed you at dinner," he said. "We may go West tomorrow, though we haven't decided yet. I've no doubt we shall see you again to-night or at breakfast."

After a few pleasant words the Challoners passed on, and Mrs. Keith looked after them thoughtfully.

"Bertram has changed in the last few years," she said. "I heard that he had malaria in India, and that perhaps accounts for it, but he shows signs of his mother's delicacy. She was not strong, and I always thought he had her highly strung nervous temperament, though he must have learned to control it in the army."

"He couldn't have got in unless the doctors were satisfied with him," Mrs. Ashborne pointed out.

"That's true; but both mental and physical traits have a way of lying dormant while we're young, and developing later. Bertram has shown himself a capable officer; but, to my mind, he looked more like a soldier when he was at Sandhurst than he does now."

Mrs. Ashborne glanced toward Millicent, who was distributing a basket of peaches among a group of untidy immigrant children. One toddling baby clung to her skirt.

"What a charming picture! Miss Graham fits the part well. You can see that she's sorry for the dirty little beggars. They don't look as if they'd had a happy time; and a liner's crowded steerage isn't a luxurious place."

Mrs. Keith smiled as Millicent came toward her with a few of the small children clustered round her.

"I have some English letters to write," she said; "and I think we'll go in."

The Challoners did not leave for the West the next day. About an hour before sunset they leaned upon the rails of a wooden gallery built out from the rock on the summit of the green mountain that rises close behind Montreal. It is a view-point that visitors frequent, and they gazed with appreciation at the wide landscape. Wooded slopes led steeply down to the stately college buildings of McGill and the rows of picturesque houses along Sherbrook Avenue; lower yet, the city, shining in the clear evening light, spread across the plain, dominated by its cathedral dome and the towers of Notre Dame. Green squares with trees in them checkered the blocks of buildings; along its skirts, where a haze of smoke hung about the wharves, the great river gleamed in a broad silver band. On the farther bank the plain ran on again, fading from green to gray and purple, until it melted into the distance, and the hills on the Vermont frontier cut, faintly blue, against the sky.

"How beautiful this world is!" Challoner exclaimed. "I have seen grander sights, and there are more picturesque cities than Montreal—I'm looking forward to showing you the work of the Moguls in India—but happiness such as I've had of late casts a glamour over everything. It wasn't always so with me; I've had my bad hours when I was blind to beauty."

Though Blanche Challoner was very young, and much in love, she ventured a smiling rebuke.

"You shouldn't wish to remember them; I'm afraid, Bertram, there's a melancholy strain in you, and I don't mean to let you indulge in it. Besides, how could you have had bad hours? You have been made much of, and given everything you could wish for, since you were a boy. Indeed, I sometimes wonder how you escaped from being spoiled."

"When I joined the army, I hated it; that sounds like high treason, doesn't it? However, I got used to things, and made art my hobby instead of my vocation. You won't mind if I confess that a view of this kind makes me long to paint?"

"Oh, no; I intend to encourage you. You mustn't waste your talent. When we stay among the Rockies we will spend the days in the most beautiful places we can find, and I shall take my pleasure in watching you at work. But didn't your fondness for sketching amuse the mess?"

"I used to be chaffed about it, but I repaid my tormentors by caricaturing them. On the whole, they were very good-natured."

"I am sure they admired the drawings; they ought to have done so, anyway. You have talent. Indeed, I never quite understood why you became a soldier."

"I think it was from a want of moral courage; you have seen that determination is not among my virtues. If you knew my father very well, you would understand. Though he's fond of pictures, he looks upon artists and poets as a rather effeminate and irresponsible set, and I must admit that he has met one or two unfavorable specimens. Then, he couldn't imagine the possibility of a son of his not being anxious to follow the family profession; and, knowing how my defection would grieve him, I let him have his way. There has always been a Challoner fighting or ruling in India since John Company's time."

"They must have been fine men, by their portraits. There's one of a Major Henry Challoner I fell in love with. He was with Outram, wasn't he? You have his look, though there's a puzzling difference. I think those men were bluffer and blunter than you are. You're gentler and more sensitive; in a way, finer drawn."

"My sensitiveness has not been a blessing," said Challoner soberly.

"But it makes you lovable," Blanche declared. "There must have been a certain ruthlessness about those old Challoners which you couldn't show. After all, their pictures suggest that their courage was of the unimaginative, physical kind."

A shadow crept into Challoner's face, but he banished it.

"I am happy in having a wife who won't see my faults." Then he added humorously: "After all, however, that's not good for one."

Blanche gave him a tender smile; but he did not see it, for he was gazing at a man who came down the steps from the neighboring cable railway. The newcomer was about thirty years old, of average height, and strongly made. His face was deeply sunburned and he had eyes of a curious dark blue, with a twinkle in them, and dark lashes, though his hair was fair. As he drew nearer, Blanche was struck by something that suggested the family likeness of the Challoners. He had their firm mouth and wide forehead, but by no means their somewhat austere expression. He looked as if he went carelessly through life and could readily be amused. Then he saw Bertram, and, starting, made as if he would pass the entrance to the gallery, and Blanche turned her surprised glance upon her husband. Bertram's hand was tightly closed on the glasses he held, and his face was tense and flushed, but he stepped forward with a cry:

"Dick!"

The newcomer moved toward him, and Blanche knew that he was the man who had brought dishonor upon her husband's family.

"This is a fortunate meeting," Bertram said, and his voice was cordial, though rather strained. "Blanche, here's my cousin, Dick Blake."

Blake showed no awkwardness. Indeed, on the whole, he looked amused; but his face grew graver as he fixed his eyes on Mrs. Challoner.

"Though I'm rather late, you'll let me wish you happiness," he said. "I believe it will be yours. Bertram's a good fellow; I have much to thank him for."

There was a sincerity and a hint of affection in his tone, and Bertram looked uncomfortable.

"But how did you come here?" Bertram asked, as if to turn the conversation from himself. "Where have you been since——"

He stopped abruptly, and Blake laughed.

"Since you surreptitiously said good-by to me at Peshawur? Well, after that I went to Penang, and from there to Queensland. Stayed a time at a pearl-fishing station among the Kanakas, and then went to England for a few months."

"But how did you manage?" Bertram inquired with some diffidence. "It raises a point you wouldn't let

me talk about at Peshawur, but I've often felt guilty because I didn't insist. Traveling about as you have done is expensive."

"Not to me," Blake explained with a twinkle. "I've turned adventurer, and I have the Blake gift of getting along without money." He added in an explanatory aside to Blanche: "For two or three generations we kept open house and a full stable in Ireland, on a revenue derived from rents which were rarely paid, and if I hadn't been too young when a disaster gave the creditors their chance. I'd have given them a sporting run."

"But what did you do when you left England?" Bertram broke in.

"Went to East Africa; after that, to this country, where I tried my hand at prairie farming. Found it decidedly monotonous and sold the homestead at a profit. Then I did some prospecting, and now I'm here on business."

"On business!" Bertram exclaimed. "You could never be trusted to get proper value for a shilling!"

"I've learned to do so lately, and that's not going far. If you're in commerce in this country, you must know how to put down fifty cents and take up a dollar's worth. Anyhow, I'm here to meet an American whose acquaintance I made farther West. He's a traveler in paints and varnishes, and a very enterprising person, as well as an unusually good sort. But I've told you enough about myself; I want your news."

Blanche thought it cost her husband an effort to fall in with his cousin's casual mood. Blake, however, seemed quite at ease, and she was growing interested in him. He reminded her of the Challoner portraits in the dark oak gallery at Sandymere, but she thought him lighter, more brilliant, and, in a sense, more human than those stern soldiers. Then she remembered that his Irish blood explained something.

They talked a while about English friends and relatives; and then Blake asked rather abruptly:

"And the Colonel?"

"Well," said Bertram, "I heard that you saw him, Dick."

"I did, for half an hour. I felt that it was my duty, though the interview was hard on us both. He was fair, as he always was, and tried to hide his feelings. I couldn't blame him because he failed."

Bertram looked away, and Blake's face was troubled. There was a hint of emotion in his voice as he went on, turning to Blanche:

"Whatever he may think of me, I have a sincere respect for Colonel Challoner; and I owe him more than I can ever repay. He brought me up after my father's death and started me, like a son, in an honorable career." His tone grew lighter. "It's one of my few virtues that I don't forget my debts. But I've kept you some time. My American friend hasn't turned up yet and I may be here a few days. Where are you staying? I'll look you up before I leave."

"We go West to-morrow morning. Come down and have dinner with us at the Windsor," Bertram said; and when Mrs. Challoner seconded the request, they went up the steps to the platform from which the cable train started.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN FROM CONNECTICUT

After an excellent dinner, Mrs. Keith took Blanche away, and the men found a quiet corner in the rotunda, where they sat talking for a while.

"I have an appointment to keep and must go in a few minutes," Blake said, glancing at his watch. "Make my excuses to your wife; I shall not see her again. It would be better: there's no reason why she should be reminded of anything unpleasant now. She's a good woman, Bertram, and I'm glad she didn't shrink from me. It would have been a natural thing, but I believe she was sorry and was anxious to make all the allowances she could."

Challoner was silent for a few moments, his face showing signs of strain.

"I don't deserve her, Dick; the thought of it troubles me. She doesn't know me for what I really am!"

"Rot!" Blake exclaimed. "It's your misfortune that you're a sentimentalist with a habit of exaggerating things; but if you don't indulge in your weakness too much, you'll go a long way. You showed the true Challoner pluck when you smoked out that robbers' nest in the hills, and the pacification of the frontier valley was a smart piece of work. When I read about the business I never thought you would pull it off with the force you had. It must have impressed the authorities, and you'll get something better than your major's commission before long. I understand that you're already looked upon as a coming man."

It was a generous speech, but it was justified, for Challoner had shown administrative as well as military skill in the affairs his cousin mentioned. However, he still looked troubled, and his color was higher than usual.

"Dick," he said, "you know all I owe to you. I wish you would let me repay you in the only way I can. You know——"

"No," Blake interrupted curtly; "it's impossible! Your father made me a similar offer, and I couldn't consent. I suppose I have the Blakes' carelessness about money, but what I get from my mother's little property keeps me on my feet." He laughed as he went on: "It's lucky that your people, knowing the family failing, arranged matters so that the principal could not be touched. Besides, I've a plan for adding to my means."

Bertram dropped the subject. Dick was often rather casual and inconsequent, but there was a stubborn vein in him. When he took the trouble to think a matter out he was apt to prove immovable.

"Anyway, you will let me know how you get on?"

"I think not. What good would it do? While I'm grateful, it's better that the Challoners should have nothing more to do with me. Think of your career, keep your wife proud of you—she has good reason for being so—and let me go my way and drop out of sight again. I'm a common adventurer and have been mixed up in matters that fastidious people would shrink from—which may happen again. Still, I manage to get a good deal of pleasure out of the life; it suits me in many ways." He rose, holding out his hand. "Good-by, Bertram. We may run across each other somewhere again."

"I'll always be glad to do so," Challoner said with feeling. "Be sure I won't forget what a generous thing you've done for me, Dick."

Blake turned away, but when he left the hotel his face was sternly set. It had cost him something to check his cousin's friendly advances and break the last connection between himself and the life he once had led; but he knew it must be broken, and he felt no pang of envious bitterness. For many years Bertram had been a good and generous friend, and Blake sincerely wished him well.

The Challoners left by the Pacific Express the next morning, and that evening a group of men were engaged in conversation at one end of the hotel rotunda. One was a sawmill owner; another served the Hudson Bay Company in the northern wilds; the third was a young, keen-eyed American, quick in his movements and concise in speech.

"You're in lumber, aren't you?" he said, taking a strip of wood from his pocket and handing it to the mill owner. "What would you call this?"

"Cedar, sawn from a good log."

"That's so; red cedar. You know something about that material?"

"I ought to, considering how much of it I've cut. Been in the business for twenty years."

The American took out another strip.

"The same stuff, sir. How would you say it had been treated?"

The sawmill man carefully examined the piece of wood.

"It's not French polish, but I've never seen varnish as good as this. Except that it's clear and shows the grain, it's more like some rare old Japanese lacquer."

"It is varnish. Try to scrape it with your knife."

The man failed to make a mark on it, and the American looked at him with a smile.

"What would you think of it as a business proposition?"

"If not too dear, it ought to drive every other high-grade varnish off the market. Do you make the stuff?"

"We're not ready to sell it yet: can't get hold of the raw material in quantities, and we're not satisfied about the best flux. I'll give you my card."

It bore the address of a paint and varnish factory in Connecticut, with the words, "Represented by Cyrus P. Harding," at the bottom.

"Well," said the lumber man, "you seem to have got hold of a good thing, Mr. Harding; but if you're not open to sell it, what has brought you over here?"

"I'm looking round; we deal in all kinds of paints, and miss no chance of a trade. Then I'm going 'way up Northwest. Is there anything doing in my line there?"

"Not much," the Hudson Bay man answered him. "You may sell a few kegs along the railroad track, but as soon as you leave it you'll find no paint required. The settlers use logs or shiplap and leave them in the raw. The trip won't pay you."

"Well, I'll see the country, and find out something about the coniferous gums."

"They're soft and resinous. Don't you get the material you make good varnish of from the tropics?"

Harding laughed.

"You people don't know your own resources. There's 'most everything a white man needs right on this American continent, if he'll take the trouble to look for it. Lumber changes some of its properties with the location in which it grows, I guess. We have pines in Florida, but when you get right up to their northern limit you'll find a difference."

"There's something in that," the sawmill man agreed.

"If you're going up to their northern limit, you'll see some of the roughest and wildest country on this earth," declared the Hudson Bay agent. "It's almost impossible to get through in summer unless you stick to the rivers, and to cross it in winter with the dog sleds is pretty tough work."

"So I've heard," said Harding. "Well, I'm going to take a smoke. Will you come along?"

They declined, and when he left them one smiled at the other.

"They're smart people across the frontier, but to send a man into the northern timber belt looking for paint trade openings or resin they can make varnish of is about the limit to commercial enterprise."

Harding was leaning back in his chair in the smoking-room with a frown on his face when Blake joined him. He had a nervous, alert look, and was dressed with fastidious neatness.

"So you have come along at last!" he remarked in an ironical tone. "Feel like getting down to business, or shall we put it off again?"

"Sorry I couldn't come earlier," Blake replied. "Somehow or other I couldn't get away. Things kept turning up to occupy me."

"It's a way they seem to have. Your trouble is that you're too diffuse; you spread yourself out too much. You want to fix your mind on one thing; and that will have to be business as soon as we leave here."

"I dare say you're right. My interest's apt to wander; but if you take advantage of every opportunity that offers, you get most out of life. Concentration's good; but if you concentrate on a thing and then don't get it, you begin to think what a lot of other things you've missed."

"That may be all right," said Harding dubiously; "but we're going to concentrate on business right now. I have a wife, and I don't forget it. Marianna—that's Mrs. Harding—is living in a two-room tenement, making her own dresses and cooking on a gasoline stove, so's to give me my chance for finding the gum. And I'm here in an expensive hotel, where I've made about two dollars' commission in three days. We have got to pull out as soon as possible. Did you get any information from the Hudson Bay man?"

"I learned something about our route through the timber belt, and the kind of camp outfit we'll want;

the temperature's often fifty below in winter. Then I was in Revillons', looking at their cheaper furs, and in a store where they supply especially light hand-sleds, snowshoes, and patent cooking cans. We must have these things good, and I estimate they'll cost about six hundred dollars."

"Six hundred dollars will make a big hole in our capital."

"I'm afraid so, but we can't run the risk of freezing to death; and we may have to spend all winter in the wilds."

"That's true; I don't go back until I find the gum."

Harding's tone was resolute, and when he leaned forward, musing, with knitted brows, Blake gave him a sympathetic glance. Harding had entered the paint factory when a very young man, and had studied chemistry in his scanty spare time, with the object of understanding his business better. He found the composition of varnishes an interesting subject, and as the best gums employed came from the tropics and were expensive he began to experiment with the exudations from American trees. His employers hinted that he was wasting his time, but Harding continued, trying to test a theory that the texture and hardness of the gums might depend upon climatic temperature. By chance, a resinous substance which had come from the far North fell into his hands, and he found that, when combined with an African gum, it gave astonishing results. Before this happened, however, his employers had sent him out on the road; and as they were sceptical about his discovery and he would not take them fully into his confidence, they merely promised to keep his place open for a time. Now he was going to search for the gum at his own expense.

"We'll order the outfit in the morning," he said presently, glancing toward a man who sat across the room. "Do you think that fellow Clarke can hear? I've a notion that he's been watching us."

"Does it matter?"

"You must bear in mind that we have a valuable secret; and I understand that he lives somewhere in the country we are going through."

As he spoke, the Hudson Bay agent came in and walked over to Clarke.

"That was good stuff you gave me a dose of last night," he said to him. "It cured my ague right off."

"It's a powerful drug," Clarke answered, "and must be used with discretion. If you feel you need it, I'll give you another dose. It's an Indian remedy; I learned the secret up in the timber belt, but I spent some time experimenting before I was satisfied about its properties."

"Then you get on with Indians?"

"Yes," Clarke said shortly. "It isn't difficult when you grasp their point of view. You ought to know something about that. On the whole, the Hudson Bay people treat the Indians well; there was a starving lad you picked up suffering from snow-blindness near Jack-pine River and sent back safely to his tribe."

"That's so; but I don't know how you knew. I'm sure I haven't talked about it, and my clerk has never left the factory. There wasn't another white man within a week's Journey."

Clarke smiled.

"I heard, all the same. You afterward had some better furs than usual brought in."

The agent looked surprised.

"Some of these people are grateful, but although I've been in the country twelve years I don't pretend to understand them."

"They understand you. The proof of it is that you can keep your factory open in a district where furs are rather scarce, and you have had very few mishaps. You can take that as a compliment."

Blake noticed something significant in Clarke's tone.

"Then you know the Jack-pine?" the agent asked.

"Pretty well, though it's not easy to reach. I came down it one winter from the Wild-goose hills. I'd put in the winter with a band of Stonies."

"The Northern Stonies? Did you find them easy to get on with?"

"They knew some interesting things," Clarke answered dryly. "I went there to study."

"Ah!" said the agent. "What plain folk, for want of a better name, call the occult. But it's fortunate that there's a barred door between white men and the Indian's mysticism."

"It has been opened to a white man once or twice."

"Oh, yes! He stepped through into the darkness and never came out again. There was an instance I could mention."

"Civilized people would have no use for him afterward," Harding broke in. "We want sane, normal men on this continent. Neurotics, hoodoos and fakirs are worse than the plague; there's contagion in their fooling."

"How would you define them? Those who don't fit in with your ideas of the normal?" Clarke sneered.

"I know a clean, straight man when I meet him, and that's enough for me," Harding retorted.

"I imagine that cleverer people are now and then deceived," said Clarke, moving away as he spoke.

"That's a man I want to keep clear of," Harding declared. "There's something wrong about him; he's not wholesome!"

CHAPTER V

CORNERING THE BOBCAT

The next evening Harding was taking out a cigar in the vestibule when a man brushed past him wearing big mittens and a loose black cloak such as old-fashioned French-Canadians sometimes use.

"Why, Blake!" he cried. "What have you got on? Have you been serenading somebody?"

"I can't stop," Blake answered with a grin. "Open that door for me—quick!"

A porter held back the door, but as Blake slipped through, Harding seized his cloak.

"Hold on! I want a talk with you!"

Blake made an effort to break loose, and as he did so a bobcat dropped from beneath his arm and fell, spitting and snarling, to the floor. Its fur was torn and matted, tufts were hanging loose, and the creature had a singularly disreputable and ferocious appearance. Blake made an attempt to recapture it, but, evading him easily, it ran along the floor with a curious hopping gait and disappeared among the pillars. Then he turned to his friend with a rueful laugh.

"You see what you've done! It's gone into the rotunda, where everybody is."

Harding looked at him critically.

"You seem sober. What ever possessed you to get yourself up like an Italian opera villain and go round the town with a wild beast under your arm?"

"I'll tell you later," Blake laughed. "What we have to do now is to catch the thing."

"It's time," drawled Harding. "The circus is beginning."

Men's laughter and women's shrieks rose from the rotunda. Somebody shouted orders in French, there was a patter of running feet, and then a crash as of chairs being overturned. Blake sprang in, and Harding followed, divided between amusement and impatience. They saw an animated scene. Two porters were chasing the bobcat, which now and then turned upon them savagely, while several waiters, keeping at a judicious distance, tried to frighten it into a corner by flourishing their napkins. Women fled out of the creature's way, men hastily moved chairs and tables to give the pursuers room, and some of the more energetic joined in the chase. At one end of the room, Mrs. Keith stood angrily giving instructions which nobody attended to. Millicent, standing near her, looked hot and unhappy, but for all that her eyes twinkled when a waiter, colliding with a chair, went down with a crash and the

bobcat sped away from him in a series of awkward jumps.

At last, Blake managed to seize it with his mittened hands. He rolled it in a cloth and gave it to a porter, and then advanced toward Mrs. Keith, his face red with exertion but contrite, and the cloak, which had come unhooked, hanging down from one shoulder. She glanced at him in a puzzled, half-disturbed manner when he stopped.

"As the cat belongs to me," she said imperiously, "and as I'm told you dropped it in the vestibule, I feel that I'm entitled to an explanation. I gave the animal to my maid this morning, sending Miss Graham to see it delivered to a veterinary surgeon, and it disappeared. May I ask how it came into your possession?"

"Through no fault of Miss Graham's, I assure you. I happened to notice your maid trying to carry an awkwardly shaped hamper, and Miss Graham looking for a cab. It struck me the thing was more of a man's errand and I undertook it."

"It's curious that you knew what the errand was, unless Miss Graham told you." Mrs. Keith looked sternly at Millicent, and the girl blushed. "I have been led to believe that you made her acquaintance, without my knowledge, on board the steamer by which we came up."

"That," said Blake respectfully, "is not quite correct. I was formally presented to Miss Graham in England some time ago. However, as I saw a car coming along St. Catharine's while your maid was looking for a hack, and there was no time to explain, I scribbled a note on a bit of a letter and gave it to a boy to deliver to Miss Graham, and then I took the cat to a taxidermist."

"To a taxidermist! Why?"

"It struck me that he ought to know something about the matter. Anyway, he was the nearest approach to a vet that I could find."

Mrs. Keith looked at him thoughtfully.

"You seem to have a curious way of reasoning. What did the man say?"

"He promised to engage the services of a dog-fancier friend of his."

"You imagined that a dog-fancier would specialize in cats?"

Millicent's eyes twinkled, but Mrs. Keith's face was serious and Blake's perfectly grave.

"I don't know that I argued the matter out. To tell the truth, I undertook the thing on impulse."

"So it seems. But you haven't told me what became of my hamper."

"The hamper was unfortunately smashed. I left it at a basket shop; and that explains the cloak. My friend, the taxidermist, insisted on lending it and his winter gloves to me. One looks rather conspicuous walking through the streets with a bobcat on one's arm."

Then, to Blake's astonishment, Mrs. Keith broke into a soft laugh.

"I understand it all," she said. "It was a prank one would expect you to play. Though it's a very long time since I saw you, you haven't changed, Dick. Now take that ridiculous cloak off and come back and talk to me."

When Blake returned, Millicent had gone, and Mrs. Keith noticed the glance he cast about the room.

"I sent Miss Graham away," she said. "You have been here some days. Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

"I wasn't sure you would be willing to acknowledge me," he answered frankly.

"Oh, I never quite agreed with the popular opinion about what you were supposed to have done. It wasn't like you; there must have been something that did not come out."

"Thank you," Blake said quietly.

She gave him a searching glance.

"Can't you say something for yourself?" she urged.

"I think not. The least said, the soonest mended, you know."

"But for the sake of others."

"So far as I know, only one person was much troubled about my disgrace. I'm thankful my father died before it came."

"Your uncle felt it very keenly. He was furious when the first news arrived, and refused to believe you were to blame. Then, when Major Allardyce wrote, he scarcely spoke for the rest of the day, and it was a long time before he recovered from the blow; I was staying at Sandymere. He loved you, Dick, and I imagined he expected you to do even better than his son."

Blake mused for a few moments, and Mrs. Keith could not read his thoughts.

"Bertram is a good fellow," he said. "Why should his people think less of him because he likes to paint? But I've been sorry for the Colonel; more sorry than I've felt for myself."

There was a softness in his dark blue eyes that appealed to Mrs. Keith. She had been fond of Dick Blake in his younger days and firmly believed in him. Now she could not credit his being guilty of cowardice.

"Well," she said, "you have a long life before you, I trust; and there are people who would be glad to see you reinstated."

He made a sign of grave dissent.

"That can't happen, in the way you mean. I closed the door of the old life against my return, with my own hands; and you don't gain distinction, as the Challoners think of it, in business."

"What business have you gone into?"

Blake's eyes gleamed humorously.

"At present, I'm in the paint line."

"Paint!" Mrs. Keith exclaimed.

"Yes, but not common paint. We use the highest grade of lead and the purest linseed oil. Varnish also of unapproachable quality, guaranteed to stand exposure to any climate. There's nothing to equal our products in North America."

"Do you seriously mean that you are going about selling these things?"

"I'm trying to. I booked an order for two kegs yesterday, but it isn't to be paid for until arrival, when I shall not be here. Can't I induce you to give us a trial? Your house must need painting now and then, and we'll ship you the stuff to Liverpool in air-tight drums. Once you have tried it you'll use nothing else."

Mrs. Keith laughed.

"Dick, you're a marvel! I'm glad adversity hasn't soured you; but you know that you won't make enough to keep you in neckties at any business you take up. It's ludicrous to think of your running about with paint samples!"

"You seem to doubt my ability," Blake said humorously. "Here comes my American partner. He has been waiting for a word with me since this morning."

"And you kept him waiting? That was a true Blake. But bring him here. I want to know your friend."

They spent a pleasant evening; and the next afternoon Blake and Harding drove up the mountain with Mrs. Keith and one or two others. The city was unpleasantly hot and the breeze that swept its streets blew clouds of sand and cement about, for Montreal is subject to fits of feverish constructional activity and on every other block buildings were being torn down and replaced by larger ones of concrete and steel. Leaving its outskirts, the carriage climbed the road which winds in loops through the shade of overhanging trees. Wide views of blue hills and shining river opened up through gaps in the foliage; the air lost its humid warmth and grew fresh and invigorating.

Reaching the level summit, they found seats near the edge of a steep, wooded slope. The strip of tableland is not remarkably picturesque, but it is thickly covered with trees, and one can look out

across a vast stretch of country traversed by the great river.

When the party scattered, Mrs. Keith was left with Harding. They were, in many ways, strangely assorted companions—the elderly English lady accustomed to the smoother side of life, and the young American who had struggled hard from boyhood—but they were sensible of a mutual liking. Mrs. Keith had a trace of the grand manner, which had its effect on Harding; he showed a naive frankness which she found attractive. Besides, his talk and conduct were marked by a labored correctness which amused and pleased her. She thought he had taken some trouble to acquire it.

"So you had to leave your wife at home," she said presently. "Wasn't that rather hard for both of you?"

"It was hard enough," he replied with feeling. "What made it worse was that I hadn't much money to leave with her; but I had to go. The man who will take no chances has to stay at the bottom."

"Then, if it's not an impertinence, your means are small?"

"Your interest is a compliment. We had two hundred dollars when we were married. You wouldn't consider that much to begin on?"

"No. Still, of course, it depends upon what one expects. After all, I think my poorest friends have been happiest."

"We had only one trouble—making the money go round," Harding told her with grave confidence. "It was worst in the hot weather, when other people could move out of town, and it hurt me to see Marianna looking white and tired. I used to wish I could send her to one of the farms up in the hills—though I guess she wouldn't have gone without me. She's brave, and when my chance came she saw that I must take it. She sent me off with smiles; but I knew what they cost."

"Courage to face a hard task is a great gift. So you consider this trip to the Northwest your opportunity? You must expect to sell a good deal of paint."

Harding looked up with a sudden twinkle.

"I'll admit to you, ma'am, that I expect to sell very little. The company will pay my commission on any orders I get at the settlements, but this is my venture, not theirs. I'm going up into the wilds to look for a valuable raw material."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Keith. "I suspected something like this. It's difficult to imagine Dick Blake's going into anything so sober and matter-of-fact as the paint business. Have you known him long?"

"I met him a year ago, and we spent two or three weeks together."

"But was that long enough to learn much about him? Do you know his history?"

Harding gave her a direct glance.

"Do you?"

"Yes," she said; "and I gather that he has taken you into his confidence."

"Now you set me free to talk. When I asked him to be my partner, he told me why he had left the army. That was the square thing, and it made me keen on getting him."

"Then you were not deterred by what you learned?"

"Not at all. I knew it was impossible that Blake should have done what he was charged with."

"I agree with you; but, then, I know him better than you do. What made you jump to the conclusion?"

"You shall judge whether I hadn't good reason. I was in one of our lake ports, collecting accounts, and Blake had come with me. It was late at night when I saw my last customer at his hotel, and I had a valise half-full of silver currency and bills. Going back along the waterfront where the second-rate saloons are, I thought that somebody was following me. The lights didn't run far along the street, I hadn't seen a patrol, and as I was passing a dark block a man jumped out. I got a blow on the shoulder that made me sore for a week, but the fellow had missed my head with the sandbag, and I slipped behind a telegraph post before he could strike again. Still, things looked ugly. The man who'd been following came into sight, and I was between the two. Then Blake ran up the street—and I was mighty glad to see him. He had two men to tackle, and one had a sandbag, while I guess the other had a pistol."

"But you were there. That made it equal."

"Oh, no; I'd been nearly knocked out with the sandbag and could hardly keep my feet. Besides, I had my employers' money in the valise, and it was my business to take care of it."

Mrs. Keith made a sign of agreement.

"I beg your pardon. You were right."

"Blake got after the first thief like a panther. He was so quick I didn't quite see what happened, but the man reeled half-way across the street before he fell, and when his partner saw Blake coming for him he ran. Then, when the trouble was over, a policeman came along, and he and Blake helped me back to my hotel. Knowing I had the money, he'd got uneasy when I was late." Harding paused and looked meaningly at his companion. "Later I was asked to believe that the man who went for those two toughs with no weapon but his fists ran away under fire. The thing didn't seem plausible."

"And so you trust Blake, in spite of his story?"

"The Northwest is a hard country in winter and I may find myself in a tight place before I've finished my search," Harding answered with grave quietness. "But if that happens, I'll have a partner I can trust my life to. What's more, Mrs. Harding feels I'm safe with him."

Mrs. Keith was moved; his respect for his wife's judgment and his faith in his comrade appealed to her.

"Tell me something about your journey," she said.

While they talked, Millicent and Blake sat in the sunshine on the slope of the hill. Beneath them a wide landscape stretched away toward the Ottawa valley, the road to the lonely North, and the girl felt a longing to see the trackless wilds. The distance drew her.

"Your way lies up yonder," she said. "I suppose you are thinking about it. Are you looking forward to the trip?"

"Not so much as Harding is," Blake replied. "He's a bit of an enthusiast; and I've been in the country before. It's a singularly rough one, and I anticipate our meeting with more hardships than money."

"Which doesn't seem to daunt you."

"No; not to a great extent. Hardship is not a novelty to me, and I don't think I'm avaricious. The fact is, I'm a good deal better at spending than gathering."

"It's undoubtedly easier," the girl laughed. "But, while I like Mr. Harding, I shouldn't consider him a type of the romantic adventurer."

"You're right in one sense and wrong in another. Harding's out for money, and I believe he'll get it if it's to be had. He'll avoid adventures so far as he can, but if there's trouble to be faced, it won't stop him. Then, he has left a safe employment, broken up his home, and set off on this long journey, for the sake of a woman who is trying to hold out on a very few dollars in a couple of poor rooms until his return. He's taking risks which, I believe may be serious, in order that she may have a brighter and fuller life. Is there no romance in that?"

What Blake said about his comrade's devotion to his wife appealed to the girl, and she mused for a moment or two. She liked Blake and he improved upon acquaintance. He had a whimsical humor and a dash of reckless gallantry. He was supposed to be in disgrace, but she had cause to know that he was compassionate and chivalrous.

"You haven't been with us long," she said, "but we shall be duller when you have gone."

"That's nice to hear; but it's with mixed feelings that one leaves friends behind. I've lost some good ones."

"I can imagine your making others easily; but haven't you retained one or two? I think, for instance, you could count on Mrs. Keith."

"Ah! I owe a good deal to her. A little charity, such as she shows, goes a very long way."

Millicent did not answer, and he watched her as she sat looking out into the distance with grave brown eyes. Her face was gentle; he thought there was pity for him in it, and he felt strongly drawn to her; but he remembered that he was a man with a tainted name and must travel a lonely road.

Some of the others joined them, and soon afterward they walked down the winding road to the city. There Harding found some letters he had been waiting for, and there was now nothing to keep them in Montreal.

Mrs. Keith was gracious to Blake when he went to say good-by the next morning, but he felt a strong sense of disappointment at finding her alone. He looked around for Millicent, and then, as he was going out, he met her in the hall. She wore her hat, and the flush of color in her face indicated that she had been walking fast.

"I'm glad I didn't miss you," she said. "You are going now, by the Vancouver express?"

"Yes," answered Blake, stopping beside a pillar; "and I was feeling rather gloomy until I saw you. Harding's at the station, and it's depressing to set off on a long journey feeling that nobody minds your going."

"Mrs. Keith will mind," smiled Millicent. "I'm sure you have her good wishes."

Blake looked at her keenly.

"I want yours."

"You have them," she said softly. "I haven't forgotten what happened one evening in London. I wish you a safe journey and every possible success!"

"Thank you! It will be something to remember that you have wished me well."

As his eyes rested upon her he forgot that he was a marked man. She looked very fresh and desirable; there was a hint of regret and pity in her face and a trace of shyness in her manner.

"I suppose I can't ask you to think of me now and then; it would be too much," he said, a little bitterly. "But I want you to know that these few days of your friendship have meant a great deal to me. I wish"—he hesitated a moment—"that I might have something of yours—some little memento—to take with me on my trip."

Millicent took a tiny bunch of flowers from the lace at the neck of her white dress, and handed them to him with a smile.

"Will these do? They won't last very long."

"They will last a long time, well taken care of. When I come back, I will show them to you."

"But I shall be in England then."

"England is not very far off; and I'm a wanderer, you know."

"Well," she said with faint confusion, "unless you hurry you will miss your train. Good-by, and good fortune!"

He took the hand she gave him and held it a moment.

"If your last wish is ever realized, I shall come to thank you, even in England."

He turned and went out with hurried steps, wondering what had led him to break through the reserve he had prudently determined to maintain. What he had said might mean nothing, but it might mean much. He had seen Millicent Graham for a few minutes in her father's house, and afterward met her every day during the week spent in Montreal; but, brief as their friendship had been, he had yielded to her charm. Had he been free to seek her love, he would eagerly have done so; but he was not free. He was an outcast, engaged in a desperate attempt to repair his fortune. Miss Graham knew this. Perhaps she had taken his remarks as a piece of sentimental gallantry; but something in her manner suggested a doubt. Anyway, he had promised to show her the flowers again some day, and he carefully placed them in his pocketbook.

CHAPTER VI

THE PRAIRIE

A strong breeze swept the wide plain, blowing fine sand about and adding to Blake's discomfort as he plodded beside a jaded Indian pony and a small cart. The cart was loaded with preserved provisions, camp stores, and winter clothes; he had bought it and the pony because that seemed cheaper than paying for transport. The settlement for which he and Harding were bound stands near the northern edge of the great sweep of grass which stretches across central Canada. Since leaving the railroad they had spent four days upon the trail, which sometimes ran plain before them, marked by dints of wheels among the wiry grass, and sometimes died away, leaving them at a loss in a wilderness of sand and short poplar scrub.

It was now late in the afternoon and the men were tired of battling with the wind which buffeted their sunburned faces with sharp sand. They were crossing one of the high steppes of the middle prairie toward the belt of pines and muskegs which divides it from the barrens of the North. The broad stretch of fertile loam, where prosperous wooden towns are rising fast among the wheatfields, lay to the south of them, and the arid tract through which they journeyed had so far no attraction for even the adventurous homestead pre-emptor.

They found it a bleak and cheerless country, crossed by the ravines of a few sluggish creeks, the water of which was unpleasant to drink, and dotted at long intervals by ponds bitter with alkali. In places, stunted poplar bluffs cut against the sky, but, for the most part, there was only a rolling waste of dingy grass. The trail was heavy, the wheels sank deep in sand as they climbed a low rise, and, to make things worse, the rounded, white-edged clouds which had scudded across the sky since morning were gathering in threatening masses. This had happened every afternoon, but now and then the cloud ranks had broken, to pour out a furious deluge and a blaze of lightning. Harding anxiously studied the sky.

"I guess we're up against another thunderstorm," he said. "My opinion of the mid-continental climate is singularly mean, but I'd put this strip of Canada near the limit. Our Texan northerners are fierce when they come along; but here it blows all the time."

"We'll make camp, if you like; I don't feel very fresh," Blake replied.

"Not here," snapped Harding. "Where I stop I sleep, and I'm not particularly enthusiastic about sheltering under the cart. Last time we tried it the pony stampeded and the wheel went over my foot. The tent's no good; you'd want a chain to stop its blowing away. We'll go on until we bring up to lee of a big, solid bluff."

"Very well," Blake agreed. "I dare say we ought to find one in the hollow we got a glimpse of from the last rise; but we haven't had to put up with much discomfort yet."

"That's a matter of opinion. You haven't limped forty miles on a bad foot; but I'm not complaining. It's a whole lot to feel that we have started; doing nothing takes the sand out of me."

Blake had once or twice suggested that his comrade should ride, but the pony was overburdened and Harding refused. He explained that they could not expect to sell it at the settlement if it were in a worn-out condition; but Blake suspected him of sympathy for the patient beast.

They crossed the ridge and, seeing a wavy line of trees in the wide hollow, quickened their pace. The soil was firmer, the scrub through which the wheels crushed was short, and the trail led smoothly down a slight descent. This was comforting, for half the sky was barred with leaden cloud and the parched grass gleamed beneath it lividly white, while the light that struck a ridge-top here and there had a sinister luridness. It was getting cold and the wind was dropping; and that was not a favorable sign.

Pushing the cart through the softer places, dragging the jaded pony by the head, they hurried on and at last plunged through a creek with the trees just beyond. A few minutes later they tethered the pony to lee of the cart, and set up their tent. While Blake was rummaging out provisions, and Harding searching the bluff for dry sticks, they heard a beat of hoofs and a man rode up, leading a second horse. He got down and hobbled the horses before he turned to Blake.

"From the south? You're for Sweetwater?" he asked.

"Yes. How much farther is it?"

"You ought to make it in a day and a half," the stranger said. "I'll ride in with you. My name's Gardner. I run a store and hotel at Sweetwater, but I feel that I want to get out on the prairie now and then, and as a horse was missing I went after him. A looker, isn't he?"

The man had a good-humored, sunburned face and an honest look, and he gladly acquiesced in Blake's suggestion that he join them instead of cooking a separate supper.

The prairie was now wrapped in inky gloom, and there was an impressive stillness except for the occasional rustle of a leaf; but the stillness was broken by a puff of icy wind which suddenly stirred the grass. The harsh rustle it made was followed by a deafening crash, and a jagged streak of lightning fell from the leaden clouds; then the air was filled with the roar of driving hail. It swept the woods, rending leaves and smashing twigs, while a constant blaze of lightning flickered about the grass. Then the thunder died away and the hail gave place to torrential rain, while the slender trees rocked in the blast and small branches drove past the tent, where the men crouched inside. After the rain ceased, suddenly, a fierce red light streamed along the saturated grass from the huge sinking sun.

Harding, with Gardner's help, brought his pile of wood out of the tent, and soon made a fire; and it was getting dark, though a band of transcendental green still burned upon the prairie's western edge, when they finished supper and, sitting round the fire, took out their pipes. The hobbled horses were quietly grazing near them.

"That's undoubtedly a fine animal," Blake observed. "Is it yours?"

"No; it belongs to Clarke's Englishman."

"Who's he? It's a curious way to speak of a fellow."

"It fits him," laughed Gardner. "Guess he's Clarke's, hide and bones—and that's all there'll be when the doctor gets through with him. He's a sucker the doctor taught farming and then sold land to."

"Then, who's the doctor?" Harding inquired.

"That's not so easy to answer; but he's a man you want to be friends with if you stay near the settlement. Teaches farming to tenderfoot young Englishmen and Americans; finds them land and stock to start with—and makes a mighty good thing out of it. Goes to Montreal now and then, but whether it's to look up fresh suckers is more than I know."

"We met a fellow named Clarke at the Windsor not long ago. What's he like?"

When Gardner described him, Harding frowned.

"That's the man," he said.

"Then I can't see what he was doing at the Windsor; an opium joint would have been more in his line."

"Does the fellow live at Sweetwater?" Blake asked.

"Has a farm—and runs it well—about three miles back; but he's away pretty often in the North, and at a settlement on the edge of the bush country. Don't know what he does there, and they're a curious crowd—Dubokars, Russians of sorts, I guess."

Blake had seen the Dubokars in other parts of Canada and had found them an industrious people, leading, from religious convictions, a remarkably primitive life. There were, however, fanatics among them, and he understood that these now and then led their followers into outbreaks of emotional extravagance.

"They make good settlers, as a rule," he commented. "But, as they don't speak English, how does the fellow get on with them?"

"Told me he was a philologist, when I asked him; then he allowed two or three of them were mystics, and he was something in that line. He was a doctor once and got fired out of England for something he shouldn't have done. Anyhow, the Dubokars are like the rest of us—good, bad, and pretty mixed—and the crowd back of Sweetwater belong to the last. At first, some of them didn't believe it was right to work horses, and made the women drag the plow; and they had one or two other habits that brought the police down on them. After that they've given no trouble, but they get on a jag of some kind now and then."

Blake nodded. He knew that the fanatic with untrained and unbalanced mind is liable under the influence of excitement to indulge in crude debauchery; but it was strange that a man of culture, such as Clarke appeared to be, should take part in these excesses. He had, however, no interest in the fellow; and he turned the talk on to other matters, until it got cold and they went to sleep.

Starting early the next morning, they reached Sweetwater after an uneventful journey, and found it by no means an attractive place. South of it, rolling prairie ran back, grayish white with withered grass,

to the skyline; to the north, straggling poplar bluffs and scattered Jack-pines crowned the summits of the ridges. A lake gleamed in a hollow, a slow creek wound across the foreground in a deep ravine, and here and there in the distance was an outlying farm. A row of houses followed the crest of the ravine, some built of small logs, and some of shiplap lumber which had cracked with exposure to the sun, but all having a neglected and poverty-stricken air. The land was poor and the settlement was located too far from a market. With leaden thunderclouds hanging over it, the place looked as desolate as the sad-colored waste.

Following the deeply rutted street, which had a narrow, plank sidewalk, they reached the Imperial Hotel—a somewhat pretentious, double-storied building of unpainted wood, with a veranda across the front. Here Gardner took the pony from them and gave them a room which had no furniture except a chair and two rickety iron beds. Before he left them he indicated a printed list of the things they were not allowed to do. Harding studied it with a sardonic smile.

"I don't see much use in prohibiting people from washing their clothes in the bedrooms when they don't give you any water," he remarked. "This place must be about the limit in the way of cheap hotels."

"It isn't cheap," responded Blake; "I've seen the tariff."

They found their supper better than they had reason to expect, and afterward sat out on the veranda with the proprietor and one or two of the settlers who boarded at the hotel. The sun had set, and now and then a heavy shower beat upon the shingled roof, but the western sky was clear and flushed with vivid crimson, toward which the prairie rolled away in varying tones of blue. Lights shone in the windows behind the veranda, and from one which stood open a hoarse voice drifted out, singing in a maudlin fashion snatches of an old music-hall ditty.

"It's that fool Benson—Clarke's Englishman," Gardner explained. "Found he'd got into my bed with his boots on, after falling down in a muskeg. It's not the first time he's played that trick; when he gets worse than usual he makes straight for my room."

"Why do you give him the liquor?" Harding inquired.

"I don't. He's a pretty regular customer, but he never gets too much at this hotel."

"And there isn't another."

"That's so," Gardner assented, but he offered no explanation and Blake changed the subject.

"Unless you're fond of farming, life in these remote districts is trying," he remarked. "The loneliness and monotony are apt to break down men who are not used to it."

"Turns some of them crazy and kills off a few," said a farmer, who appeared to be well educated. "After all, worse things might happen to them."

"It's conceivable," agreed Blake. "But what particular things were you referring to?"

"I was thinking of men who go to the devil while they're alive. There's a fellow in this neighborhood who's doing something of the kind."

"Rot!" exclaimed a thick voice; and a man's figure appeared against the light at the open window. "Devil'sh a myth; allegorolical gentleman, everybody knowsh. Hard word that—allegorolical. Bad word too; reminds you of things in the rivers down in Florida. Must be some in the creek here; seen them, in my homestead."

"You go to bed!" said Gardner sternly.

"Nosh a bit," replied Benson. "Who you talking to?" He leaned forward, in danger of falling through the window. "Lemme out!"

"It's not all drink," Gardner explained. "He has something like shakes and ague now and then. Says he got it in India."

Benson disappeared, and a few moments afterward reeled out of the door and held himself upright by one of the veranda posts.

"Now I'm here, don't let me interrupt, gentlemen," he said. "Nice place if this post would keep still."

Warned by a sign from Gardner, the others ignored him; and Harding turned to the farmer.

"You hadn't finished what you were saying when he disturbed you."

"I don't know that it was of much importance; speaking of degenerates, weren't we? We have a curious example of the neurotic here: a fellow who makes a good deal of money by victimizing farmers who are forced to borrow when they lose a crop, as well as preying on young fools from England; and, by way of amusement, he studies modern magic and indulges in refined debauchery. It strikes me as a particularly unhallowed combination."

"No sensible man has any use for hoodoo tricks and the people who practise them," Harding said. "They're frauds from the start."

"Don't know what you're talking about!" Benson broke in. "Not all tricks. Seen funny things in the East; thingsh decent men better leave alone."

Letting go the post, he lurched forward; and as the light fell on his face Blake started. He had been puzzled by something familiar in the voice, and now he recognized the man, and had no wish to meet him. He was too late in hitching his chair back into the shadow, for Benson had seen him and stopped with an excited cry.

"Blake of the sappers! Want to cut your old friendsh? Whatsh you doing here?"

"It's a mutual surprise, Benson," Blake replied.

Benson, holding on by a chair back, smiled at him genially.

"Often wondered where you went to after you left Peshawur, old man. Though you got the sack for it, it wasn't your fault the ghazees broke our line that night. Said so to the Colonel—can see him now, sitting there, looking very sick and cut up, and Bolsover, acting adjutant, blinking like an owl."

"Be quiet!" Blake commanded in alarm, for the man had been a lieutenant of native infantry when they had met on the hill campaign.

Benson, however, was not to be deterred.

"This gentleman old friend of mine; never agreed with solemn old Colonel, but they wouldn't listen to me. Very black night in India; ghazees coming yelling up the hill; nothing would stop 'em. Rifles cracking, Nepalese comp'ny busy with the bayonet; and in the thick of it the bugle goes——"

Raising a hand to his mouth, he gave a shrill imitation of the call to cease firing, and then lost his balance and fell over the chair with a crash.

"Leave him to me," said Gardner, seizing the fallen man and with some difficulty lifting him to his feet. After he pushed him through the door there were sounds of a scuffle, and a few minutes later Gardner came back with a bruise on his face.

"He's quiet now, and the bartender will put him to bed," he said.

There was silence for the next few moments, for the group on the veranda had been impressed by the scene; then a man came up the steps. He was dressed in old brown overalls and carried a riding quirt, but Harding recognized him as the man they had met at the hotel in Montreal.

"Have you got Benson here?" he asked.

"Sure," said Gardner. "He's left his mark on my cheek. Why don't you look after the fool? You must have come pretty quietly; I didn't hear you until you were half-way up the steps."

"Light boots," Clarke answered, smiling; "I bought them from you. I don't know that I need hold myself responsible for Benson, but I found he wasn't in when I rode past his place and it struck me that he might get into trouble if he got on a jag."

He turned and nodded to Blake.

"So you have come up here! I may see you tomorrow, but if Benson's all right I'm going home now."

He went into the hotel and soon afterward they heard him leave by another door. An hour later, when Harding and Blake were in their room, the keen young American brought his fist down on the bedpost with vehemence.

"I tell you," he said, "there's something queer about that fellow Clarke—something even Gardner don't know. I don't like that look that's behind his eyes, not in 'em; and the less we see of him, I reckon the better."

CHAPTER VII

THE OCCULT MAN

After breakfast the next morning, Blake and Harding sat on the veranda talking to the farmer. When they mentioned their first objective point, and asked if he could give them any directions for reaching it, he looked thoughtful.

"I only know that it's remarkably rough country; thick pine bush on rolling ground, with some bad muskegs and small lakes," he said. "You would find things easier if you could hire an Indian or two, and a canoe when you strike the river. The boys here seldom go up so far; but Clarke could help you if he liked. He knows that country like a book, and he knows the Indians."

"We're willing to pay him for any useful help," Harding said.

"Be careful," cautioned the farmer. "If you're on a prospecting trip, keep your secret close. There's another bit of advice I might give." He turned to Blake. "If you're a friend of Benson's, take him along with you."

"I suppose I am, in a way, though it's a long time since I met him. But why do you suggest our taking him?"

"I hate to see a man go to pieces as Benson's doing. Clarke's ruining the fellow. He must have got two or three thousand dollars out of him, one way or another, and isn't satisfied with that. Lent him money on mortgage to start a foolish stock-raising speculation, and keeps him well supplied with drink. The fellow's weak, but he has his good points."

"But what's Clarke's object?"

"It isn't very clear. But a man who's seldom sober is easily robbed, and Benson's place is worth something; Clarke sees it's properly farmed. However, you must use your judgment about anything he tells you; I've given you warning."

The farmer rose as he spoke, and when he had left them, Blake sat silent for a while. Though he and Benson had never been intimate friends, it did not seem fitting to leave him in the clutches of a man who was ruining him in health and fortune. He would rather not have met the man at all; but, since they had met, there seemed to be only one thing to be done.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take Benson with us," he said to Harding.

The American looked doubtful.

"We could do with another white man; but I guess your friend isn't the kind we want. He may give us trouble; and you can't count on much help from a whisky-tank. However, if you wish it, you can bring him."

Soon afterward Benson came out from the dining-room. He was two or three years younger than Blake and had a muscular figure, but he looked shaky and his face was weak and marked by dissipation. Smiling in a deprecatory way, he lighted a cigar.

"I'm afraid I made a fool of myself last night," he said. "If I made any unfortunate allusions, you must overlook them. You must have seen that I wasn't altogether responsible."

"I did," Blake answered curtly. "If we are to remain friends, you'd better understand that I can't tolerate any further mention of the matter you talked about."

"Sorry," responded Benson, giving him a keen glance. "Though I don't think you have much cause to be touchy about it, I'll try to remember."

"Then I'd like you to know my partner, Mr. Harding, who has agreed to a suggestion I'm going to make. We want you to come with us on a trip to the northern bush."

"Thanks," said Benson, shaking hands with Harding. "I wonder what use you think I would be?"

"To tell the truth, I haven't considered whether you would be of any use or not. The trip will brace you up, and you look as if you needed it."

Benson's face grew red.

"Your intentions may be good, but you virtuous and respectable people sometimes show a meddlesome thoughtfulness which degenerates like myself resent. Besides, I suspect your offer has come too late."

"I don't think you have much reason for taunting me with being respectable," Blake answered with a grim smile. "Anyway, I want you to come with us."

Tilting back his chair, Benson looked heavily about.

"When I was new to the country, I often wished to go North," he said. "There are caribou and moose up yonder; great sights when the rivers break up in the spring; and a sled trip across the snow must be a thing to remember! The wilds draw me—but I'm afraid my nerve's not good enough. A man must be fit in every way to cross the timber belt."

"Why aren't you fit? Why have you let that fellow Clarke suck the life and energy out of you, as well as rob you of your money?"

"You hit hard, but I deserve it, and I'll try to explain."

Benson indicated the desolate settlement with a gesture of weariness. Ugly frame houses straggled, weather-scarred and dilapidated, along one side of the unpaved street, while unsightly refuse dumps disfigured the slopes of the ravine in front. There was no sign of activity; but two or three untidy loungers leaned against a rude shack with "Pool Room" painted on its dirty windows. All round, the rolling prairie stretched back to the horizon, washed in dingy drab and gray. The prospect was dreary and depressing.

"This place," Benson said grimly, "hasn't much to offer one in the way of relaxation; and, for a man used to something different, life at a lonely homestead soon loses its charm. Unless he's a keen farmer, he's apt to go to bits."

"Then, why don't you quit?" Harding asked.

"Where could I go? A man with no profession except the one he hasn't the means to follow is not of much use at home; and all my money is sunk in my place here. As things stand, I can't sell it." He turned to Blake. "I left the army because a financial disaster for which I wasn't responsible stopped my allowance, and I was in debt. Eventually, about two thousand pounds were saved out of the wreck; and I came here with that, feeling badly hipped. Perhaps that was one reason why I took to whisky; and Clarke, who engaged to teach me farming, saw that I got plenty of it. Now he has his hands on all that's mine; but he keeps me fairly supplied with cash, and it saves trouble to leave things to him."

When Benson stopped, Blake made a sign of comprehension, for he knew that somewhat exceptional qualities are required of the man who undertakes the breaking of virgin prairie in the remoter districts. He must have unflinching courage and stubbornness, and be able to dispense with all the comforts and amenities of civilized life. No interests are offered him beyond those connected with his task; for half the year he must toil unremittingly from dawn till dark, and depend upon his own resources through the long, bitter winter. For society, he may have a hired hand, and the loungers in the saloon of the nearest settlement, which is often a day's ride away; and they are not, as a rule, men of culture or pleasing manners. For the strong in mind and body, it is nevertheless a healthful life; but Benson was not of sufficiently tough fiber.

"Now, see here," said Harding. "I'm out for money, and this is a business trip; but Blake wants to take you, and I'm agreeable. If you can stand for two or three months' hard work in the open, and very plain living, you'll feel yourself a match for Clarke when you get back. Though there's no reason why you should tell a stranger like myself how you stand, if you'd rather not, I know something of business and might see a way out of your difficulties."

Benson hesitated. He would have resented an attempt to use his troubles as a text for improving remarks, for he fully appreciated his failings. What he desired was a means for escaping their consequences; and the American seemed to offer it. He began an explanation and, with the help of a few leading questions, made his financial position fairly clear.

"Well," said Harding, "Clarke has certainly got a tight hold on you; but I guess it's possible to shake him on. As things stand, however, it seems to me he has something to gain by your death."

"He couldn't count on that—to do the fellow justice, he'd hardly go so far; but there's some truth in what you say."

Benson looked disturbed and irresolute, but after a few moments he abruptly threw his cigar away and leaned forward with a decided air.

"If you'll have me, I'll go with you."

"You're wise," Harding said quietly.

Shortly afterward Benson left them, and Harding turned to Blake.

"Now you had better go along and see if you can learn anything from Clarke about our road. He's a rogue, but that's no reason we shouldn't make him useful. If he can help us, pay him. But be careful what you say. Remember that he was watching you at the hotel in Montreal, and I've a suspicion that he was standing in the shadow near the stairs when Benson talked last night."

Borrowing a saddle, Blake rode over to Clarke's homestead, which had a well-kept, prosperous look. He found its owner in a small room furnished as an office. Files of papers and a large map of the Western Provinces hung on one wall; and Clarke was seated at a handsome American desk. He wore old overalls, and the soil on his boots suggested that he had been engaged in fall plowing.

As Blake entered, Clarke looked up and the light fell on his face. It was deeply lined and of a curious dead color, but, while, it bore a sensual stamp and something in it hinted at cruelty, it was, Blake felt, the face of a clever and determined man.

"Ah!" said Clarke. "You have ridden over for a talk. Glad to see you. Have a cigar."

Blake took one and explained his errand. Clarke seemed to consider; then he took out a small hand-drawn map and passed it to his visitor.

"I won't ask why you are going north, as I dare say it's a secret. However, though it's too valuable for me to lend it to you, this will show you your way through the timber belt." He cleared one end of the desk. "Sit here and make a note of the features of the country."

It took Blake some time, but he had been taught such work and did it carefully.

"I'll give you a few directions," Clarke went on, "and you had better take them down. You'll want a canoe and one or two Indians. I can enable you to get them, but I think the service is worth fifty dollars."

"I'd be glad to pay it when we come back," Blake answered cautiously. "It's possible that we might not find the Indians; and we might leave the water and strike overland."

"As you like," Clarke said with a smile. "I'll give you the directions before you go. But there's another matter I want to talk about." He fixed his eyes on Blake. "You are a nephew of Colonel Challoner?"

"I am; but I can't see what connection this has——"

Clarke stopped him.

"It's not an impertinence. Hear me out. You were a lieutenant of engineers and served in India, where you left the army."

"That is correct, but it's not a subject I'm disposed to talk about."

"So I imagined," Clarke said dryly. "Still, I'd like to say that there is some reason for believing you to be a badly treated man. You have my sympathy."

"Thank you. I must remind you, however, that I have given you no grounds for offering it."

"A painful subject! But are you content to quietly suffer injustice?"

"I don't admit an injustice. Besides, I don't see what you can know about the matter—or how it concerns you."

"A proper line to take with an outsider like myself; but I know you were turned out of the army for a fault you did not commit."

Blake's face set sternly.

"It's hard to understand how you arrived at that flattering conclusion."

"I won't explain, but I'm convinced of its correctness," Clarke replied, watching him keenly. "One would imagine that the most important matter is that you were driven out of a calling you liked and were sent here, ruined in repute and fortune. Are you satisfied with your lot? Haven't you the courage to insist on being reinstated?"

"My reinstatement would be difficult," Blake said curtly.

"It would be at the expense of——"

Blake stopped him with a gesture. He would have left the house only that he was curious to learn where Clarke's suggestions led, and how much he knew.

There was a moment's silence, and then Clarke went on:

"A young man of ability, with means and influence behind him, has a choice of careers in England; and there's another point to be considered: you might wish to marry. That, of course, is out of the question now."

"It will no doubt remain so," Blake replied, with the color creeping into his set face.

"Then you have given up all idea of clearing yourself? The thing may be easier than you imagine if properly handled." Clarke paused and added significantly: "In fact, I could show you a way in which the matter could be straightened out without causing serious trouble to anybody concerned; that is, if you are disposed to take me into your confidence."

Blake got up, filled with anger and uneasiness. He had no great faith in Harding's scheme; his life as a needy adventurer had its trials; but he had no intention of changing it. This was an old resolve, but it was disconcerting to feel that an unscrupulous fellow was anxious to meddle with his affairs, for Clarke had obviously implied the possibility of putting some pressure upon Colonel Challoner. Blake shrank from the suggestion; it was not to be thought of.

"I have nothing more to say on the subject," he answered sternly. "It must be dropped."

Somewhat to his surprise, Clarke acquiesced good-humoredly, after a keen glance at him.

"As you wish. However, that needn't prevent my giving you the directions I promised, particularly as it may help me to earn fifty dollars. I believe Benson spent some time with you this morning; are you taking him?"

Blake started. He wondered how the man could have guessed; but he admitted that Benson was going.

"You may find him a drag, but that's your affair," Clarke said in a tone of indifference. "Now sit down and make a careful note of what I tell you."

Believing that the information might be of service, Blake did as he was told, and then took his leave. When he had gone, a curious smile came over Clarke's face. Blake had firmly declined to be influenced by his hints; but Clarke had half expected that, and he had learned enough about the young man's character to clear the ground for a plan that had formed and grown in his clever mind.

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE

Darkness was settling down over the edge of the timber belt that cuts off the prairie from the desolate barrens. In the fading light the straggling wood wore a dreary, forbidding look. The spruces were gnarled and twisted by the wind, a number of them were dead, and many leaned unsymmetrically athwart each other.

Blake and Harding found no beauty in the scene as they wearily led two packhorses through the thin, scattered trees, with Benson lagging a short distance behind. They had spent some time crossing a wide stretch of rolling country dotted with clumps of poplar and birch, which was still sparsely inhabited; and now they were compelled to pick their way among fallen branches and patches of muskeg, for the ground was marshy and their feet sank among the withered needles.

Blake checked his pony and waited until Benson came up. The man moved with a slack heaviness, and his face was worn and tense. He was tired with the journey, for excess had weakened him, and now the lust for drink which he had stubbornly fought had grown overwhelming.

"I can go no faster. Push on and I'll follow your tracks," he said in a surly tone. "It takes time to get into condition, and I haven't walked much for several years."

"Neither have I," Harding answered cheerfully. "I'm more used to riding in elevators and streetcars, but this sort of thing soon makes you fit."

"You're not troubled with my complaint," Benson grumbled; and when Blake started the pony, he deliberately dropped behind.

"He's in a black mood; we'll leave him to himself," Harding advised. "So far he's braced up better than I expected; when a man's been tanking steadily, it's pretty drastic to put him through the total deprivation cure."

"I wonder," Blake said thoughtfully, "whether it is a cure; we have both seen men who made some effort to save themselves go down. Though I'm a long way from being a philanthropist, I hate this waste of good material. Perhaps it's partly an economic objection, because I used to get savage in India when any of the Tommies' lives were thrown away by careless handling."

"It was your soldiers' business to be made use of, wasn't it?"

"Yes; but there's a difference between that and the other thing. It's the needless waste of life and talent that annoys me. On the frontier, we spent men freely, so to speak, because we tried to get something in return—a rebel hill fort seized, a raid turned back. If Benson had killed himself in breaking a horse, or by an accident with a harvesting machine, one couldn't complain; but to see him do so with whisky is another matter."

Harding nodded. Blake was not given to serious conversation; indeed, he was rather casual, as a rule; but Harding was shrewd, and he saw beneath the surface a love of order and a constructive ability.

"I guess you're right; but your speaking of India, reminds me of something I want to mention. I've been thinking over what Clarke said to you. His game's obvious, and it might have been a profitable one. He wanted you to help him in squeezing Colonel Challoner."

"He knows now that he applied to the wrong man."

"Suppose the fellow goes to work without you? It looks as if he'd learned enough to make him dangerous."

"He can do nothing. Let him trump up any plausible theory he likes; it won't stand for a moment after I deny it."

"True," agreed Harding gravely. "But if you were out of the way, he'd have a free hand. As you wouldn't join him, you're a serious obstacle."

Blake laughed.

"I'm glad I am; and as I come of a healthy stock there's reason to believe I'll continue one."

Harding said nothing more, and they went on in silence through the gathering darkness. The spruces were losing shape and getting blacker, though through openings here and there a faint line of smoky red glowed on the horizon. A cold wind wailed among the branches, and the thud of the tired horses' feet rang dully among the shadowy trunks. Reaching a strip of higher ground, the men pitched camp and turned out the hobbled horses to graze among the swamp grass that lined a muskeg. After supper they sat beside their fire in silence for a while; and then Benson took his pipe from his mouth.

"I've had enough of this; and I'm only a drag on you," he said. "Give me grub enough to see me through, and I'll start back for the settlement the first thing in the morning."

"Don't be a fool!" Blake replied sharply. "You'll get harder and feel the march less every day. Are you willing to let Clarke get hold of you again?"

"Oh, I don't want to go; I'm driven—I can't help myself."

Blake felt sorry for him. He imagined that Benson had made a hard fight, but he was being beaten by his craving. Still, it seemed unwise to show any sympathy.

"You want to wallow like a hog for two or three days that you'll regret all your life," he said. "You have your chance for breaking free now. Be a man and take it. Hold out a little longer, and you'll find it easier."

Benson regarded him with a mocking smile.

"I'm inclined to think the jag you so feelingly allude to will last a week; that is, if I can raise money enough from Clarke to keep it up. You may not understand that I'm willing to barter all my future for it."

"Yes," said Harding grimly; "we understand, all right. Yours is not a singular case; the trouble is that it's too common. But we'll quit talking about it. You can't go."

He was in no mood to handle the subject delicately; they were alone in the wilds and the situation made for candor. There was only one way in which they could help the man, and he meant to take it.

Benson turned to him angrily.

"Your permission's not required; I'm a free man."

"Are you?" Harding asked. "It strikes me as a very curious boast. Improving the occasion's a riling thing, but there was never a slave in the world tighter bound than you."

"That's an impertinence!" Benson exclaimed with a flush, as unsatisfied longing drove him to fury. "What business is it of yours to preach to me? Confound you, who are *you*? I tell you, I won't have it! Give me food enough to last until I reach Sweetwater, and let me go!"

As he spoke, a haughty ring crept into his voice. Benson would not have used that tone in his normal state, but he belonged by right of birth to a ruling caste, and no doubt felt that he had been treated with indignity by a man of lower station. Harding, however, answered quietly.

"I am a paint factory drummer who has never had the opportunities you have enjoyed; but so long as we're up here in the wilds the only thing that counts is that we're men with the same weaknesses and feelings. Because that's so, and you're hard up against it, my partner and I mean to see you through."

"You can't unless I'm willing. Man, don't you realize that talking's of no use? The thing I'm driven by won't yield to words. What's more to the purpose, I didn't engage to go all the way with you. Now that I've had enough, I'm going back to the settlement."

"Very well. You were right in claiming that there was no engagement of any kind. So far, we have kept you in grub; but we're not bound to do so, and if you leave us, you must shift for yourself."

There was a tense silence for a moment or two. Benson, his face marked with baffled desire and scarcely controlled fury, glared at the others. Blake's expression was pitiful, but his lips were resolutely set; and Harding's eyes were very keen and determined.

A curious look crept into Benson's face, and he made a sign of resignation.

"It looks as if I were beaten," he said quietly. "I may as well go to sleep."

He wrapped his blanket round him and lay down near the fire, and soon afterward Blake and Harding crept into the tent. Benson would be warm enough where he lay, and they felt it a relief to get away from him.

Day was breaking when Blake rose and threw fresh wood on the fire, and as a bright flame leaped up, driving back the shadows, he saw that Benson was missing. This, however, did not disturb him, for the man had been restless and they had now and then heard him moving about at night. When the fire had burned up and he had filled the kettle, without seeing anything of his friend, he began to grow anxious. He called loudly, but there was no answer, and he could hear no movement in the bush. The dark spruces had grown sharper in form; he could see some distance between the trunks, but everything was still.

"You had better see if the horses are there," Harding suggested, coming out of the tent.

Blake failed to find them near the muskeg, but as the light got clearer he saw tracks leading through the bush. Following these for a distance, he came upon the Indian pony, still hobbled, but the other, a powerful range horse, was missing. Mounting the pony, he rode back to camp, where he found Harding looking grave.

"The fellow's gone and taken some provisions with him," he said. "He left this for us."

It was a strip of paper, apparently torn from a notebook, with a few lines expressing Benson's regret at having to leave them in such an unceremonious fashion, and stating that he would leave the horse, hobbled, at a spot about two days' ride away.

"He seems to think he's showing us some consideration in not riding the beast down to the settlement," Blake remarked with a dubious smile, feeling strongly annoyed with himself for not taking more precautions. With the cunning which the lust for drink breeds in its victims Benson had outwitted him by feigning acquiescence. "Anyway," he added, "I'll have to go after him. We must have the horse, for one thing; but I suppose we'll lose four days. This is rough on you."

"Yes," agreed Harding, "you must go after him; but don't mind about me. The man's a friend of yours, and I like him; I wouldn't feel happy if we let him fall back into the clutches of that cunning brute. Now we'll get breakfast; you'll need it."

"If you don't mind waiting," Blake said, while they made a hasty meal, "I'll follow him half-way to Sweetwater, if necessary. You see, I haven't much expectation of overtaking him before he leaves the horse. It's faster than the pony; and we don't know when he started."

"That's so. Still, you're tough; and I guess the first hard day's ride will be enough for your partner."

Five minutes later Blake was picking his way as fast as possible through the woods. It was a cool morning, and when he had gone a few miles the ground was fairly dear. By noon he was in more open country, where there were long stretches of grass, and after a short rest he pushed on fast. Bright sunshine flooded the waste that now stretched back to the south, sprinkled with clumps of bush that showed a shadowy blue in the distance. Near at hand, the birch and poplar leaves glowed in flecks of vivid lemon among the white stems; but Blake rode hard, his eyes turned steadily on the misty skyline. It was broken only by clusters of small trees; nothing moved on the wilderness of grass and sand ahead of him.

He felt tired when evening came, but he pressed on to find water before he camped. Benson was a weakling, who would no doubt give them further trouble; but they had taken him in hand, and Blake had made up his mind to save him from the rogue who preyed upon his failings.

It was getting late when he saw a faint trail of smoke curl up against the sky from a distant bluff, and on approaching it he checked the jaded pony. Then he dismounted and, picketing the animal, moved cautiously around the edge of the woods. Passing a projecting tongue of smaller brush, he saw, as he had expected, Benson sitting beside the fire. Blake stopped a moment to watch him. The man's face was weary, his pose was slack, and it was obvious that the life he had led had unfitted him for a long, hard ride. He looked forlorn and dejected; but as Blake moved forward, he roused himself, and his eyes had an angry gleam.

"So you have overtaken me! I thought myself safe from you!" he exclaimed.

"You were wrong," Blake replied quietly. "If it had been needful, I'd have gone after you to Clarke's. But I'm hungry, and I'll cook my supper at your fire." He glanced at the provisions scattered about. "You haven't had much of a meal."

"It's a long drink I want," Benson growled.

Blake let this pass. He prepared his supper, and offered Benson a portion.

"Try some of that," he urged, indicating the light flapjacks fizzling among the pork in the frying-pan. "It strikes me as a good deal more tempting than the stuff you have been eating."

Benson thrust the food aside, and Blake ate in silence. Then he took out his pipe.

"Now," he said, "you can go to sleep when you wish. You're probably tired, and it's a long ride back to camp."

"You seem to count upon my going back with you," Benson replied mockingly.

"Of course!"

"Do you suppose it's likely, after I've ridden all this way?"

Blake laid down his pipe and leaned forward, where the firelight flickered on his face.

"Benson, you force me to take a strong line with you. Think a moment. You have land and stock worth a good deal of money which my partner believes can be saved from the rogue who's stealing it from you. You are a young man, and if you pull yourself together and pay off his claims, you can sell out and look for another opening wherever you like; but you know what will happen if you go on as you are doing a year or two longer. Have you no friends or relatives in England to whom you owe something? Is your life worth nothing, that you're willing to throw it away?"

"Oh, that's all true," Benson admitted irritably. "Do you think I can't see where I'm drifting? The trouble is that I've gone too far to stop."

"Try!" persisted Blake. "It's very well worth while."

Benson was silent for a few moments, and then he looked up with a curious expression.

"You're wasting time, Dick," he said. "I've sunk too far. Go back in the morning, and leave me to my fate."

"When I go back, you are coming with me."

Benson's nerves were on edge, and his self-control broke down.

"Confound you!" he cried. "Let me alone! You have reached the limit; once for all, I'll stand no more meddling!"

"Very well," Blake answered quietly. "You have left me only one recourse, and you can't blame me for taking it."

"What's that?"

"Superior strength. You're a heavier man than I am, and ought to be a match for me, but you have lost your nerve and grown soft and flabby with drink. It's your own doing; and now you have to take the consequences. If you compel me, I'll drag you back to camp with the pack lariat."

"Do you mean that?", Benson's face grew flushed and his eyes glittered.

"Try me and see."

Savage as he was, Benson realized that his companion was capable of making good his promise. The man looked hard and very muscular, and his expression was determined.

"This is insufferable!" he cried.

Blake coolly filled his pipe.

"There's no other remedy. Before I go to sleep, I'll picket the horses close beside me; and if you steal away on foot during the night, I'll ride you down a few hours after daybreak. I think you understand me. There's nothing more to be said."

He tried to talk about other matters, but found it hard, for Benson, tormented by his craving, made no response. Darkness wrapped them about and the prairie was lost in shadow. The leaves in the bluff rustled in a faint, cold wind, and the smoke of the fire drifted round the men. For a while Benson sat moodily watching his companion, and then, wrapping his blanket round him, he lay down and turned away his head. Blake sat smoking for a while, and then strolled toward the horses and chose a resting-place beside their pickets.

Waking in the cold of daybreak, he saw Benson asleep, and prepared breakfast before he called him. They ate in silence, and then Blake led up the pony.

"I think we'll make a start," he said, as cheerfully as he could.

For a moment or two Benson hesitated, standing with hands clenched and baffled desire in his face; but Blake looked coolly resolute, and he mounted.

CHAPTER IX

A SUSPICIOUS MOVE

When Benson and Blake rode into the camp, apparently on good terms with each other, Harding made no reference to what had occurred. He greeted them pleasantly, and soon afterward they sat down to the supper he had been cooking. When they had finished, they gathered round the fire with their pipes.

"A remark was made the other night which struck me as quite warranted," Benson said. "It was pointed out that I had contributed nothing to the cost of this trip."

"It was very uncivil of Harding to mention it," Blake answered. "Still, you see, circumstances rather forced him."

"Oh, I admit that; indeed, you might put it more harshly with truth. But I want to suggest that you let me take a share in your venture."

"Sorry," said Harding promptly; "I can't agree to that."

Benson sat smoking in silence for a moment.

"I think I understand," he said, "and I can't blame you. You haven't much cause for trusting me."

"I didn't mean——"

"I know," Benson interrupted. "It's my weakness you're afraid of. However, you must let me pay my share of the provisions and any transport we may be able to get. That's all I insist on now; if you feel more confidence in me later, I may reopen the other question." He paused, and continued with a little embarrassment in his manner: "You are two good fellows. I think I can promise not to play the fool again."

"Suppose we talk about something else," Blake suggested.

They broke camp early the following morning; and Benson struggled manfully with his craving during the next week or two, which they spent in pushing farther into the forest. It was a desolate waste of small, stunted trees, many of which were dead and stripped of half their branches, while wide belts had been scarred by fire. Harding found the unvarying somber green of the needles strangely monotonous; but the ground was comparatively clear, and the party made progress.

Then, one evening, when the country grew more broken, they fell in with three returning prospectors.

"If you'll trade your horses, we might make a deal," said one when they camped together. "You can't take them much farther—the country's too rough—and we could sell them to one of the farmers near the settlements."

Blake was glad to come to terms.

"We've been out two months on a general prospecting trip," the man informed them. "It's the toughest country to get through I ever struck."

His worn and ragged appearance bore this out; and Benson looked somewhat dismayed.

"Are there minerals up yonder?" Harding asked. "We're not in that line; it's a forest product we're looking for."

"We found indications of gold, copper, and one or two other metals, besides petroleum, but we didn't see anything that looked worth taking up. Considering the cost of transport, you want to strike it pretty rich before what you find will pay as a business proposition."

"So I should imagine. Petroleum's a cheap product to handle when you're a long way from a market, isn't it?"

"Give us plenty of it and we'll make a market. It's an idea of mine that there's no part of this country that hasn't something worth working in it if you can get cheap fuel. Where the land's too poor for farming, you often find minerals, and ore that won't pay for transport can be reduced on the spot, so long as you have natural resources that can be turned into power. With an oil well in good flow, we'd soon start some profitable industry and put up a city that would bring a railroad in. Show our business men a good opening, and you'll get the money. And there are men across the frontier who have a mighty keen scent for oil."

"Have you done much prospecting?" Harding asked.

The man smiled.

"Whenever I can get money enough for an outfit I go off on the trail. There's a fascination in the thing that gets hold of you—you can't tell what you may strike, and the prizes are big. However, I'll admit that after seven or eight years of it I'm poorer than when I started at the game."

Blake made a sign of comprehension. He knew the sanguine nature of the Westerner and his belief in the richness of his country; and he himself had felt the call of the wilderness. There was, in truth, a fascination in the silent waste that drew the adventurous into its rugged fastnesses; that a number of them did not come back seldom deterred the others.

"We want to get as far north as the timber limit, if we can," Harding said. "I understand that there are no Hudson Bay factories near our line, but we were told we might find some Stony Indians."

"There's one bunch of them," the prospector replied. "They ramble about after fish and furs, but they've a kind of base-camp where a few generally stop. They're a mean crowd, and often short of food, but if they've been lucky you might get supplies. Now and then they put up a lot of dried fish and kill some caribou."

He told Blake roughly where the Indian encampment lay; and after talking for a while they went to sleep. The next morning the prospectors took the horses and started for the south, while Blake's party pushed on north with loads that severely tried their strength. After a few days' laborious march they reached a stream and found a few Indians who were willing to take them some distance down it. It was a relief to get rid of the heavy packs and rest while the canoe glided smoothly through the straggling forest, and the labor of hauling her across the numerous portages was light compared with the toil of the march.

Blake, however, had misgivings. They were making swift progress northward; but it would be different when they came back. Rivers and lakes would be frozen then. That might make traveling easier, if they could pick up the hand sleds they had cached; but there was a limit to the provisions they could transport, and unless fresh supplies could be obtained they would have a long distance to traverse on scanty rations in the rigors of the arctic winter.

After a day or two the Indians, who were going no farther, landed them, and they entered a belt of very broken country across which they must push to reach a larger stream. The ground was rocky, pierced by ravines, and covered with clumps of small trees. There were stony tracts across which they painfully picked their way, steep ridges to be clambered over, and belts of quaggy muskeg they must skirt. Benson, however, gave them no trouble; the man was getting hard and was generally cheerful; and when he had an occasional fit of moroseness, as he fought with the longing that tormented him, they left him alone. Still, at times they were daunted by the rugged sternness of the region they were steadily pushing through, and the thought of the long return journey troubled them.

One night, when it was raining, they sat beside their fire in a desolate gorge. A cold wind swept between the thin spruce trunks that loomed vaguely out of the surrounding gloom as the red glare leaped up, and wisps of acrid smoke drifted about the camp. There was a lake up the hollow, and now and then the wild and mournful cry of a loon rang out. The men were tired and somewhat dejected as they sat about the blaze with their damp blankets round them. A silence had fallen upon them; but suddenly Blake looked up, startled.

"What was that?" he exclaimed.

The others could hear nothing but the sound of running water and the wail of the wind. Since leaving the Indians they had seen no sign of life and believed that they were crossing uninhabited wilds. Blake could not tell what had suddenly roused his attention, but in former days he had developed his perceptive faculties by close night watching on the Indian frontier, where any relaxing of his vigilance might have cost his life. Something, he thought, was moving in the bush, and he felt uneasy.

A stick cracked, and Harding called out as a shadowy figure appeared on the edge of the light. Blake laughed, but his uneasiness did not desert him when he recognized Clarke. The fellow was not to be trusted, and he had come upon them in a startling manner.

"I suppose you are surprised to see me," Clarke said, moving coolly forward and sitting down by the fire.

"We are," Harding answered briefly.

Benson's face wore a curious, strained expression, but he did not speak.

"Well," Clarke laughed, as he filled his pipe, "I dare say I made a rather dramatic entrance, falling upon you, so to speak, out of the dark."

"I've a suspicion that you enjoy that kind of thing," Harding said. "You're a man with the dramatic feeling; guess you find it useful now and then."

Clarke's eyes twinkled, but it was not with wholesome humor. His eyes were keen, but he looked old and forbidding as he sat with the smoke blowing about him and the ruddy firelight on his face.

"There's some truth in your remark, and I take it as a compliment; but my arrival's easily explained. I saw your fire in the distance and curiosity brought me along."

"What are you doing up here?"

"Going on a visit to my friends, the Stonies. Though it's a long way, I look them up now and then."

"From what I've heard of them, they don't seem a very attractive lot," Blake interposed. "But we haven't offered you any supper. Benson, you might put on the frying-pan."

"No, thanks," said Clarke. "I'm camped with two half-breeds a little way back. The Stonies, as you remark, are not a polished set; but we're on pretty good terms, and it's their primitiveness that makes them interesting. You can learn things civilized men don't know much about from these people."

"In my opinion, it's knowledge that's not worth much to a white man," Harding remarked contemptuously. "Guess you mean the secrets of their medicine-men? What isn't gross superstition is trickery."

"There you are wrong. They have some tricks, rather clever ones, though that's not unusual with the professors of a more advanced occultism; but living, as they do, in direct contact with nature in her most savage mood, they have found clues to things that we regard as mysteries. Anyway, they have discovered a few effective remedies that aren't generally known yet to medical science."

He spoke with some warmth, and had the look of a genuine enthusiast; but Harding laughed.

"Medical science hasn't much to say in favor of hoodoo practises, so far as I know. But I understand you are a doctor?"

"I was pretty well known in London."

"Then," Harding asked bluntly, "what brought you to Sweetwater?"

"If you haven't heard, I may as well tell you, because the thing isn't a secret at the settlement." Clarke turned and his eyes rested on Blake. "I'm by no means the only man who has come to Canada under a cloud. There was a famous police-court affair that I figured in. Nothing was proved against me, but my practise afterward fell to bits. As a matter of fact, I was absolutely innocent of the offense. I had acted without much caution, out of pity, and laid myself open to an attack that was meant to cover the escape of the real criminal."

Blake thought he spoke the truth, and he felt some sympathy; but Clarke went on:

"In a few weeks I was without patients or friends; driven out from the profession I loved and in which I was beginning to make my mark. It was a blow that I never altogether recovered from; and the generous impulse which got me into trouble was the last that I ever yielded to."

His face changed, growing hard and malevolent, and Blake now felt strangely repelled. It looked as if the man had been soured by his misfortunes, and had turned into an outlaw who took a vindictive pleasure in making such reprisals as he found possible upon society at large. This conclusion was borne out by what Blake had learned at the settlement.

No one made any comment, and there was silence for a few minutes while the smoke whirled about the group and the drips from the dark boughs above fell upon the brands. Then, after a little casual talk, Clarke rose to go.

"I shall start at daybreak, and your way lies to the east of mine," he said. "You'll find traveling easier when the snow comes. I wish you good luck."

Though the loneliness of the wilds had now and then weighed upon them, they all felt relieved when he left. After Benson went to sleep, Blake and Harding continued talking for a while.

"That's a man we'll have to watch," the American declared. "I suppose it struck you that he made no attempt to get your friend back?"

"I noticed it. He may have thought it wouldn't succeed, and didn't wish to show his hand. Benson already looks a different man; I saw Clarke studying him."

"He could have drawn him away by the sight of a whisky flask, or a hint of a jag in camp. My opinion is that he didn't want him."

"That's curious," said Blake. "He seems to have stuck to Benson pretty closely, no doubt with the object of fleecing him; and you think he's not altogether ruined yet."

"If what he told me is correct, there are still some pickings left on him."

"I don't suppose the explanation is that Clarke has some conscience, and feels that he has robbed him enough."

Harding laughed.

"He has about as much pity as a hungry wolf; in fact, to my mind, he's the more dangerous brute, because I've a feeling that he delights in doing harm. There's something cruel about the man; getting fired out of his profession must have warped his nature. Then there was another point that struck me—why's he going so far to stay with those Indians?"

"It's puzzling," Blake answered thoughtfully. "He hinted that he was interested in their superstitions, and I think there was some truth in it. Meddling with these things seems to have a fascination for neurotic people, and as the fellow's a sensualist he may find some form of indulgence that wouldn't be tolerated near the settlements. All this, however, doesn't quite seem to account for the thing."

"I've another idea," said Harding. "Clarke's known as a crank, and he takes advantage of it to cover his doings. At first, I thought of the whisky trade; but taking up prohibited liquor would hardly be worth his while; though I dare say he has some with him to be used for gaining his Indian friends' good will. He's on the trail of something, and it's probably minerals. What the prospector told us suggested it to me."

"You may be right. Anyway, it doesn't seem to concern us."

"Well," said Harding gravely, "I'm troubled about his leaving Benson alone. The fellow had some good reason—I wish I knew."

He rose to throw more wood on the fire, and they changed the subject.

CHAPTER X

THE MUSKEG

A fortnight later the party entered a hollow between two low ranges. The hills receded as they progressed, the basin widened and grew more difficult to traverse, for the ground was boggy and thickly covered with small, rotting pines. Every here and there some had fallen and lay in tangles among pools of mire. A sluggish creek wound through the hollow and the men had often to cross it; and as they plodded through the morass they found their loads intolerably heavy. Still, Clarke's directions had plainly indicated this valley as their road, and they stubbornly pushed on, camping where they could find a dry spot.

They were wet to the waist, and their temper began to give way under the strain. When they lay down in damp clothes beside the fire at nights, Blake was annoyed to find his sleep disturbed by a touch of malarial fever. He had suffered from it in India, and now it had attacked him again, in his weakened condition due to the hardships of the march. Sometimes he was too hot and sometimes he lay awake shivering for hours. Saying nothing to his companions, however, he patiently trudged on, though his head throbbed and he was conscious of a depressing weakness.

The ground grew softer as they proceeded. The creek no longer kept within its banks, but spread in shallow pools; and the rotting trees were giving place to tall grass and reeds. The valley had turned

into very wet muskeg. It was shut in by hills whose rocky sides were seamed by ravines and covered with banks of stones and short brush, through which it was almost impossible to force a passage.

After making several attempts to get out of the valley, the men plodded on through the muskeg, tramping down the wiry grass, often stumbling over a partly submerged tree-trunk.

Then one day Blake felt his head reel. He staggered, and dropped down heavily.

"Sorry!" he mumbled. "Malaria!"

His companions gazed at him in dismay. His face was flushed; his eyes glittered; and he lay limply among the grass. He looked seriously ill. Harding, realizing that the situation must be grappled with, resolutely pulled himself together.

"You can't lie there; the ground's too wet," he said. "It's drier on yonder hummock, and we'll have to get you across to it. If you can stand up and lean on us, we'll fix you comfortably in camp in a few minutes."

Blake did not move. Instead, he lay gazing up at them and mumbling to himself. With much trouble, they got him to a small, stony knoll, where they made a fire and spread their blankets on a bundle of reeds for him to lie on. Then he spoke, in a faint and listless voice.

"Thanks! I think I'll go to sleep. I'll feel better to-morrow."

He fell asleep, but his rest was broken, for he moved his limbs and muttered now and then. It was a heavy, gray afternoon, with a cold wind rippling the leaden pools and rustling the reeds, and the watchers felt dejected and alarmed. Neither had any medical knowledge, and they were a very long way from the settlements. Rocky hillsides and wet muskegs, which they could not cross with a sick companion, shut them off from all help. Their provisions were not plentiful; and the rigorous winter would soon set in.

They scarcely spoke to each other as the afternoon wore away. When supper time came, Harding roused Blake and tried to give him a little food. He could not eat, however, and soon sank again into a restless sleep. His companions sat disconsolately beside the fire as night closed in. Their clothes were damp and splashed with mud, for they had had to cross a patch of very soft muskeg to gather wood among a clump of rotting spruces. The wind was searching, the reeds clashed and rustled drearily, and even the splash of the ripples on a neighboring pool was depressing. As in turn they kept watch in the darkness their hearts sank.

The next morning Blake was obviously worse. He insisted irritably that he would be all right again in a day or two, but the others felt dubious.

"How often must I tell you that the thing will wear off?" he said.
"You needn't look so glum."

"I thought I was looking pretty cheerful," Harding objected with a forced laugh. "Anyway, I've been working off my best stories for the last hour, and I really think that one about the Cincinnati man——"

"You overdo the thing," Blake interrupted crossly; "and the way Benson grins at your thread-bare jokes would worry me if I were well! Do you suppose I'm a fool and don't know what you think?" He raised himself on his elbow, speaking angrily. "Try to understand that this is merely common malaria! I've had it several times; but it doesn't bother you when you're out of the tropics. Why, Bertram—very good fellow, Bertram; so's his father. If anybody speaks against my cousin, let him look out for me!"

He paused a moment, looking around him dazedly.

"Getting off the subject, wasn't I? Can't think with this pain in my head and back; but don't worry. Leave me alone; I'll soon be on my feet again."

Lying down, he turned away from them, and during the next few hours he dozed intermittently.

Late in the afternoon an Indian reached the camp. He carried a dirty blue blanket and a few skins and was dressed in ragged white men's clothes. In a few words of broken English he made them understand that he was tired and short of food, and they gave him a meal. When he had finished it, they fell into conversation and Benson, who understood him best, told Harding that he had been trapping in the neighborhood. His tribe lived some distance off, and though there were some Stonies not far away, he would not go to them for supplies. They were, he said, quarrelsome people.

Harding looked interested.

"Ask the fellow where the village is!"

When Benson had interpreted the Indian's answer, Harding lighted his pipe and thought keenly for a long time. Rain had begun to fall, and though they had built a rude shelter of earth and stones to keep off the wind in place of the tent, which had been abandoned to save weight, the raw damp seemed to reach their bones. It was not the place for a fever patient; and Harding was getting anxious. He had led his comrade into the adventure, and he felt responsible for him; moreover, he had a strong affection for the helpless man. Blake was very ill, and something must be done to save him; but for a while Harding could not see how help could be obtained. Then an idea crept into his mind, and he got Benson to ask the Indian a few more questions about the locality. When they were answered, he began to see his way; but he waited until supper was over before he spoke of his plan.

It was getting dark and raining hard. Blake was asleep; the Indian sitting silent; and the fire crackled noisily, throwing up a wavering light against the surrounding gloom.

"I suppose I needn't consider you a friend of Clarke's?" Harding began.

"There's no reason why I should feel grateful to him; though I can't blame him for all my misfortunes," Benson replied.

"That clears the ground. Well, it must have struck you that Clarke's account of the whereabouts of the Stony camp doesn't agree with what the prospectors and this Indian told us. He fixed the locality farther west and a good deal farther off from where we are now. Looks as if he didn't want us to reach the place."

"He's a scheming brute, but I can't see his object in deceiving us."

"We'll leave that point for a minute. You must admit it's curious that when we asked him for the easiest way he sent us through these hills and muskegs; particularly as you have learned from the Indian that we could have got north with much less trouble had we headed farther west."

"That has an ugly look," Benson answered thoughtfully.

"Well, I'm going to put the thing before you as I see it. Clarke has lent you money and has a claim on your homestead, which will increase in value as the settlement grows—and sooner or later they are bound to bring in a railroad. Now, after what you once told me, I don't think there's any reason why you shouldn't pay him off in a year or two, if you keep steady and work hard; but while you were in his clutches that looked very far from probable."

"You might have put it more plainly—I was drinking myself to death." Benson's face grew stern. "You suggest that that is what the fellow wished?"

"You can form your own opinion. My point is that it would suit him if you didn't come back from this trip. With nobody to dispute his statements, he'd prove he had a claim to all you own."

Benson started.

"I believe he would stick at nothing! But I'm only one of the party; what would he gain if you and Blake came to grief?"

"That," said Harding evasively, "is not so clear."

He glanced at his companion searchingly, and seeing that he suspected nothing, he decided not to enlighten him. Benson seemed to have overcome his craving, but there was a possibility that he might relapse after his return to the settlement, and betray the secret in his cups. Harding thought Clarke a dangerous man of unusual ability and abnormal character. He had learned from Benson something of Blake's history, and had seen a chance for extorting money from Colonel Challoner. Indeed, Clarke had made overtures to Blake on the subject, with the pretext of wishing to ascertain whether the latter were willing to seek redress, and had met with an indignant rebuff. This much was a matter of fact, but Harding surmised that the man, finding Blake more inclined to thwart than assist him, would be glad to get rid of him. With Blake out of the way, the Challoners, father and son, would be at Clarke's mercy; and it unfortunately looked as if his wishes might be gratified. Harding meant, however, to make a determined effort to save his comrade.

"I don't understand what you're leading up to," Benson remarked.

"It's this—I suspect Clarke intended us to get entangled among these muskegs, where we'd have no chance for renewing our provisions, and he misled us about the Stony village, which he didn't wish us to reach. Well, he has succeeded in getting us into trouble; now he has to help us out. The fellow is a

doctor."

Benson looked up eagerly.

"You're going to bring him here? It's a daring plan, because it will be difficult to make him come."

"He'll come if he values his life," Harding said resolutely. "The Indian will take me to the village, and perhaps see me through if I offer him enough; he seems to have some grudge against the Stonies. I'll have to drop in upon the doctor late at night, when none of his Indian friends are about."

"But who'll look after Blake? He can't be left."

"That's your part. You'd run more risk than I would, and I'm his partner."

"I'd hate to stay," Benson protested. "You know how I'm indebted to Blake."

"It's your place," Harding insisted. "Try to arrange the thing with the Indian."

It took some time, but the man proved amenable. He frankly owned that he would not have ventured near the Stony camp alone, because of some quarrel between its inhabitants and his tribe, originating, Benson gathered, over a dispute about trapping grounds; but he was ready to accompany the white man, if the latter went well armed.

"All right; that's settled. We start at daybreak," said Harding. "I'll lie down now; it's your watch."

Five minutes later he was sound asleep, and awoke, quietly determined and ready for the march, in the cold of dawn. He was a man of the cities, bred to civilized life, but he had a just appreciation of the risks attached to his undertaking. He meant to abduct the doctor, who himself was dangerous to meddle with, from an Indian village where he apparently was held in great esteem. The Stonies, living far remote, had escaped the chastening influence of an occasional visit from the patrols of the North-West Police; they knew nothing of law and order. Moreover, there was a possibility that Clarke might prove too clever for his abductor.

It was certainly a strange adventure for a business man, but Harding believed that his comrade would perish unless help could be obtained. He shook hands with Benson, who wished him a sincere "Good-luck!" and then, with the Indian leading, struck out through the muskeg toward the shadowy hills.

CHAPTER XI

KIDNAPPED

Harding had cause to remember the forced march he made to the Stony village. The light was faint, and the low ground streaked with haze, as they floundered through the muskeg, sinking deep in the softer spots and splashing through shallow pools. When they reached the first hill bench he was hot and breathless, and their path led sharply upward over banks of ragged stones which had a trick of slipping down when they trod on them. It was worse where the stones were large and they stumbled into the hollows between. Then they struggled through short pine-scrub, crawled up a wet gorge where thick willows grew, and afterward got entangled among thickets of thorny canes. Harding's clothes were badly torn and his boots giving out; his breath was labored, and his heart beat painfully, but he pressed on upward, without slackening his pace, for he knew there was no time to be lost.

It was exhausting toil, and trying to the man who, until he entered that grim country, had undergone no physical training and had seldom tried his muscles; being left to shift for himself at an unusually early age had prevented his even playing outdoor games. His career had been a humble one, but it had taught him self-reliance, and when he was thrown into the company of men brought up in a higher station he was not surprised that they accepted him as an equal and a comrade. There was, however, nothing assertive in the man; he knew his powers and their limitations. Now he clearly recognized that he had undertaken a big thing; but the need was urgent, and he meant to see it through. He was of essentially practical temperament, a man of action, and it was necessary that he should keep up with

his Indian guide as long as possible. Therefore, he braced himself for the arduous task.

In the afternoon they reached a tableland where traveling was slightly easier; but when they camped without a fire among the rocks, one of Harding's feet was bleeding, and he was very weary. Walking was painful for the first hour after they started again at dawn, but after walking a while his galled foot troubled him less, and he doggedly followed the Indian up and down deep ravines and over rough stony slopes. Then they reached stunted timber: thickly massed, tangled pines, with many dead trees among them, a number which had fallen, barring the way. The Indian seemed tireless; Harding could imagine his muscles having been toughened into something different from ordinary flesh and blood. He was feeling great distress; but for the present there was only one thing for him to do, and that was to march. He saw it clearly with his shrewd sense; and though his worn-out body revolted, his resolution did not flinch.

They forced a way through thickets, they skirted precipitous rocks, passed clusters of ragged pines, and plunged down ravines. In the afternoon the sun was hot, and when it got low a cold wind buffeted them as they crossed the height of land. Harding's side ached, and his feet were bleeding, but the march went on. Just before dark there opened up before them a wide valley, fading into the blue distance, with water shining in its midst and gray blurs of willows here and there. However, it faded swiftly, and Harding found himself limping across a stony ridge into a belt of drifting mist. Half an hour afterward he threw himself down, exhausted, beside a fire in a sheltered hollow.

Late at night they stopped a few minutes to listen and look about on the outskirts of the Indian village. Thick willows stretched up to it, with mist that moved before a light wind drifting past them; and the blurred shapes of conical tepees showed dimly through the vapor. The night was dark but still, and Harding knew that a sound would carry some distance. He felt his heart beat tensely, but there was nothing to be heard. He had seen dogs about the Indian encampments farther south and he was afraid now of hearing a warning bark; but nothing broke the silence, and he concluded that Clarke's friends were unable to find food enough for sled-teams. This was reassuring, because the odds against him were heavy enough, knowing, as he did, that the Indian's sense of hearing is remarkably keen.

Making certain that his magazine pistol was loose, he motioned to his guide and they moved cautiously forward. The ground was fortunately clear, and their footsteps made little noise, though now and then tufts of dry grass which Harding trod upon rustled with what seemed to him alarming distinctness. Still, nobody challenged them, and creeping up to the center of the village they stopped again. The nearest of the tepees was only thirty or forty yards away, though others ran back into the mist. As Harding stood listening, with tingling nerves, he clearly recognized the difficulty of his enterprise. In the first place, there was nothing to indicate which tent Clarke occupied; and it was highly undesirable that Harding should choose the wrong one and rouse an Indian from his slumbers. Then, it was possible that the man shared a tepee with one of his hosts, in which case Harding would place himself at the Indian's mercy by entering it. Clarke was a dangerous man, and his Stony friends were people with rudimentary ideas and barbarous habits. Harding glanced at his guide, but the man stood very still, and he could judge nothing about his feelings from his attitude.

Fortune favored them, for as Harding made toward a tepee, without any particular reason for doing so, except that it stood a little apart from the others, he saw a faint streak of light shine out beneath the curtain. This suggested that it was occupied by the white man; and it was now an important question whether he could reach it silently enough to surprise him. Beckoning the Indian to fall behind, he crept forward, with his heart beating painfully, and stopped a moment just outside the entrance. It was obvious that he had not been heard, but he could not tell whether Clarke was alone. Then the Indian, creeping silently up behind him, dragged the doorway open. Harding jumped quickly through the entrance, and stood, ragged, unkempt, and strung up, blinking in the unaccustomed light.

The tent had an earth floor, with a layer of reeds and grass thrown down on one side. It was frail, and hinted at changing times and poverty, for the original skin cover had been patched and eked out with the products of civilization in the shape of cotton flour-bags and old sacking. In the later repairs sewing twine had been used instead of sinews. A wooden case stood open near the reeds, and Harding saw that it contained glass jars and what looked like laboratory apparatus; a common tin kerosene lamp hung from the junction of the frame poles, which met at the point of the cone. A curious smell, which reminded him of the paint factory, filled the tent, though he could not recognize it.

As Harding entered, Clarke looked up from where he was bending over the case. It was, Harding thought, a good test of his nerve; but his face was imperturbable and he showed no surprise. There was silence for a moment, while the Indian stood motionless, with his ax shining as it caught the light, and Harding's lips grew firmly set. Then Clarke spoke.

"So you have turned back! You found the muskeg too difficult to cross?
I suppose this fellow showed you the way here."

Harding felt worn out; he crossed the floor to the heap of reeds and sat down facing Clarke.

"We have come for you," he announced abruptly; "and we must start at once. My partner is very sick—fever—and you'll have to cure him."

Clarke laughed, without mirth.

"You're presuming on my consent."

"Yes," said Harding sternly; "I'm counting right on that. It wouldn't be wise of you to refuse."

"I don't agree with you. A shout or a shot would bring in my friends, and you'd find yourself in a very unpleasant position. You had better understand that nobody troubles about what goes on up here—and I believe I'm a person of some influence." He indicated Harding's guide. "I don't know what this fellow's doing in this neighborhood, but he belongs to a tribe the Stonies have a grudge against. On the whole, I think you have been somewhat rash."

"I guess you're clever enough to see that since I've taken a lot of chances in coming I'm not likely to be bluffed off now. But we'll let that go. The most important thing is that Blake will die unless he gets proper treatment—and gets it mighty soon."

Clarke regarded him with a mocking smile.

"It's a matter of indifference to me whether Blakes dies or not."

"Oh, no!" said Harding. "On the whole, you would rather he did die. He's in the way."

He could not tell whether this shot had reached the mark, for though Clarke's eyes were steadily fixed on him the man's face was inscrutable.

"If you're right, it seems strange that you should urge me to prescribe for him."

"There are precautions I mean to take," Harding informed him dryly. "However, I haven't come here to argue. For reasons of your own, you sent us into a belt of country which you thought we couldn't possibly get through. You expected us to be held up there until our provisions ran out and winter set in, when these Stonies would no doubt have moved on. Well, part of what you wished has happened; but the matter is taking a turn you couldn't have looked for. You led us into difficulties—and now you're going to get us out. I guess delay means danger. Get ready to start."

The Indian raised his hand in warning. Footsteps approached the tepee with something strangely stealthy in their tread, and Clarke, turning his head, listened with a curious expression. Then he looked at Harding and as the steps drew nearer the American's lips set tight. His pose grew tense, but it was more expressive of determination than alarm. For a few moments none of the party moved and then the attitude of all relaxed as the footsteps passed and grew indistinct. Clarke broke into a faint smile.

"That was not an ordinary Stony but a gentleman of my profession, with similar interests, going about his business. There are reasons why he should undertake it in the dark. You were right in supposing that you were in some danger—and the danger isn't over."

Harding felt a shiver. He had the repugnance of the healthy minded man of affairs from any form of meddling with what he vaguely thought of as the occult; but in that remote, grim solitude he could not scoff at it.

"Understand this!" he said curtly. "I mean to save my partner; I've staked my life on doing so. But I've said enough. You're coming with me—now—and if you make any attempt to rouse your friends, you'll have a chance to learn something about the other world at first hand a few seconds afterward."

Clarke saw that it was not an idle threat. The American meant what he said, and he hurriedly put a few things together and made them into a pack. Then he turned to Harding with a gesture of ironical resignation.

"I'm ready."

The Indian laid a firm hand on his arm, and Harding took out his pistol and extinguished the lamp.

"Your interest in keeping quiet is as strong as mine," he sternly reminded Clarke.

He set his teeth as they passed a tepee at a few yards' distance. He could see the dark gap of the

doorway, and had a nervous fancy that eyes were following his movements; for now that he had succeeded in the more difficult part of his errand, he was conscious of strain. Indeed, he feared that he might grow limp with the reaction; and the danger was not yet over. Unless they reached camp in the next few days, he thought Blake would die, and the journey was a long and arduous one. Still, he was determined that if disaster overtook him, the plotter who had betrayed them should not escape. Harding was a respecter of law and social conventions; but now, under heavy stress, he had suddenly become primitive.

They approached the only remaining tepee. The tension on Harding's nerves grew severe. As the Indian, holding tightly to their prisoner's arm, picked his way noiselessly past the open flap, Clarke made a queer noise—half cough, half sneeze—very low, but loud enough to be heard by any one in the tent. Like a flash, Harding threw up his pistol, ready for use. As he did so, his foot tripped on a broken bottle lying in front of the dark entrance. The pistol did not go off, but Harding, trying wildly to regain his balance, fell with a crash against the tepee.

CHAPTER XII

THE FEVER PATIENT

When Harding scrambled to his feet, with his pistol still aimed, Clarke laughed.

"You're not only very rash—and very clumsy—but you're lucky. That's the only vacant tepee in the whole village. And my friends don't seem to have heard you."

They moved on very quickly and cautiously, and when they reached the thick willow bluff, where they were comparatively safe, Harding felt easier.

It was noon when they stumbled into camp, Harding ragged and exhausted, and Clarke limping after him in an even more pitiable state. The doctor had suffered badly from the hurried march; but his conductor would brook no delay, and the grim hints he had been given encouraged him to put forth his utmost exertion.

Blake was alive, but when Harding bent over him he feared that help had come too late. His skin looked harsh and dry, his face had grown hollow, and his thick, strong hair had turned lank and was falling out. His eyes were vacant and unrecognizing when he turned them upon Harding.

"Here's your patient," the American said to Clarke. "We expect you to cure him, and you had better get to work at once."

Then his face grew troubled as he turned to Benson.

"How long has he been like that?" he asked.

"The last two days. I'm afraid he's very bad."

Harding sat down with a smothered groan. Every muscle seemed to ache; he could scarcely hold himself upright; and his heart was very heavy. He would miss Blake terribly. It was hard to think of going on without him; but he feared that this was inevitable. He was filled with a deep pity for the helpless man; but after a few moments his weary face grew stern. He had done all that he was able, and now Clarke, whom he believed to be a man of high medical skill, must do his part. If he were unsuccessful, it would be the worse for him.

"Did you have much trouble?" Benson asked, as he laid out a meal.

"No; I suppose I was fortunate, because the thing was surprisingly easy. Of course, Clarke did not want to come."

"I don't see how you overcame his objections."

Harding broke into a dry smile.

"In the kind of game I played with the doctor your strength depends on how much you're willing to lose, and I put down all I had upon the table. That beat him, because he wasn't willing to stake as much."

"You mean your life? Of course, I know you were in some danger; but was it so serious?"

"It would have been if I'd shot him; and I think he saw I meant that.
What's more, I may have to do so yet."

Harding's tone was quietly matter of fact, but Benson no longer wondered at Clarke's submission. He had been a soldier and had faced grave risks, but he was inclined to think that, even before he had weakened it by excess, his nerve had never been so good as this young American's.

"Well," he said, "I'm fond of Blake, and I recognize my debt to him; we were once comrades in an adventure that was more dangerous than this; but I'm not sure that I'd have been ready to go as far as you. In a way, though, you were quite justified; the fellow no doubt set a trap for us. But if he's to have a fair chance, we had better give him something to eat. If he's as hungry as you are, he needs it."

He called Clarke to join them by the fire. Weariness had deepened the lines on the doctor's face, and there were puffy pouches under his eyes. He was obviously exhausted and scarcely able to move, but there was something malignant in his look. He ate greedily, without speaking, and then glanced up at the others.

"Well," Benson asked, "what's your opinion?"

"Your friend's state is dangerous. How he came to suffer from a severe attack of malaria in this bracing climate, I can't determine; and, after all, it's not an important point. He can't live much longer at his present temperature."

"And the remedy?"

"One of two is indicated, and the choice is difficult, because both are risky."

"Then they're risky to you as well as to your patient," Harding grimly reminded him.

Clarke made a contemptuous gesture, which was not without a touch of dignity. His manner now was severely professional.

"One course would be to put him into the coldest water we can find; it's drastic treatment, and sometimes effective, but there's a strong probability of its killing him."

"You had better mention the other."

"The administration of a remedy of my own, which I'll admit few doctors would venture to use. It's almost as dangerous as the first course, and in case of success recovery is slower."

Harding pondered this for a moment or two. He distrusted the man, and believed he would feel no compunction about poisoning Blake, should he consider it safe to do so, but he thought he had convinced him of the contrary.

"I must leave you to decide; but I warn you that I'll hold you responsible if the result's unfortunate."

"If you doubt my professional skill or good faith, why do you put your partner in my charge?"

"I have some confidence in your sense of self-interest," Harding answered. "You'll serve the latter best by curing Blake."

Clarke gave him a curious glance.

"I'll try the draught, and it had better be done now," he said. "There is no time to lose."

He moved toward Blake, who lay with half-closed eyes, breathing with apparent difficulty and making feeble restless movements. Stooping beside him, he took out a very small bottle and carefully let a few drops fall into a spoon. With some trouble, he got the sick man to swallow them; and then he sat down and turned to Harding.

"I can't predict the result. We must wait an hour; then I may be able to form some opinion."

Harding lighted his pipe, and, though he found it strangely hard to sit still, he smoked steadily. His mouth grew dry with the strain he was bearing, but he refilled the pipe as it emptied, and bit savagely on its stem, crushing the wood between his teeth. There was, so far as he could see, no change in Blake, and he was stirred by a deep pity and a daunting sense of loneliness. He knew now that he had grown to love the man; Blake's quick resourcefulness had overcome many of the obstacles they had met with, his whimsical humor had lightened the toilsome march, and often when they were wet and worn

out be had banished their dejection by a jest. Now it looked as if they would hear his cheerful laugh no more; and Harding felt that, if the worst came, he would, in a sense, be accountable for his partner's death. It was his sanguine expectations that had drawn Blake into the wilds.

Benson seemed to find the suspense equally trying, but he made no remark, and there was nothing to be learned from Clarke's impassive face. Harding could only wait with all the fortitude he could muster; but he long remembered that momentous hour. They were all perfectly still; there was no wind, a heavy gray sky overhung them, and the smoke of the fire went straight up. The gurgle of running water came softly through the silence.

At last, when Harding felt the tension becoming unendurable, Clarke glanced at his watch and reopened the small bottle.

"We'll try again," he said gravely; and Harding thought he detected anxiety in his tone.

The dose was given; and Harding, feeling the urgent need of action if he were to continue calm, got up and wandered about the muskeg. Coming back after a while, he looked at Clarke. The doctor merely shook his head, though his face now showed signs of uneasiness. Harding sat down again and refilled his pipe, noticing that the stem was nearly bitten through. He gathered from Clarke's expression that they would soon know what to expect, and he feared the worst. Now, however, he was growing cool; his eyes were very stern, and his lips had set in an ominously determined fashion. Benson, glancing at him once or twice, thought it boded trouble for the doctor if things went badly. The American had a ruthless air.

At last Clarke, moving silently but quickly, bent over his patient, felt his pulse, and listened to his breathing. Harding leaned forward eagerly. Blake seemed less restless; his face, which had been furrowed, was relaxing; there was a faint damp on it. He moved and sighed; and then, turning his head weakly, he closed his eyes.

A few moments later Clarke stood up, stretching out his arms with a gesture of deep weariness.

"I believe your partner has turned the corner," he said, "He must sleep as long as he is able."

Harding crept away, conscious of a relief so overpowering that he was afraid he might do something foolish and disturb his comrade if he remained. Scarcely noticing where he was going, he plunged into the swamp and plowed through it, smashing down the reeds and splashing in the pools. Quick movement was balm to his raw-edged nerves, for the suspense of the last two hours had tried him very hard.

When he returned to camp, rather wet and muddy, Clarke was sitting by his patient's side, and Harding saw that Blake was sleeping soundly. With a sense of thankfulness too deep for expression, he set about preparing the evening meal. Now he could eat with appetite.

Before he and Benson had finished their supper, Clarke joined them.

"I believe the worst danger's over," he said; "though there's a possibility of a relapse. He'll need careful attention for several days."

"Longer, I think," said Harding. "Anyhow, you'll have to make up your mind to stay while it strikes us as necessary."

"My time's valuable, and you run some risk in keeping me. You must recognize that there's a strong likelihood that the Stonies will pick up my trail."

"If they get here, they'll run up against all the trouble they'll have any use for," Harding replied. "However, I told our guide, who seems pretty smart at such matters, to take precautions; and I understand that he fixed things so it would be hard to follow our tracks. You may remember that he took us across all the bare rocks he could find, and made us wade up a creek. Besides, as you seem to have played on your friends' superstitions, they may not find anything remarkable in your disappearing mysteriously."

"You're a capable man," Clarke laughed. "Anyway, I find this case appeals to my professional interest. For one thing, it's curious that the malaria should attack him in a severe form after a lengthy absence from the tropical jungles where he caught it. By the way, how long is it since he left India?"

Harding shrewdly returned an evasive answer. He did not think it desirable that Clarke should learn too much about his comrade's connection with India.

"I can't fix the date, but it's some time. However, I understand he was afterward in an unhealthy part

of Africa, which may account for it. I don't think he's been in this country more than a year or two."

"Did he ever speak of having malaria here? It is apt to return within a rather elastic period."

"Not so far as I can recollect," said Harding.

Seeing that he could extract no useful information from him, Clarke abandoned the attempt and discussed the case from a medical point of view. Then he rose, wearily.

"As we're not out of the wood yet, and I don't expect I'll be needed for a while, I'd better get some sleep," he said. "You must waken me if there's any sign of a change."

Drawing his blanket round him, he lay down on a bed of branches and reeds, and his deep, regular breathing soon indicated that he was asleep.

Harding looked at Benson.

"I guess he'll do all that's possible, for his own sake. It strikes me he's a pretty good doctor."

"I understand that he once promised to become a famous one," Benson replied. "Though I left you to deal with the matter, I kept my eye on him; and my idea is that, while he wouldn't have scrupled much about letting Blake die if it had suited his purpose, as soon as you showed him the danger of that course, his professional feelings came uppermost. In fact, I believe Blake couldn't have got better treatment in Montreal or London. Now that the fellow has taken his case up, he'll effect a cure. But I'll keep the first watch—you need a rest."

In a few minutes Harding was fast asleep; and when he relieved Benson late at night, he found Clarke at his post. Shortly afterward Blake opened his eyes and asked a few intelligent questions in a weak voice before he went to sleep again; and the next morning he was obviously improving. Although a strong man often recovers rapidly from an attack of malarial fever, Clarke stayed several days, and gave Harding a number of careful instructions on parting.

"I don't think that can do much harm," said Harding, looking him in the face.

"Your suspicions die hard," Clarke laughed.

"That's so," returned Harding coolly. "As soon as you leave this camp, I lose my hold on you. However, I've given you the Indian for a guide, and he'll see you safe to about a day's march from your friends' village; and I've put up food enough for the journey. Considering everything, that's all the fee I need offer you."

"There wouldn't be much use in urging my claim," Clarke acquiesced.

"What about Benson? I noticed you didn't seem particularly anxious to renew your acquaintance. Are you willing to leave him with us?"

Clarke smiled in an ironical manner.

"Why do you ask, when you mean to keep him? So far as I'm concerned, you're welcome to the man; I make you a present of him. Have you had enough of this trip yet, or are you going on?"

"We're going ahead; you can do what you like about it. And now, while I admire the way you pulled my partner through, there's not much more to say. I wish you a safe journey. Good-morning."

He turned back toward the fire, while Clarke stood a moment with clenched hand and a malignant look creeping into his eyes; then, following the Indian, the doctor silently moved forward across the muskeg.

CHAPTER XIII

A STAUNCH ALLY

On a dark November morning, when a blustering wind drove the rain against the windows, Thomas Foster sat stripping the lock of a favorite gun in the room he called his study, at Hazlehurst, in Shropshire. The shelves on the handsome paneled walls contained a few works on agriculture, horse-

breeding, and British natural history, but two racks were filled with guns and fishing-rods and the table at which Foster was seated had a vise clamped to its edge. He had once had a commodious gun-room, but had given it up, under pressure from his wife, as Hazlehurst was small and she had numerous guests, but the study was his private retreat. A hacksaw, a few files, a wire brush, and a bottle of Rangoon oil were spread out in front of him, the latter standing, for the sake of cleanliness, on the cover of the *Field*.

Foster laid down his tools and looked up with an air of humorous resignation as his wife came in. Mrs. Foster was a slender, vivacious woman, fond of society.

"Put that greasy thing away for a few minutes and listen to me," she said, sitting down opposite him.

"I am listening; I'm inclined to think it's my normal state," Foster answered with a smile. "The greasy thing cost forty guineas, and I wouldn't trust it to Jenkins after young Jimmy dropped it in a ditch. Jenkins can rear pheasants with any keeper I've met, but he's no good at a gun."

"You shouldn't have taken Jimmy out; he's not strong enough yet."

"So it seems; he gave us some trouble in getting him back to the cart after he collapsed in the woods. But it wasn't my fault; he was keen on coming."

Mrs. Foster made a sign of agreement. Jimmy was her cousin, Lieutenant Walters, lately invalided home from India.

"Perhaps you were not so much to blame; but that was not what I came to talk about," she said.

"Then I suppose you want my approval of some new plans. Go ahead with any arrangements you wish to make, but, as far as possible, leave me out. Though it was a very wet spring, I never saw the pheasants more plentiful; glad I stuck to the hand-rearing, though Jenkins wanted to leave the birds alone in the higher woods. Of course, now we've cleared out the vermin——"

"Oh, never mind the pheasants!" his wife broke in. "You would talk about such things all day. The question is——"

"It strikes me it's when are we going to have the house to ourselves? Though I don't interfere much, I've lately felt that I'm qualifying for a hotel-keeper."

"You have been unusually patient, and I'm getting rather tired of entertaining people, but Margaret Keith says she'd like to come down. You don't mind her?"

"Not a bit, if she doesn't insist on bringing a menagerie. It was cats last time, but I hear she's gone in for wild animals now. If she turns up with her collection, we'll probably lose Pattinson; he had all he could stand on the last occasion. Still, Meg's good fun; ready to meet you on any ground; keen as a razor."

After a little further talk, Mrs. Foster left him; and a few days later Mrs. Keith and Millicent arrived at Hazlehurst. Lieutenant Walters was sitting in a recess of the big hall when Mrs. Foster went forward to greet them. The house was old and the dark paneling formed a good background for Millicent's delicate beauty, which was of the blond type. Walters studied her closely. He liked the something in her face that hinted at strength of character; and he noted her grace as she accompanied her hostess up the broad stairs.

When Mrs. Keith and Millicent returned to the hall a half-hour later, tea was being served.

"Colonel Challoner is eager to see you, Margaret," Mrs. Foster said, after they had chatted a while. "He excused himself for not coming this evening because Greythorpe is staying with him for a day or two, but he made me promise to bring you over to-morrow."

Mrs. Keith acquiesced heartily, for she was fond of the Colonel.

The evening passed pleasantly at Hazlehurst, for Mrs. Foster made a charming hostess. Foster, who as a rule was indifferent to women's society, livened the party by matching wits with Margaret Keith; and Lieutenant Walters found Mrs. Keith's pretty companion very interesting.

At Sandymere, three miles away, Colonel Challoner sat in his library with his guest. It was a large and simply furnished room, but there was a tone of austere harmony in all its appointments. The dark oak table, the rows of old books in faded leather bindings, the antique lamps, and the straight-backed chairs were in keeping with the severe lines of the somber panels and the heavy, square molding of the ceiling. Three wax candles in an old silver holder stood on a small table by the wide hearth, on which a

cheerful wood fire burned, but most of the room was shadowy.

The sense of empty space and gloom, however, had no effect on the two elderly men who sat with a cigar box and decanter in front of them, engaged in quiet, confidential talk. Challoner was white-haired, straight, and spare, with aquiline features and piercing eyes; Greythorpe broad-shouldered and big, with a heavy-jawed, thoughtful face. They had been fast friends since their first meeting a number of years ago, when Challoner was giving evidence before a parliamentary commission.

"So you have not heard from Blake after the day he came here," Greythorpe said.

"Never directly," Challoner replied. "On the whole, it is better so, though I regret it now and then. A weakness on my part, perhaps, but I was fond of Dick and expected much from him. However, it seems that Bertram and Margaret Keith met him in Montreal, and she is coming here to-morrow."

"A very sad affair." Greythorpe mused. "A promising career cut short and a life ruined by a moment's failure of nerve. The price paid for it was a heavy one. Still, I found the matter difficult to understand, because, so far as I could tell, there was nothing in Blake's character that made such a failure possible. Then it's known that personal courage was always a characteristic of your family."

"His mother was my sister. You have seen her portrait."

Greythorpe made a sign of assent. He knew the picture of the woman with the proud, determined face.

"And the other side? Was the strain equally virile?" he asked.

"You shall judge," said Challoner. "You and Margaret Keith are the only people to whom I have ever spoken freely of these things. I am sure of your discretion and sympathy."

He crossed the floor and, opening a cabinet, came back with a photograph, which he gave to his companion.

"Dick's father. He was famous as a daring rider across an Irish, stone-wall country, and was killed when taking a dangerous leap."

Greythorpe studied the face, which was of Irish type, with bold eyes in which a reckless twinkle showed. On the whole, it suggested an ardent and somewhat irresponsible temperament.

"No sign of weakness there," he said. "Though he might be careless and headstrong, this man would ride straight and stand fire. I can't hint at an explanation of his son's disaster, but I imagine that one might have been found if it had been diligently searched for. My opinion is that there's something hidden; but whether it will ever come out is another matter. But—your nephew hasn't forfeited my liking. If I can ever be of any service."

"Thanks; I know," responded Challoner. "It looks as if he meant to cut loose from all of us. While I'm sorry, I can't say that he's wrong or that it's not a proper feeling. And now I think we'll let the subject drop."

The next afternoon was bright and mild, and soon after Mrs. Foster and her party arrived Challoner offered to show them his winter shrubbery.

"I have lately planted a number of new specimens which you and Margaret have not seen," he said; "and you may be interested to learn what effects can be got by a judicious mingling of bushes remarkable for the beauty of their berries and branch-coloring among the stereotyped evergreens."

They went out and Millicent thought the front of the old house with its mullioned windows, its heavy, pillared coping, and its angular chimney stacks, made a picturesque background for the smooth-clipped yew hedges and broad sweep of lawn. Behind it a wood of tall beeches raised their naked boughs in pale, intricate tracery against the soft blue sky. The shrubs proved worth inspection, for some were rich with berries of hues that varied from crimson to lilac, and the massed twigs of others formed blotches of strong coloring. The grass was dry and lighted by gleams of sunshine, the air only cold enough to make movement pleasant.

When Challoner and his guests returned to the house, he showed them the best bits of the old carved oak with which it was decorated and some curious works of art he had picked up in India, and then he took them to the picture gallery which ran round the big square hall. A lantern dome admitted a cold light, but a few sunrays struck through a window looking to the southwest and fell in long bright bars on polished floor and somber paneling. On entering the gallery, Challoner took out a case of miniatures

and, placing it on a small table, brought a chair for Mrs. Keith.

"You know the pictures, but this collection generally interests you, and I have added a few examples of a good French period since you were last here."

Mrs. Keith sat down and picked up a miniature.

"Millicent would enjoy that picture of the hills at Arrowdale," she said. "It's near her old home in the North."

Challoner and the girl moved away down the gallery, and he showed her a large painting of gray hills and a sullen tarn, half revealed between folds of rolling vapor. Millicent was stirred to keen appreciation.

"It's beautiful!" she exclaimed. "And so full of life! One can see the mist drive by and the ripples break upon the stones. Perhaps it's because I know the tarn that I like the picture so much; but it makes one realize the rugged grandeur and the melancholy charm of the place. That is genius! Who is the painter?"

"My son," said the Colonel quietly.

Millicent saw that he was troubled, though she could not imagine the reason.

"I hardly know Captain Challoner, whom I met only once; but it is obvious that he has talent. You would rather have him a soldier?"

"Very much rather."

"But he is one! I understand that he has distinguished himself. After all, it is perhaps a mistake to think of genius as limited to one ability—music or painting, for example. Real genius, the power of understanding, is more comprehensive; the man who has it ought to be successful at whatever he undertakes."

"I'm dubious," said Challoner. "It strikes me as a rather daring theory."

"It isn't mine," Millicent explained quickly. "It's a favorite theme of a philosopher I'm fond of, and he insists upon it when he speaks about great men. Perhaps I'm talking too freely, but I feel that Captain Challoner's being able to paint well shouldn't prevent his making a good officer."

"Great men are scarce. I'm content that my son has so far done his duty quietly and well; all I could wish for is that if any exceptional call should be made on him he should rise to the occasion. That is the supreme test; men from whom one expects much sometimes fail to meet it."

Millicent guessed that he was thinking of a man who had been dear to him, and who apparently had broken down beneath sudden stress.

"It must be hard to judge them unless one knows all the circumstances," she said stoutly.

"Not when a man has entered his country's service. He must carry out his orders; what he is sent to do must be done. No excuse can justify disobedience and failure. But we are getting too serious, and I am boring you. There is another picture I think you would like to see."

They walked down the long gallery, chatting lightly. The Colonel drew her attention to a few of his favorite landscapes, and then they stood before a large painting of a scene unmistakably in British Columbia. The Indian canoe on the rippled surface of the lake, the tall, stiff, yet beautiful, trees that crept down to the water's edge, the furrowed snow peaks in the background, stirred the girl's pulse as she thought of one who even then perhaps was wandering about in that wild country. She expressed her admiration of the painting, and then rather hesitatingly mentioned the Colonel's nephew.

"Have you heard anything from Mr. Blake since he left Montreal?"

"Nothing," said Challoner with a trace of grimness. "He does not correspond with me."

"Then I suppose you don't know where he is?"

"I heard that he had left a small settlement on the Western prairie and started for the North." He gave her a sharp glance. "Are you interested in my nephew?"

"Yes," she said frankly. "I don't know him very well, but on two occasions he came to my assistance when I needed it. He was very tactful and considerate."

"Then he's fortunate in gaining your good opinion. No doubt, you know something about his history?"

"I dare say my good opinion is not worth much, but I feel that he deserves it, in spite of what I've been told about him," she answered with a blush. "It is very sad that he should have to give up all he valued; and I thought there was something gallant in his cheerfulness—he was always ready with a jest."

"Have you met his companion? I understand that he is not a man of my nephew's stamp."

Millicent smiled.

"Hardly so, from your point of view."

"Does that mean that yours is not the same as mine?"

"I have had to earn my living; and that changes one's outlook—perhaps I'd better not say enlarges it. However, you shall judge. Mr. Harding is a traveler for an American paint factory, and had to begin work at an age when your nephew was at Eton; but I think him a very fine type. He's serious, courteous, and sanguine, and seems to have a strong confidence in his partner."

"Ah! That is not so strange. The Blakes have a way of inspiring trust and liking. It's a gift of theirs."

"Your nephew undoubtedly has it. He uses it unconsciously, but I think that those who trust him are not deceived."

Challoner regarded her with a curious expression. "After all," he said, "that may be true."

Mrs. Foster joined them, and when, soon afterward, she and her friends left, Challoner sat alone for a long time, while the pictures faded as dusk crept into the gallery. A man of practical abilities, with a stern perception of his duty, he was inclined to distrust all that made its strongest appeal to the senses. Art and music he thought were vocations for women; in his opinion it was hardly fitting that a man should exploit his emotions by expressing them for public exhibition. Indeed, he regarded sentimentality of any kind as a failing; and it had been suggested that his son possessed the dangerous gift. One of his friends had even gone farther and hinted that Bertram should never have been a soldier; but Challoner could not agree with that conclusion. His lips set sternly as he went out in search of Greythorpe.

CHAPTER XIV

DEFEAT

A good fire burned on the hearth in the library at Sandymere, although the mild air of an early spring morning floated in through the open window. Challoner sat in a big leather chair, watching the flames and thinking of his nephew, when a servant entered and handed him a card.

Challoner glanced at it.

"Clarke? I don't know any one of that name—"

He stopped abruptly as he saw the word *Sweetwater* in small type at the bottom of the card. He knew that that was the name of the prairie town from which Blake had started on his quest into the wilderness.

"All right, Perkins," he said, rather eagerly; and a few minutes afterward Clarke entered the room, with an irritating air of assurance.

"Colonel Challoner, I presume?"

Challoner bowed.

"You have brought me some news of my nephew, Richard Blake?"

This disconcerted Clarke. He had not imagined that his object would be known, and he had counted upon Challoner's being surprised and thrown off his guard. It looked as if the Colonel had been making inquiries about Blake. Clarke wished that he could guess his reason, for it might affect the situation.

"That is correct," he said. "I have a good deal to tell you, and it may take some time."

Challoner motioned to him to be seated, and offered him a cigar; and Clarke lighted it before he spoke.

"Your nephew," he began, "spent a week in the settlement where I live, preparing for a journey to the North. Though his object was secret, I believe he went in search of something to make varnish of, because he took with him a young American traveler for a paint factory, besides another man."

"I know all that," Challoner replied. "I heard about his American companion; who was the other?"

"We will come to him presently. There is still something which I think you do not know."

"Yes?" Challoner said.

He was suspicious, for his visitor's looks were not in his favor.

Clarke gave the Colonel a keen glance.

"It concerns your nephew's earlier history."

"That is of most importance to himself and me. It can't interest you."

"It interests me very much," Clarke returned, with an ironical smile.

"I must ask you to let me tell you what I know."

Challoner consented, and Clarke gave what the Colonel admitted was a very accurate account of the action on the Indian frontier.

"Well," he concluded, "the orders were to hold on—they could send for support if very hard pressed, but they mustn't yield a yard of ground. It was hot work in front of the trench upon the ridge—the natives pouring into it at one end—but the men held their ground, until—there was an order given—in a white man's voice—and the bugle called them off. Somebody had ventured to disobey instructions, and after that the hill was lost. The bugler was killed, so they could learn nothing from him."

Clarke paused a moment and narrowed his eyes. "Now," he said "it is of vital importance to you to know who gave that order to retreat."

"That question has been answered and settled," Challoner replied severely.

"I think incorrectly."

"Yes?" the Colonel queried again. "Perhaps you will let me have your theory as to what occurred."

That was the opportunity for which Clarke was waiting. His argument had been cleverly worked out, his points carefully arranged; and Challoner's heart sank, for the damaging inference could hardly be shirked.

"Your suggestions are plausible, but you can't seriously expect me to attach much weight to them," Challoner said. "Besides, you seem to have overlooked the important fact that at the regimental inquiry the verdict was that nobody in particular was to blame."

"Oh, no!" Clarke replied with a harsh laugh. "I merely question its validity. I imagine that reasons which would not be officially recognized led the court to take a lenient view. But what of that? Blake had to leave the army, a ruined man; and I've good reason for knowing what an acquittal like his is worth." He paused a moment. "I may as well tell you candidly, because it's probable that you'll make inquiries about me. Well, I'd won some reputation as a medical specialist when I became involved in a sensational police case—you may recollect it."

Challoner started.

"So you are the man! I think nothing was actually proved against you."

"No," said Clarke dryly; "there was only a fatal suspicion. As it happens, I was innocent; but I had to give up my profession, and my life was spoiled. There's no reason why you should be interested in this—I mention it merely because a similar misfortune has befallen Richard Blake. The point, of course, is that it has done so undeservedly. I think you must see who the real culprit is."

"You mean to infer that my son is a coward and gave the shameful order?" Challoner's eyes glittered, though his face was colorless. "It's unthinkable!"

"Nevertheless it's true. Why did he, without permission and abusing his authority over the guard, spend two hours late at night with Blake, who was under arrest? What had they to say that took so long, when there was a risk of Captain Challoner's being discovered? Why did Blake make no defense, unless it was because he knew that to clear himself would throw the blame upon his friend?"

"You press me hard," said Challoner in a hoarse voice. "But that my son should so have failed in his duty to his country and his cousin is impossible!"

"Yet you were willing to believe your nephew guilty. Had you any cause to doubt his courage?"

Challoner felt beaten by the man's remorseless reasoning; there was scarcely a point he could contest. A conviction that humbled him to the dust was being forced on him; but he would not let his rough visitor see him shrink as the truth seared him.

"I'll admit that you have told me a rather likely tale. As you don't speak of having been in India, may I ask who gave you the information?"

"Blake's companion, the man I've mentioned, a former Indian officer named Benson."

"His full name, please."

Clarke gave it to him, and Challoner, crossing the floor, took a book from a shelf and turned over the pages.

"Yes; he's here. What led him to talk of the thing to an outsider?"

"Drink. I'll confess to having taken advantage of the condition he was often in."

Challoner sat down and coolly lighted a cigar. His position seemed a weak one, but he had no thought of surrender.

"Well, you have given me some interesting information; but there's one thing you haven't mentioned, and that is your reason for doing so."

"Can't you guess?"

"I shouldn't have suspected you of being so diffident, but I dare say you thought this was a chance for earning some money easily."

"Yes," said Clarke. "For five thousand pounds, I'll undertake that no word of what I've told you will ever pass my lip's again."

"And do you suppose I'd pay five thousand pounds to see my nephew wronged?"

"I believe you might do so to save your son." Challoner controlled his anger, for he wished to lead the man on and learn something about his plans.

"Out of the question!" he said briefly.

"Then I'll make you an alternative offer—and it's worth considering. Take, or get your friends to subscribe for ten thousand pounds' worth of shares in a commercial syndicate I'm getting up. You'll never regret it. If you wish, I'll make you a director, so that you can satisfy yourself that the money will be wisely spent. You'll get it back several times over."

Challoner laughed.

"This is to salve my feelings; to make the thing look like a business transaction?"

"Oh, no!" Clarke declared, leaning forward and speaking eagerly. "It's a genuine offer. I'll ask your attention for a minute or two. Canada's an undeveloped country; we have scarcely begun to tap its natural resources, and there's wealth ready for exploitation all over it. We roughly know the extent of the farming land and the value of the timber, but the minerals still to a large extent await discovery, while perhaps the most readily and profitably handled product is oil. Now I know a belt of country where it's oozing from the soil; and with ten thousand pounds I'll engage to bore wells that will give a remarkable yield."

His manner was impressive, and though Challoner had no cause to trust him he thought the man sincere.

"One understands that in Canada all natural commodities belong to the State, and any person discovering them can work them on certain terms," Challoner said. "It seems to follow that if your

knowledge of the locality is worth anything, it must belong to you alone. How is it that nobody else suspects the belt contains oil?"

"A shrewd objection, but easily answered. The country in question is one of the most rugged tracts in Canada—difficult to get through in summer; in winter the man who enters it runs a serious risk. I'll admit that what you know about me is not likely to prejudice you in my favor; but, on your promise to keep it secret, I'll give you information that must convince you."

"Why don't you make your offer to some company floater or stockjobber?"

Clarke smiled in a pointed manner.

"Because I've a damaging record and no friends to vouch for me. I came here because I felt that I had some claim on you."

"You were mistaken," said Challoner curtly.

"Hear me out; try to consider my proposition on its merits. For a number of years, I've known the existence of the oil and have tried to prospect the country. It was difficult; to transport enough food and tools meant a costly expedition and the attracting of undesirable attention. I went alone, living with primitive Russian settlers and afterward with the Indians. To gain a hold on them, I studied the occult sciences, and learned tricks that impose upon the credulous. To the white men I'm a crank, to the Indians something of a magician; but my search for the oil has gone on; and now, while I already know where boring would be commercially profitable, I'm on the brink of tapping a remarkable flow."

"What will you do if it comes up to your expectations?" Challoner asked, for he had grown interested in spite of his disbelief in the man.

"Turn it over to a company strong enough to exact good terms from the American producers or, failing that, to work the wells. Then I'd go back to London, where, with money and the standing it would buy me, I'd take up my old profession. I believe I've kept abreast of medical progress and could still make my mark and reinstate myself. It has been my steadfast object ever since I became an outcast; I've schemed and cheated to gain it, besides risking my life often in desolate muskegs and the arctic frost. Now, I ask you to make it possible—and you cannot refuse."

Challoner was silent for a minute or two, while Clarke smoked impassively. The Colonel knew that he had a determined man to deal with, and he believed, moreover, that he had spoken the truth. Still, the fellow, although in some respects to be pitied, was obviously a dangerous rascal, embittered and robbed of all scruples by injustice. There was something malignant in his face that testified against him; but, worse than all, he had come there resolved to extort money as the price of his connivance in a wrong.

"Well?" Clarke said, breaking the pause.

"So far as I can judge, your ultimate object's creditable; but I can't say as much for the means you are ready to employ in raising the money. If you go on with the scheme, it must be without any help of mine."

Clarke's face grew hard, and there was something forbidding in the way he knitted his brows.

"Have you gaged the consequences of your refusal?"

"It's more to the purpose that I've tried to estimate the importance of your version of what happened during the night attack. It has one fatal weakness which you seem to have overlooked."

"Ah!" said Clarke, with ironical calm. "You will no doubt mention it?"

"You suggest Blake's innocence. You cannot prove it in the face of his own denial."

To Challoner's surprise, Clarke smiled.

"So you have seen that! The trouble is that your nephew may never have an opportunity for denying it. He left for the North very badly equipped, and he has not come back yet. The country he meant to cross is rugged and covered deep with snow all winter. Food is hard to get, and the temperature varies from forty to fifty degrees below." Then he rose with an undisturbed air. "Well, as it seems we can't come to terms, I needn't waste my time, and it's a long walk to the station. I must try some other market. While I think you have made a grave mistake, that is your affair."

When Clarke had gone, Challoner left the house in a restless mood and paced slowly up and down among his shrubbery. He wished to be alone in the open air. Bright sunshine fell upon him, the massed

evergreens cut off the wind, and in a sheltered border spear-like green points were pushing through the soil in promise of the spring. Challoner knew them all, the veined crocus blades, the tight-closed heads of the hyacinths, and the twin shoots of the daffodils, but, fond as he was of his garden, he gave them scanty attention.

Clarke's revelation had been a shock. With his sense of duty and family pride, the Colonel had, when the news of the frontier disaster first reached him, found it almost impossible to believe that his nephew had been guilty of shameful cowardice; and now it looked as if the disgrace might be brought still closer home. Bertram would presently take his place and, retiring from active service, rule the estate in accordance with Challoner traditions and perhaps exert some influence in politics. Clarke had, however, shown him that Bertram, from whom so much was expected, had proved himself a poltroon and, what was even worse, had allowed an innocent man to suffer for his baseness.

Challoner remembered that Bertram had shown timidity in his younger days—they had had some trouble in teaching him to ride—and there was no doubt that his was a highly strung and nervous temperament. He had not the calm which marked the Challoners in time of strain. On the other hand, Dick Blake was recklessly generous, and loved his cousin; it would be consistent with his character if he were willing to suffer in Bertram's stead. Moreover, there were reasons which might have had some effect in inducing Bertram to consent, because Challoner knew the affection his son bore him and that he would shrink from involving him in his disgrace. What Bertram would certainly not have done to secure his own escape he might have done for the sake of his father and the girl he was to marry.

Admitting all this, Challoner could not take his son's guilt for granted. There was room for doubt. Blake must be summoned home and forced to declare the truth.

Then Challoner's thoughts went back to the man whose tale had so disturbed him. There had been nothing forcible or obviously threatening in Clarke's last few remarks, but their effect was somehow sinister. Challoner wondered whether he had done well in suggesting that Blake's denial would prove the man's greatest difficulty. After all, he had a strong affection for his nephew, and he knew that the wilds of northern Canada might prove deadly to a weak party unprovided with proper sleds and provisions. Clarke had hinted that Blake's party was in danger. Surely, aid could reach them, even in that frozen land, by a well-equipped expedition.

Realizing what delay might mean to his nephew, Challoner hastened indoors and sent a cable-letter to a friend in Montreal, asking him to spare no effort to follow Blake's trail into the northern wilds.

CHAPTER XV

THE FROZEN NORTH

A bitter wind swept the snowy prairie and the cold was arctic when Clarke, shivering in his furs, came into sight of his homestead as he walked back from Sweetwater. He had gone there for his mail, which included an English newspaper, and had taken supper at the hotel. It was now about two hours after dark, but a full moon hung in the western sky, and the cluster of wooden buildings formed a shadowy blur on the glittering plain. There was no fence, not a tree to break the white expanse that ran back to the skyline, and it struck Clarke that the place looked very dreary.

He walked on, with the fine, dry snow the wind whipped up glistening on his furs. On reaching the homestead, he went first to the stable—built of sod, which was cheaper and warmer than sawed lumber—and, lighting a lantern, fed his teams. The heavy Clydesdales and lighter driving horses were all valuable, for Clarke was a successful farmer and had found that the purchase of the best animals and implements led to economy; though it was said that he seldom paid the full market price for them. He had walked home because it was impossible to keep warm driving; and he now felt tired and morose. The man had passed his prime and was beginning to find the labor he had never shirked more irksome than it had been. He dispensed with a hired hand in winter, when there was less to be done, for Clarke neglected no opportunity to save a dollar.

When he had finished in the stable, he crossed the snow to the house, which was dark and silent. After the bustle and stir of London, where he had spent some time, it was depressing to come back to the empty dwelling, and he was glad that he had saved himself the task of getting supper. Shaking the snow from his furs, he lighted the lamp and filled up the stove before he sat down wearily. The small room was not a cheerful place in which to spend the winter nights alone. Walls and floor were

uncovered and were roughly boarded with heat-cracked lumber; the stove was rusty, and gave out a smell of warm iron, while a black distillate had dripped from its pipe. There were, however, several well-filled bookcases and one or two comfortable chairs,

Clarke lighted his pipe and, drawing his seat as near the stove as possible, opened the English newspaper, which contained some news that interested him. A short paragraph stated that Captain Bertram Challoner, then stationed at Delhi, had received an appointment which would shortly necessitate his return from India. This, Clarke imagined, might be turned to good account; but the matter demanded thought, and for a long time he sat motionless, deeply pondering. His farming had prospered, though the bare and laborious life had tried him hard; and he had made some money by more questionable means, lending to unfortunate neighbors at extortionate interest and foreclosing on their possessions. No defaulter got any mercy at his hands, and shrewd sellers of seed and implements took precautions when they dealt with him.

His money, however, would not last him long if he returned to England and attempted to regain a footing in his profession, and he had daringly schemed to increase it. Glancing across the room, his eyes rested with a curious smile on one of the bookcases. It contained works on hypnotism, telepathy, and psychological speculations in general; he had studied some of them with ironical amusement and others with a quickening of his interest. Amid much that he thought of as sterile chaff he saw germs of truth; and once or twice he had been led to the brink of a startling discovery. There the elusive clue had failed him, though he felt that strange secrets might be revealed some day.

After all, the books had served his purpose, as well as kept him from brooding when he sat alone at nights while the icy wind howled round his dwelling. He passed for a sage and something of a prophet with the primitive Dubokars; his Indian friends regarded him as medicine-man; and both unknowingly had made easier his search for the petroleum. Then, contrary to his expectations he had found speculators in London willing to venture a few hundred pounds on his scheme; but the amount was insufficient and the terms were exacting. It would pay him better to get rid of his associates. He was growing old; it would be too late to return to his former life unless he could do so soon; but he must make a fair start with ample means. The man had no scruples and no illusions; money well employed would buy him standing and friends. People were charitable to a man who had something to offer them; and the blot on his name must be nearly forgotten.

First of all, however, the richest spot of the oil field must be found, and money enough raised to place him in a strong position when the venture was put on the market. He had failed to extort any from Challoner; but he might be more successful with his son. The man who was weak enough to allow his cousin to suffer for his fault would no doubt yield to judicious pressure. It was fortunate that Bertram Challoner was coming to England, where he could more easily be reached. This led Clarke to think of Blake, for he realized that Challoner was right in pointing out that the man was his greatest difficulty. If Blake maintained that the fault was his, nothing could be done; it was therefore desirable that he should be kept out of the way. There was another person to whom the same applied. Clarke had preyed on Benson's weakness; but if the fellow had overcome it and should return to farm industriously, his exploitation would no longer be possible. On the other hand, if he failed to pay off his debts, Clarke saw how he could with much advantage seize his possessions. Thus both Blake and Benson were obstacles; and now that they had ventured into the icy North it would be better if they did not reappear.

Clarke refilled his pipe, and his face wore a sinister look as he took down a rather sketchy map of the wilds beyond the prairie belt. After studying it keenly, he sank into an attitude of concentrated thought. The stove crackled, its pipe glowing red; driving snow lashed the shiplap walls; and the wind moaned drearily about the house. Its occupant, however, was oblivious to his surroundings. He sat very still in his chair, with pouches under his fixed eyes and his lips set tight. He looked malignant and dangerous. Perhaps his mental attitude was not quite normal; for close study and severe physical toil, coupled with free indulgence, had weakened him; there were drugs to which he was addicted; and he had long been possessed by one fixed idea. By degrees it had become a mania; and he would stick at nothing that might help him to carry out his purpose.

When at last he got up, with a shiver, to throw wood into the stove, he thought he saw how his object could be secured.

A month before Clarke spent the evening thinking about them, Blake and his comrades camped at sunset in a belt of small spruces near the edge of the open waste that runs back to the Polar Sea. They were worn and hungry, for the shortage of provisions had been a constant trouble, and such supplies as they obtained from Indians, who seldom had much to spare, soon ran out. Once or twice they had feasted royally after shooting a big bull moose, but the frozen meat they were able to carry did not last long, and again they were threatened with starvation.

It was a calm evening, with a coppery sunset flaring across the snow, but intensely cold; and though the men had wood enough and sat close beside a fire, with their ragged blankets wrapped round them, they could not keep warm. Harding and Benson were openly dejected, but Blake had somehow preserved his cheerful serenity. As usual after finishing their scanty supper, they began to talk, for during the day conversation was limited by the toil of the march.

"No good," Harding said, taking a few bits of resin out of a bag. "It's common fir gum, such as I could gather a carload of in the forests of Michigan. Guess there's something wrong with my theory about the effects of extreme cold." He took a larger lump from a neat leather case. "This is the genuine article, and it's certainly the product of a coniferous tree. The fellow I got it from said it was found in the coldest parts of North America. Seems to me we have tried all the varieties of the firs, but we're as far from finding what we want as when we started."

"Hard luck!" Benson remarked gloomily.

Harding broke off a fragment and lighted it.

"Notice the smell. It's characteristic."

"The fellow may have been right on one point," said Blake. "When I was in India I once got some incense which was brought down in small quantities from the Himalayas, and, I understood, came from near the snow-line. The smell was the same; one doesn't forget a curious scent."

"That's so. Talking about it reminds me that I was puzzled by a smell I thought I ought to know when I brought Clarke out of the tepee. I know now what it was; and the thing's significant. It was gasoline."

"They extract it from crude petroleum, don't they?"

"Yes; it's called petrol on your side. Clarke's out for coal-oil; and I guess he's struck it."

"Then he's lucky; but his good fortune doesn't concern us, and we have other things to think about. What are you going to do, now that we don't seem able to find the gum?"

"It's a difficult question," Harding answered in a troubled voice. "I'd hate to go back, with nothing accomplished and all my money spent. Marianna's paying for this journey in many ways, and I haven't the grit to tell her we're poorer than when I left. She wouldn't complain; but when you have to live on a small commission that's hard to make, it's the woman who meets the bill."

Blake made a sign of sympathy. He had never shared Harding's confidence in the success of his search, and had joined in it from love of adventure and a warm liking for his comrade.

"Well," he said, "I have no means except a small allowance which is so tied up that it's difficult to borrow anything on it; but it's at your disposal, as far as it goes. Suppose we keep on with our prospecting."

"If Clarke's mortgage doesn't stop me, I might raise a few dollars on my farm," Benson volunteered. "I'll throw it in, with pleasure, because I'm pretty deep in your debt."

"Thanks," Harding responded. "I'm sorry I can't agree; but I wouldn't take your offer when you first made it, and I can't do so now that my plan's a failure. Anyway, we're doing some useless talking, because I don't see how we're to go on prospecting, or get south again, when we have only three or four days' food in hand."

He stated an unpleasant truth which the others had characteristically shirked, for Blake was often careless, and Benson had taken the risks of the journey with frank indifference. After nearly starving once or twice, they had succeeded in getting fresh supplies; but now their hearts sank: as they thought of the expanse of frozen wilderness that lay between them and the settlements.

"Well," said Blake, "there's a Hudson Bay factory somewhere to the east of us. I can't tell how far off it is, though it must be a long way, but if we could reach it, the agent might take us in."

"How are you going to find the place?"

"I don't know; but a Hudson Bay post is generally fixed where there are furs to be got. There will no doubt be Indians trapping in the neighborhood, and we must take our chances of hitting their tracks."

"But we can't make a long march without food," Benson objected.

"The trouble is that we can't stay here without it," Blake pointed out with a short laugh.

This was undeniable, and neither of his companions answered. They were unkempt, worn out, and ragged; and in the past week they had traveled a long way through fresh snow on short rations. Ahead of them lay a vast and almost untrodden desolation; behind them a rugged wilderness which there seemed no probability of their being able to cross. Lured by the hope of finding what they sought, they had pushed on from point to point; and now it was too late to return.

Presently Blake got up.

"Our best chance is to kill a caribou, and this is the kind of country they generally haunt. The sooner we look for one, the better; so I may as well start at once. There'll be a moon to-night."

He threw off his blanket and, picking up a Marlin rifle, which was their only weapon, strode out of camp; and as he was a good shot and tracker they let him go. It was getting dark when he left the shelter of the trees, and the cold in the open struck through him like a knife. The moon had not yet risen and the waste stretched away before him, its whiteness changed to a soft blue-gray. In the distance scattered bluffs rose in long dark smears; but there was nothing to indicate which way Blake should turn, and he had no reason to believe there was a caribou near the camp. As a matter of fact, they had found the larger deer remarkably scarce.

Blake was tired, after breaking the trail since sunrise, and the snow was loose beneath his big net shoes, but he plodded toward the farthest bluff, feeling that he was largely to blame for the party's difficulties. Knowing something of the country, he should have insisted on turning back when he found they could obtain no dog teams to transport their supplies. Occasionally Hudson Bay agents and patrols of the North-West Police made long journeys in arctic weather; but they were provided with proper sleds and sufficient preserved food. Indeed, Blake was astonished that he and his comrades had got so far. He had given way to Harding, who hardly knew the risks he ran, and now he supposed that he must take the consequences. This did not daunt him badly. After all, life had not much to offer an outcast; he had managed to extract some amusement from it, but he had nothing to look forward to. There was no prospect of his making money—his talents were not commercial—and the hardships he could bear now would press on him more heavily as he grew older.

These considerations, however, were too philosophical for him to dwell on. He was essentially a man of action, and was feeling unpleasantly hungry, and he quickened his pace, knowing that the chance of his getting a shot at a caribou in the open was small.

The moon had not risen when he reached the bluff, but the snow reflected a faint light and he noticed a row of small depressions on its surface. Kneeling down, he examined them, but there had been wind during the day and the marks were blurred. He felt for a match, but his fingers were too numbed to open the watertight case, and he proceeded to measure the distance between the footprints. This was an unreliable test, as a big deer's stride varies with its pace, but he thought the tracks indicated a caribou. Then he stopped, without rising, and looked about.

Near in front the trees rose in a shadowy wall against the clear blue sky; there was no wind, and it was oppressively still; the darkness of the woods was impenetrable and its silence daunting. The row of tracks was the only sign of life Blake had seen for days.

While he listened, a faint howl came out of the distance, and was followed by another. After the deep silence, the sound was startling. Blake recognized the cry of the timber wolves, and knew his danger. The big gray brutes would make short work of a lonely man. His flesh crept as he wondered whether, they were on his trail. On the whole, it did not seem likely, though they might get scent of him. Rising to his feet, he felt that the rifle magazine was full before he set off at his highest speed.

The snow was loose, however, and his shoes packed and sank; his breath got shorter, and he began to feel distressed. There was no sound behind him; but that somehow increased his uneasiness, and now and then he anxiously turned his head. Nothing moved on the sweep of blue-gray shadow; and he pressed on, knowing how poor his speed was compared with that the wolves were capable of making. At last, with keen satisfaction, he saw a flicker of light break out from the dark mass of a bluff ahead, and a few minutes later he came, breathing hard, into camp.

"You haven't stayed out long," Benson observed. "I suppose you saw nothing?"

"I heard wolves," Blake answered dryly. "You had better gather wood enough to keep a big fire going, because I've no doubt they'll pick up my trail. However, it's a promising sign."

"I guess we could do without it," Hording broke in. "I've no use for wolves."

"They must live on something," Blake said. "Since they're here, there are probably moose or caribou in the neighborhood. I'll have another try to-morrow."

"But the wolves!"

"They're not so bold in daylight. Anyway, it seems to me we must take some risks."

This was obvious; and when they had heaped up a good supply of wood, Harding and Blake went to sleep, leaving Benson to keep watch.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TRAIL OF THE CARIBOU

When Blake was awakened by Harding, the cold was almost unendurable, and it cost him a determined effort to rise from the hollow he had scraped out of the snow and lined with spruce twigs close beside the fire. He had not been warm there, and it was significant that the snow was dry; but sleep had brought him relief from discomfort, and he had found getting up the greatest hardship of the trying journey. In answer to his drowsy questions, Harding said he had once or twice heard a wolf howl in the distance, but that was all; and then he lay down, leaving Blake on guard.

Blake sat with his back to a snowbank, which afforded a slight shelter. He imagined from his sensations that the temperature must be about fifty degrees below zero. The frost bit through him, stiffening his muscles until he felt that if vigorous movement were demanded of him he would be incapable of it. His brain was dulled; he could not reason clearly, though he had things to consider; and he looked about with heavy eyes, trying to forget his physical discomfort, while his mind wandered through a maze of confused thought.

There was a half-moon in the sky, which was pitilessly clear, for cloudiness might have made it warmer; when the firelight sank, the slender spruce trunks cut sharply against the silvery radiance and the hard glitter of the snow. Everything was tinted with blue and white, and the deathly cold coloring was depressing.

Blake began to consider their position, which was serious. They were worn out and half-fed; their furs were ragged; and shortage of money and the difficulty of transport had forced them to cut down their camp equipment. Indeed, looking back on the long march, Blake was surprised that they had escaped crippling frostbite; although both Benson and Harding were somewhat lame from the strain which the use of snowshoes puts on the muscles of the leg. There was, moreover, a risk of this becoming dangerous; and it was probably two hundred miles to the Hudson Bay post. The chances of their reaching it seemed very slight.

Just then a howl rang, harsh and ominous, through the frosty air. With a nervous start, Blake grabbed his rifle. The wolves had scented them. Turning his back to the light, he spent some minutes gazing fixedly at the glistening white patches among the straggling trees, but he could make out none of the stealthy, flitting shapes he had half expected to see. It was encouraging that the wolves had not overcome their timidity of the fire. Keen hunger would have driven them to an attack; and Blake had no illusions about the result of that. However, the fierce brutes were not starving; they must have found something to eat; and what a wolf could eat would feed men who were by no means fastidious.

Seeing nothing that alarmed him, Blake resumed his musing. Their search for the gum had proved useless. He pitied Harding, who had staked his future upon its success. The man had not complained much; but Blake knew what he must feel; and he thought with compassion of the lonely woman who had bravely sent her husband out and was now waiting for him in the mean discomfort of a cheap tenement. It was not difficult to imagine her anxiety and suspense.

Next he began to ponder his own affairs, which were not encouraging, though he did not think he really regretted the self-sacrificing course he had taken. His father had died involved in debt, and Blake suspected that it had cost Colonel Challoner something to redeem the share of his mother's property which brought him in a small income. That it had been carefully tied up was not, he thought, enough to guard it from the Blake extravagance and ingenuity in raising money. Afterward the Colonel had brought him up and sent him into the army, doing so with a generous affection which was very different from cold charity, and which demanded some return. Then, Bertram had never been jealous of the favor shown his cousin, but had given him warm friendship; and Blake, who was much the stronger, had now and then stood between the lad and harm. He had done so again in Bertram's greatest need, and now he must not grumble at the consequences.

Of late they had seemed heavier than formerly, for in tempting him Clarke had made a telling suggestion—suppose he married? This appeared improbable: for one thing, no girl that he was likely to care for would look with favor on a man with his reputation; but he had thought a good deal about Millicent Graham during the long, weary march. He imagined that she had inherited enough of her father's reckless character to make her willing to take a risk. She would not have a man betray his friend for an advantage that he might gain; she had a courage that would help her, for love's sake, to tread a difficult path. Still, there was no reason to believe that she had any love for him; or, indeed, that she thought of him except as a stranger to whom she had, perhaps, some reason to be grateful.

Resolutely breaking off this train of thought, he threw fresh wood on the fire, and sat shivering and making plans for the march to the factory, until Benson relieved him. When the gray dawn broke above the trees, he got up stiff with cold; and, after eating his share of a very frugal breakfast, he carefully examined his rifle. Though he kept it clean of superfluous grease, there was some risk of the striker and magazine-slide freezing; and a missfire might prove disastrous. Glancing up between the branches, he noticed the low, dingy sky; although he thought it was not quite so cold.

"I'm going to look for a caribou," he said. "I'll be back by dark."

"We'll have snow," Harding warned him. "If there's much, you'll find it hard to get home."

"I'd find it harder to do without breakfast and supper, which is what may happen very soon."

"Anyway, you had better take one of us along."

"With the ax?" Blake said, laughing. "It's bad enough to reach a caribou with a rifle. Benson's as poor a hand at stalking as I know, while a day's rest may save you from getting a snowshoe leg. As we haven't a sled, it would be awkward to carry you to the factory."

They let him go; but when he reached the open his face hardened. The sky had a threatening look, the snow was soft, and there were wolves about; but he was comparatively safe while daylight lasted, and food must be found. During the morning he saw wolf tracks, but no sign of a deer, and at noon he sat down for a few minutes in a sheltered hollow and managed to light the half-frozen pipe he kept in an inner pocket. He had brought nothing to eat, for they had decided that it would be prudent to dispense with a midday meal. Getting stiffly on his feet, after he had smoked a while, he plodded from bluff to bluff throughout the afternoon. For the most part, they were thin and the trees very small, while the country between them seemed to be covered with slabs of rocks and stones. It was utterly empty, with no sign of life in it, but Blake continued his search until the light began to fail, when he stopped to look about.

No snow had fallen, but the sky was very thick and a stinging wind had risen. He would have trouble in reaching camp if his trail got drifted up. He knew that he should have turned back earlier; but there was what seemed to be an extensive woods in front, and he could not face the thought of returning empty-handed to his half-starved companions. The gray trees were not far away; he might reach them and make a mile or two on the back trail before dark, though he was weary and hunger had given him a distressing pain in his left side.

Quickening his pace, he neared the bluff. It looked very black and shadowy against the snow, which now was fading to a curious, lifeless gray. The trees were stunted and scattered; that made it possible for him to get through, though there were half-covered, fallen branches which entangled his big snowshoes. He could see no tracks of any animal, and hardly expected to do so; but, in a savage mood, he held on, without much caution, until he entered a belt of broken ground strewn with rocky hillocks. Here he could not see where he was going, and it was almost dark in the hollows; but he had learned that chance sometimes favors the hunter as much as careful stalking. Stopping for breath a moment, halfway up a steep ascent, he started, for a shadowy object unexpectedly appeared on the summit. It was barely distinguishable against the background of trees, but Blake saw the broad-tined horns in an opening and knew it for a caribou.

There was no time to lose; the swift creature would take flight in an instant; and, almost as he caught sight of it, the rifle went up to his shoulder. For a moment the foresight wavered across the indistinct form, and then his numbed hands grew steady, and, trusting that nothing would check the frost-clogged action, he pressed the trigger. He felt the jar of the butt, a little smoke blew in his eyes, and he could make out nothing on the crest of the ridge. It seemed impossible, however, that he had missed, and the next moment he heard a heavy floundering in the snow among the rocks above. He went up the slope at a savage run, and plunged down a precipitous hollow, on the farther side of which a half-seen object was moving through the gloom of the trees. Stopping a moment, he threw up the rifle, and after the thin red flash the deer staggered and collapsed.

Running on in desperate haste, he fell upon it with his hunting knife; and then stopped, feeling strangely limp and breathless, with the long blade dripping in his hand. Now that the caribou lay dead before him, the strain of the last few minutes made itself felt. Surprised by a sudden and unexpected opportunity when he was exhausted and weak from want of food, he had forced upon himself sufficient steadiness to shoot. It had cost him an effort; the short, fierce chase had tried him hard; and now the reaction had set in. For all that, he was conscious of a savage, exultant excitement. Here was food, and food meant life!

His first impulse was to light a fire and feast, but as he grew calmer he began to think. He was a long way from camp, and he feared that if he rested he could not force himself to resume the march. Besides, there were the wolves to reckon with; and he could not escape if they followed him in the dark. Prudence suggested that he should cut off as much meat as possible, and after placing it out of reach in a tree, set off for camp at his best speed without taking any of the raw flesh to scent the air; but this was more than he could bring himself to do. His comrades were very hungry, and some animal might climb to the frozen meat. It was unthinkable that he should run any risk of losing the precious food. He decided to take as much as he could carry, and store the rest in a tree; and he set to work with the hunting knife in anxious haste.

It was now quite dark; he could not see what he was cutting, and if he gashed his hand, which was numbed and almost useless, the wound would not heal. Then the haft of the knife grew slippery, and tough skin and bone turned the wandering blade. It was an unpleasant business, but the man could not be fastidious, and he tore the flesh off with his fingers, knowing that he was in danger while he worked. There were wolves in the neighborhood, and their scent for blood was wonderfully keen; it was a question whether they would reach the spot before he had left it. When he stopped to clean the knife in the snow he cast a swift glance about.

He could see nothing farther off than a fallen trunk about a dozen yards away; beyond that the trees had faded into a somber mass. A biting wind wailed among them, causing the needles to rustle harshly; but except for this there was a daunting silence. Blake began to feel a horror of the lonely wood and a longing to escape into the open, though he would be no safer there. But to give way to this weakness would be dangerous; and, pulling himself together, he went to work more calmly.

It was difficult to reach the branches of the spruce he chose, and when he had placed the first load of meat in safety he was tempted to flight. Indeed, for some moments he stood irresolute, struggling to hold his fears in subjection; and then he went back for another supply. He climbed the tree three times before he was satisfied that he had stored enough, and afterward he gathered up as much of the flesh as he could conveniently carry. It would soon freeze, but not before it had left a scent that any wolf which might happen to be near could follow.

He left the woods with a steady stride, refraining from attempting a faster pace than he could keep up, but when he had gone a mile he felt distressed. His load, which included the rifle, was heavy, and he had been exerting himself since early morning. The wind was in his face, lashing it until the cold became intolerable; the dry snow was loose, and had drifted over his outward trail. Still, he was thankful that no more had fallen, and he thought that he knew the quarter he must make for. Now that he was in the open, he could see some distance, for the snow threw up a dim light. It stretched away before him, a sweep of glimmering gray, and the squeaking crunch it made beneath his shoes emphasized the overwhelming silence.

Skirting a bluff he did not remember, he stopped in alarm, until a taller clump of trees which he thought he knew caught his searching eyes. If he were right, he must incline farther to the east to strike the shortest line to camp; and he set off, breathing heavily and longing to fling away his load. Cold flakes stung his face, and a creeping haze obscured his view in the direction where he expected to find the next woods. He was within a hundred yards of the nearest trees when he saw them, and as he left the woods it was snowing hard. His heart sank as he launched out into the open, for he had now no guide, and having neither ax nor blanket he could not make a fire and camp in a bluff, even if he could find one. It looked as if he must perish should he fail to reach the camp.

He had only a hazy recollection of floundering on, passing a bluff he could not locate, and here and there a white rock, while the snow fell thicker and its surface got worse. Then, when he felt he could go no farther, he heard a howl behind him, and then another.

With the wolves on his trail, Blake quickened his speed to his utmost limit. As a last resort he could throw away the meat, and they would stop for that; but they were still some distance back of him and he held on grimly to his precious load. It meant life to him and to his starving companions. His feet sank into the soft snow; the wind blew him back cruelly; a cloud had come over the moon, obscuring what little light he had; but, worst of all, one of his snowshoes was loose. With the cry of the wolves behind him, he did not dare stop to tighten it, although it impeded his progress greatly. He struggled

forward as the howls drew nearer; and then, when it seemed that he would have to give up, a faint glow of light broke out and he turned toward it with a hoarse cry. An answer reached him, the light grew brighter, and he was in among the trees.

Benson met him, and a minute later he flung himself down, exhausted, by the fire.

"I've brought you your supper, boys," he gasped, "but the wolves are on my trail!"

Harding grabbed the rifle, while Benson poked at the fire until a larger flame swept up, lighting clearly a radius of several yards; but the wolves, fearing the fire or scenting some other prey, had branched off to the right, and the men could hear their howls growing fainter in the distance.

"We'll have a feast to-night, boys," Benson said, hastily preparing the meal.

They ate with keen appetite, and afterward went to sleep; and when they reached the woods the next morning nothing was left of the caribou except the meat in the tree and a few clean-picked bones.

With a sufficient quantity of meat to stave off their anxiety regarding the question of food, the men spent two days enjoying a badly needed rest; and then they pushed on, making forced marches which severely taxed their strength. Part of their way, however, lay across open country, for they were near the northern edge of the timber belt, and the straggling trees, dwarfed and bent by the wind, ran east and west in a deeply indented line. In some places they boldly stretched out toward the Pole in long promontories; in others they fell back in wide bays which Blake, steering by compass, held straight across, afterward plunging again into the scrub. Three days were spent in struggling through the broadest tongue, but, as a rule, a few hours' arduous march brought them out into the open. Even there the ground was very rough and broken, and they were thankful for the numerous frozen creeks and lakes which provided an easier road.

Pushing on stubbornly, camping where they could find shelter and wood, for they could hardly have survived a night spent in the open without a fire, they made, by calculation, two hundred miles; and Blake believed that they must surely be near the Hudson Bay post.

CHAPTER XVII

A RESPITE

Light snow was driving across the waste before a savage wind when the party sat at breakfast one morning. Day had broken, but there was little light, and Blake, looking out from behind a slab of rock in the shelter of which a few junipers clung, thought that three or four miles would be the longest distance that he could see. This was peculiarly unfortunate, because an Indian trapper whom they had met two days before had told them that their course led across a wide untimbered stretch, on the opposite side of which one or two isolated bluffs would indicate the neighborhood of the factory. Disastrous consequences might follow the missing of these woods.

A pannikin of weak tea made from leaves which already had been twice infused stood among the embers; and Benson was leaning over a log, dividing the last of the meat. He held up a small piece.

"I had thought of saving this, but it hardly seems worth while," he said. "If we make the factory tonight, we'll get a good supper."

"You don't mention what will happen if we miss it," Harding commented with grim humor. "Anyway, that piece of meat won't make much difference. What do you think, Blake?"

Blake forced a cheerful laugh.

"Put it all in; we're going to make the post; as a matter of fact, we have to! How's the leg this morning?"

"I don't think it's worse than it was last night," Harding answered. "If I'm careful how I go, it ought to stand another journey."

He made a grimace as he stretched out the limb. It was very sore, for during the last few days the strain the snowshoe threw on the muscles had nearly disabled him. Now, he knew it would be difficult

to hold out for another journey; but he had grown accustomed to pain and weariness and hunger. They were, he imagined, the lot of all who braved the rigors of winter in the northern wilds.

"Well," said Benson, "there's no use in carrying anything that's not strictly needful, and the empty grub-bag may stay behind. Then here's a pair of worn-out moccasins I was keeping as a stand by. I should be able to get new ones at the factory."

"It's still some distance off," Harding reminded him.

"If we don't make it, the chances are that I won't need the things. But what about your collection of gum?"

Nothing had been said on this point for some time, but Harding's face wore a curious look as he took up a bag which weighed three or four pounds.

"Some of the stuff might be used for low-grade varnish; but that's not what I'm out for. I've been trying to believe that a few of the specimens might prove better on analysis; but I guess it's a delusion."

With a quick, resolute movement, he threw the bag into the fire, and when the resin flared up with a thick brown smoke the others regarded him with silent sympathy. This was the end of the project from which he had expected so much; but it was obvious that he could meet failure with fortitude. Nothing that would serve any purpose could be said, and they quietly strapped on their blankets.

There was not much snow when they set off, and fortunately the wind blew behind them, but the white haze narrowed in the prospect and Blake, breaking the trail, kept his eyes on the compass. He was not at all sure of the right line, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that he was, at least, going straight.

After a few minutes, Harding glanced behind. Their camping place had vanished, they were out in an open waste, and he knew that he had started on the last march he was capable of making. Where it would lead him he could not tell, though the answer to the question was of vital importance. For a time he thought of his wife, and wondered with keen anxiety what would become of her if his strength gave way before they reached the post; but he drove these cares out of his mind. It was dangerous to harbor them, and it served no purpose; his part was to struggle on, swinging the net snowshoes while he grappled with the pain each step caused him. He shrank from contemplating the distance yet to be covered; it seemed vast to him in his weakness, and he felt himself a feeble, crippled thing. Soft snow and arctic cold opposed his advance with malignant force; but his worn-out body still obeyed the spur of his will, and he roused himself to fight for the life that had some value to another. He must march, dividing up the distance into short stages that had less effect upon the imagination; limping forward from the ice-glazed rock abreast of him to the white hillock which loomed up dimly where the snow blurred the horizon; then again he would look ahead from some patch of scrub to the most prominent elevation that he could see.

The marks he chose and passed seemed innumerable; but the wilderness still ran on, pitilessly empty. His leg was intensely painful; he knew that he must break down soon; and they had seen nothing of a stony rise for which they watched eagerly. To find it would simplify matters, for the Indian had made them understand that the bluffs about the post lay nearly east of it.

Noon passed, and they still pressed forward without a halt, for there was little more than three hours' daylight left, and it was unthinkable that they should spend the night without food or shelter. The horizon steadily narrowed as the snow thickened; there was a risk of their passing the guiding-marks, or even the factory.

It was nearly three o'clock when Harding stumbled and fell into the snow. He found himself unable to get up until Benson helped him, and in his attempt to rise he further strained his weakened leg. For a moment he leaned on his companion, his face contorted with pain.

"The fall seems to have hurt you," Benson said sympathetically.

"I'll have to go on," Harding gasped; and, setting his teeth, he strode forward; but he made only a few paces. The pain was severe; his head reeled; his strength gave way and he sank down on his knees.

Benson and Blake stopped in consternation.

"If I've kept the right line, we can't be far from the factory," Blake said encouragingly.

"I'm played out," Harding declared. "You'll have to leave me here. If you make the post, you can come back with a sled."

"No! How are we to find you with our trail drifting up? Besides, you'd be frozen in a few hours. If you can't walk, you'll have to be carried. Get hold of him, Benson!"

Benson lifted him to his feet, Blake seized his arm, and, both supporting him, they resumed the march. Leaning on them heavily, Harding was dragged along, and they silenced the feeble protests he made now and then.

"Stop talking that rot! We see this out together!" Blake told him roughly.

None of them had much doubt as to what the end would be, but they stubbornly held on. Nothing further was said. Blake and Benson themselves were nearly exhausted, and their pinched faces were set and stern, and Harding's was drawn up in a ghastly fashion by suffering. Still, their overtaxed muscles somehow obeyed the relentless call on them.

At last, when the light had almost gone, Benson stepped into a slight depression that slanted across their path.

"Hold on!" he cried hoarsely. "Look at this!"

Blake stooped, while Harding, swaying awkwardly with bent leg, held on to him. The hollow was small: a smooth groove of slightly lower level than the rest of the snow.

"A sledge trail!" he cried in an exultant voice. "Drifted up a bit, but they've been hauling lumber over it, and that means a good deal to us!" He indicated a shallow furrow a foot or two outside the groove. "That's been made by the butt of a trailing log. The Indian said there were bluffs near the post, and they wouldn't haul their cordwood farther than necessary!"

They stood silent for a few moments, overcome by relief. They had a guide to shelter and safety! When they had gathered breath, Blake steadied Harding, who found standing difficult.

"We must make a move and hustle all we can," he said eagerly. "It will be dark in half an hour, and the snow won't take long in filling up the trail."

The risk of missing the factory, which might be near at hand, was not to be faced, and they pulled themselves together for a last effort, Blake and Benson, breathing hard as they dragged Harding along. The light was rapidly going; now that they had changed their course the snow lashed their faces, making it difficult to see, and they plodded forward with lowered heads and eyes fixed on the guiding-line. It grew faint in places, and vanished altogether after a while. Then they stopped in dismay, and Blake went down on his knees, scraping with ragged mittens in the snow.

"I can't see which way it runs, but it certainly doesn't end here," he said. "Go ahead and look for it, Benson; but don't get out of call!"

Benson moved forward, and when he faded into the cloud of driving flakes those he left behind were conscious of a keen uneasiness. They could see only a few yards; it was blowing fresh and the wind might carry their voices away, and if this happened the chances were against their comrade's being able to rejoin them. After a few minutes Blake shouted, and the answer was reassuring. They waited a little longer, and then when they cried out a hail came back very faintly:

"Nothing yet!"

"Keep closer!" Blake shouted; but it seemed that Benson did not hear him, for there was no reply.

"Hadn't you better go after him?" Harding suggested.

"No!" Blake snapped. "It would make things worse to scatter." He raised his voice. "Come back, before your tracks fill up!"

The silence that followed filled them with alarm; but while they listened in strained suspense a faint call came out of the snow. The words were indistinguishable, but the voice had an exultant note in it.

"He has found the trail!" Blake exclaimed with deep relief.

It was difficult to see the print of Benson's shoes, and Harding could not move a step alone, but they called out at intervals as Blake slowly helped him along, and at last a shadowy object loomed in front of them. As they came up, Benson pointed to a slight depression.

"We can follow it if it gets no fainter; but there's no time to lose," he said. "It might be safer if I went first and kept my eye on the trail."

He shuffled forward with lowered head, while Blake came behind, helping Harding as best he could. All three long remembered the next half-hour. Once they lost the trail and were seized with despair, but, searching anxiously, they found it again.

At last a pale, elusive light appeared amid the snow ahead, and they watched it with keen satisfaction as it grew clearer. When it had changed to a strong yellow glow, they passed a broken white barrier which Blake supposed was a ruined stockade, and the hazy mass of a building showed against the snow. Then there was a loud barking of dogs, and while they sought for the door a stream of light suddenly shone out, with a man's dark figure in the midst of it.

The next minute they entered the house, and Harding, lurching forward across the floor of a large room, clutched at a table and then fell with a crash into a chair. After the extreme cold outside, the air was suffocatingly hot. Overcome by the change and pain, Harding leaned back with flushed face and half-closed eyes, while his companions stood still, with the snow glistening on their ragged furs.

The man shut the door before he turned to them.

"A rough night," he said calmly. "Ye might as weel sit down. Where do ye hail from?"

Blake laughed as he found a seat. He imagined that their appearance must have been somewhat startling, but he knew it takes a good deal to disturb the equanimity of a Hudson Bay Scot.

"From Sweetwater; but we have been up in the timber belt since winter set in. Now we have run out of provisions and my partner's lamed by snowshoe trouble."

"Ay," said the man; "I suspected something o' the kind. But maybe ye'll be wanting supper?"

"I believe, if we were put to it, we could eat half a caribou," Benson told him with a grin.

"It's no to be had," the Scot answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "I can give ye a good thick bannock and some whitefish. Our stores are no so plentiful the now."

They took off their furs and glanced about the place while their host was busy at the stove. The room was large, and its walls of narrow logs were chinked with clay and moss. Guns and steel traps hung upon them; the floor was made of uneven boards which had obviously been split in the nearest bluff; and the furniture was of the simplest and rudest description. The room had, however, an air of supreme comfort to the famishing newcomers, and after the first few minutes they found it delightfully warm. They ate ravenously the food given them, and afterward the agent brought Harding some warm water and examined his leg.

"Ye'll no walk far for a while, I'm thinking," he commented. "Rest it on the chair here and sit ye still."

Harding was glad to comply; and, lighting their pipes, the men began to talk. Their host, who told them his name was Robertson, was a rather hard-featured man of middle age.

"I'm all my lone; my clerk's away with the breeds at the Swan Lake," he said. "Where are ye making for?"

"For the south," Blake answered. "We came here for shelter, badly tired, and we want to hire a dog team and a half-breed guide, if possible, as soon as my partner's fit to travel. Then we want provisions."

"I'm afraid I cannot supply ye. Our stores are low—we got few fish and caribou the year, and we have not a team to spare."

"Well," said Benson, "I don't suppose you'll turn us out, and we'd be glad to pay for our accommodation. We have no wish to take the trail again without food or transport."

Robertson looked thoughtful.

"Ye might wait a week or two; and then we'll maybe see better what can be done."

He asked them a few questions about their journey, and then Harding took the piece of gum from its case.

"I guess you have seen nothing like this round here?"

"No," said Robertson, after examining it carefully. "I have made it my business to study the natural products o' the district, and it's my opinion ye'll find no gum of this kind in the northern timber belt."

"I suppose you're right. Leaving furs out, if the country's rich in anything, it's probably minerals."

"There's copper and some silver, but I've seen no ore that would pay for working when ye consider the transport."

"I don't suppose you're anxious to encourage prospecting," Benson suggested.

Robertson smiled.

"If there was a rich strike, we would no object. We're here to trade, and supplying miners is no quite so chancy as dealing in furs; but to have a crowd from the settlements disturbing our preserves and going away after finding nothing o' value would not suit us. Still, I'm thinking it's no likely: the distance and the winter will keep them out."

"Did you ever see signs of oil?"

"No here; there's petroleum three hundred miles south, but no enough, in my opinion, to pay for driving wells. Onyway, the two prospecting parties that once came up didna come back again."

He left them presently, and when they heard him moving about an adjoining room, Harding made a suggestion.

"We'll stay here for a while and then look for that petroleum on our way to the settlements."

Blake agreed readily; the determination, he thought, was characteristic of his comrade. Harding's project had failed, but instead of being crushed by disappointment, he was already considering another.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BACK TRAIL

Blake and his friends spent three weeks at the Hudson Bay post, and throughout the first fortnight an icy wind hurled the snow against the quivering building. It was dangerous to venture as far as a neighboring bluff, where fuel had been cut; Benson and the agent, who were hauling cordwood home, narrowly escaped from death one evening in the suddenly freshening storm. None of the half-breeds could reach the factory, and Robertson confessed to some anxiety about them. There was little that could be done, and they spent the dreary days lounging about the red-hot stove, and listening to the roar of the gale. In the long evenings, Robertson told them grim stories of the North.

Then there came a week of still, clear weather, with intense frost; and when several of the trappers arrived, Robertson suggested that his guests had better accompany a man who was going some distance south with a dog team. He could, however, spare them only a scanty supply of food, and they knew that a long forced march lay before them when they left their guide.

Day was breaking when the dogs were harnessed to the sled, and Harding and his companions, shivering in their furs, felt a strong reluctance to leave the factory. It was a rude place and very lonely, but they had enjoyed warmth and food there, and their physical nature shrank from the toil and the bitter cold. None of them wished to linger in the North—Harding least of all—but it was daunting to contemplate the distance that lay between them and the settlements. Strong effort and stern endurance would be required of them before they rested beside a hearth again.

There was no wind, the smoke went straight up and, spreading out, hung above the roof in a motionless cloud; the snow had a strange ghostly glimmer in the creeping light; and the cold bit to the bone. It was with a pang that they bade their host farewell, and followed the half-breed, who ran down the slope from the door after his team. Robertson was going back to sit, warm and well-fed, by his stove, but they could not tell what hardships awaited them.

Their depression, however, vanished after a while. The snow was good for traveling, the dogs trotted fast, and the half-breed grunted approval of their speed as he pointed to landmarks that proved it when they stopped at noon. After that they held on until dark, and made camp among a few junipers in the shelter of a rock. All had gone well the first day; Harding's leg no longer troubled him; and there was comfort in traveling light with their packs on the sled. The journey began to look less formidable. Gathering close round the fire, they prepared their supper cheerfully, while the dogs fought over scraps of frozen fish. Harding, however, had misgivings about their ability to keep up the pace; he thought that in a day or two it would tell on the white men.

They slept soundly, for the cold has less effect on the man who is fresh and properly fed. Breakfast was quickly despatched, and after a short struggle with the dogs they set out again. It was another good day, and they traveled fast, over a rolling tableland on which the snow smoothed out the inequalities among the rocks. Bright sunshine streamed down on them, the sled ran easily up the slopes and down the hollows, and the men found no difficulty in keeping the pace. Looking back when they nooned, Harding noticed the straightness of their course. Picked out in delicate shades of blue against the unbroken white surface surrounding it, the sled trail ran back with scarcely a waver to the crest of a rise two miles away. This was not how they had journeyed north, with the icy wind in their faces, laboriously struggling round broken ridges and through tangled woods. Harding was a sanguine man, but experience warned him to prepare for much less favorable conditions. It was not often the wilderness showed a smiling face.

Still, the fine weather held, and they were deep in the timber when they parted from their guide on a frozen stream which he must follow while they pushed south across a rugged country. He was not a companionable person, and he spoke only a few words of barbarous French, but they were sorry to see the last of him when he left them with a friendly farewell. He had brought them speedily a long distance on their way, but they must now trust to the compass and their own resources; while the loads they strapped on were unpleasantly heavy. Before this task was finished, dogs and driver had vanished up the white riband of the stream, and they felt lonely as they stood in the bottom of the gorge with steep rocks and dark pines hemming them in. Blake glanced at the high bank with a rueful smile.

"There are advantages in having a good guide," he said. "We haven't had to face a climb like that all the way. But we'd better get up."

It cost them some labor, and when they reached the summit they stopped to look for the easiest road. Ahead, as far as they could see, small, ragged pines grew among the rocks, and breaks in the uneven surface hinted at troublesome ravines.

"It looks rough," said Benson. "There's rather a high ridge yonder. It might save trouble to work round its end. What do you think?"

"When I'm not sure," Harding replied, "I mean to go straight south."

Benson gave him an understanding nod.

"You have better reasons for getting back than the rest of us; though I've no particular wish to loiter up here. Break the trail, Blake; due south by compass!"

They plunged deeper into the broken belt, clambering down ravines, crossing frozen lakes and snowy creeks. Indeed, they were thankful when a strip of level surface indicated water, for the toil of getting through the timber was heavy.

After two days of travel there was a yellow sunset, and the snow gleamed in the lurid light with an ominous brilliance, while as they made their fire a moaning wind got up. These things presaged a change in the weather, and they were rather silent over the evening meal. They missed the half-breed and the snarling dogs, and it looked as if the good fortune that had so far attended them were coming to an end.

The next morning there was a low, brooding sky, and at noon snow began to fall, but they kept on until evening over very rough ground, and then they held a council round the fire.

"The situation requires some thought," Blake said. "First of all, our provisions won't carry us through the timber belt. Now, the shortest course to the prairie, where the going will be easier, is due south; but after we get there we'll have a long march to the settlements. I'd partly counted on our killing a caribou, or perhaps a moose, but so far we've seen no tracks."

"There must be some smaller animals that the Indians eat," Benson suggested.

"None of us knows where to look for them, and we haven't much time to spare for hunting."

"That's so," Harding agreed. "What's your plan?"

"I'm in favor of heading southwest. It may mean an extra hundred miles, or more, but it would bring us nearer the Stony village, and afterward the logging camp on the edge of the timber, where we might get supplies."

"It's understood that the Indians are often half starved in winter," Benson reminded him. "For all that, they might have had good luck; and, anyway, we couldn't cross the prairie with an empty grubsack. My vote's for striking off to the west."

Harding concurred, though his leg had threatened further trouble during the last day or two, and he would have preferred the shorter route.

"What about the petroleum?" Blake asked.

"We can't stop to look for it unless we can lay in a good stock of food, and I don't suppose we could do much prospecting with the snow on the ground," Harding paused with a thoughtful air. "When we reach the settlement I must go home, but if the money can be raised, I'll be back as soon as the thaw comes, to try for the oil, Clarke's an unusually smart man, and there's no doubt he's on the trail."

"We'll raise enough money somehow," Benson declared.

Harding smiled.

"Yes, we'll raise the money somehow," he agreed. "It has been my experience that when you want a thing badly enough, there's always some way to get it."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, and stood up, stretching and yawning.

"Right now I want sleep," he said.

When dawn came the next morning, it was snowing hard, and for a week they made poor progress, with a bitter gale driving the flakes in their faces. Each day the distance covered steadily lessened, and rations were cut down accordingly. Harding's leg was getting sore, but he did not mean to speak of it unless it became necessary. They were, however, approaching the neighborhood of the Indian village and Blake began to speculate upon the probability of their finding its inhabitants at home. He understood that the Stonies wandered about, and he realized with uneasiness that it would be singularly unfortunate if they were away on a hunting trip.

At last, after spending all of one blustering day laboriously climbing the rough but gently rising slope of a long divide, they camped on a high tableland, and lay awake, too cold to sleep, beside a sulky, greenwood fire. In the morning it was difficult to get up on their feet, but as the light grew clearer, the prospect ahead of them seized their attention. The hill summits were wrapped in leaden cloud, but a valley opened up below. It was wider and deeper than any they had come across since leaving the factory, the bottom looked unusually level, and it ran roughly south.

They gazed at it in silence for a time; and then Harding spoke.

"I've an idea that this is the valley where Blake fell sick, and it's going to straighten things out for us if I'm right."

"That's so," Benson agreed, "We would be sure of striking the Stony village, and we could afterward follow the low ground right down to the river. With the muskegs frozen solid, it ought to make an easy road."

Blake was conscious of keen satisfaction; but there was still a doubt.

"We'll know more about it after another march," he said.

No snow fell that morning, and as their packs were ominously light they made good speed across the hill benches and down a ravine where they scrambled among the boulders of a frozen creek. It was a gray day without the rise in temperature that often accompanies cloudiness, and the light was strangely dim. Rocks and pines melted into one another at a short distance, and leaden haze obscured the lower valley. Blake was becoming sure, however, that it was the one they had traveled up and, dispensing with the usual noon halt, they pushed on as fast as possible. All were anxious to set their doubts at rest, for there was now a prospect of obtaining food and shelter in a few days; but they recognized no landmarks, and with the approach of evening the frost grew very keen. The haze drew in closer, and the scattered pines they passed wailed drearily in a rising wind. The men were tired, but they could see no suitable camping place, and they pushed on, looking for thicker timber.

It was getting dark when a belt of trees stretched across the valley, and they decided to stop there. Benson, leading the way, suddenly cried out.

"What is it?" Harding asked.

Benson hesitated.

"Well," he said, "the thing doesn't seem probable, but I believe I saw a light. Anyway, it's gone."

They stopped, gazing eagerly into the gloom. A light meant that there were men not far off, and after

the grim desolation through which they had traveled all were conscious of a longing for human society. Besides, the strangers would no doubt have something to eat—they might even be cooking a plentiful supper. There was, however, nothing to be seen until Blake moved a few yards to one side. Then he turned to Benson with a cheerful laugh.

"You were right! I can see a glimmer about a mile ahead. I wonder who the fellows are?"

They set off as fast as they could go, though traveling among the fallen branches and the slanting trees was difficult in the dark. Now and then they lost their beacon, but the brightening glow shone out again, and when it was visible Blake watched it with surprise. It was low, hardly large enough, he thought, for a fire, and it had a curious irregular flicker. Drawing nearer, they dipped into a hollow where they could distinguish only a faint brightness beyond the rising ground ahead. They eagerly ascended that, and reaching the summit, they saw the light plainly; but it was very small, and there were no figures outlined against it. Benson shouted, and all three felt a shock of disappointment when no answer came to them.

He ran as fast as his snowshoes would let him, smashing through brush, floundering over snowy stories, with Blake and Harding stumbling, short of breath, behind; and then he stopped with a hoarse cry. He stood beside the light; there was nobody about; the blaze sprang up mysteriously from the frozen ground.

"A blower of natural gas!" Harding exclaimed excitedly. "In a sense, we've had our run for nothing, but this may be worth a good deal more than your supper."

"If I had the option, I'd trade all the natural gas in Canada for a thick, red, moose steak, and a warm place to sleep in," Benson said savagely. "Anyway, it will help us to light our fire, and we have a bit of whitefish and a few hard bannocks left."

Blake shared his comrade's disappointment. He was tired and hungry, and he felt irritated by Harding's satisfaction. For all that, he chopped wood and made camp, and their frugal supper was half eaten before he turned to the optimistic American.

"Now," he said, "maybe you will tell us why you were so cheerful about this gas."

"First of all," Harding answered good-humoredly, "it indicates that there's oil somewhere about—the two generally go together. Anyway, if there were only gas, it would be worth exploiting, so long as we found enough of it; but judging by the pressure there's not much here."

"What would you do with gas in this wilderness?"

"In due time, I or somebody else would build a town. Fuel's power, and if you could get it cheap, you'd find minerals that would pay for working. Men with money in Montreal and New York are looking for openings like this; no place is too remote to build a railroad to if you can ensure freight."

"You're the most sanguine man I ever met," Blake commented. "Take care your optimism doesn't ruin you."

"I wonder," Harding went on, "whether Clarke knows about this gas? On the whole, I think it probable. We can't be very far from the Stony camp, and there's reason to believe he's been prospecting this district. It's oil he's out for."

"How did the thing get lighted?" Benson asked in an indifferent tone.

Harding smiled as he gave him a sharp glance. He had failed in his search for the gum, and he did not expect his companions to share his enthusiasm over a new plan. They had, however, promised to support him, and that was enough, for he believed he might yet show them the way to prosperity.

"Well," he said, "I guess I can't blame you for not feeling very keen; but that's not the point. I can't answer what you ask, and I believe our forest wardens are now and then puzzled about how bush fires get started. We have crossed big belts of burned trees in a country where we saw no signs of Indians."

"If this blower has been burning long, the Stonies must know of it," Blake said. "Isn't it curious that no news of it has reached the settlements?"

"I'm not sure. They may venerate the thing; and, anyway, they're smart in some respects. They know that where the white men come their people are rounded up on reservations, and I guess they'd rather have the whole country to themselves for trapping and fishing. Then, Clarke may have persuaded them to say nothing."

"It's possible," Blake agreed thoughtfully. "We'll push on for their camp the first thing tomorrow."

CHAPTER XIX

THE DESERTED TEPEES

Starting at daybreak, they reached a hillside overlooking the Stony village on the third afternoon. Surrounded by willows and ragged spruces, the conical tepees rose in the plain beneath, but Blake stopped abruptly as he caught sight of them. They were white to the apex, where the escaping heat of the fire within generally melted the snow, and no curl of smoke floated across the clearing. The village was ominously silent and had a deserted look.

"I'm very much afraid Clarke's friends are not at home," Blake said with forced calm. "We'll know more about it in half an hour; that is, if you think it worth while to go down."

Harding and Benson were silent a moment, struggling with their disappointment. They had made a toilsome journey to reach the village, their food was nearly exhausted, and it would cost them two days to return to the valley, which was their best road to the south.

"Now that we're here, we may as well spend another hour over the job," Harding decided. "It's possible they haven't packed all their food along."

His companions suspected that they were wasting time, but they followed him down the hill, until Benson, who was a short distance to one side of them, called out. When they joined him he indicated a row of footsteps leading up the slope.

"That fellow hasn't been gone very long; there was snow yesterday," he said. "By the line he took, he must have passed near us. I wonder why he stayed on after the others."

Blake examined the footsteps carefully, and compared them with the impress of his own snowshoes.

"It's obvious that they can't be older than yesterday afternoon," he said. "From their depth and sharpness, I should judge that the fellow was carrying a good load, which probably means that he meant to be gone some time. The stride suggests a white man."

"Clarke," said Harding. "He seems to be up here pretty often; though I can't see how he'd do much prospecting in the winter."

"It's possible," Blake replied. "But I'm anxious to find out whether there's anything to eat in the tepees."

They hurried on, and when they reached the village they discovered only a few skins in the first tent. Then, separating, they eagerly searched the others without result, and when they met again they were forced to the conclusion that there was no food in the place. It was about three o'clock, and a threatening afternoon. The light was dim and a savage wind blew the snow about. The three men stood with gloomy faces in the shelter of the largest tepee, feeling that luck was hard against them.

"These northern Indians often have to put up with short rations while the snow lies," Benson remarked. "No doubt, they set off for some place where game's more plentiful when they found their grub running out; and as they've all gone the chances are that they won't come back soon. We've had our trouble, for nothing, but we may as well camp here. With a big fire going, one could make this tepee warm."

Blake and Harding felt strongly tempted to agree. The cold had been extreme the last few nights, and, weary and scantily fed as they were, they craved shelter. Still they had misgivings.

"We have wasted too much time already," Blake said with an effort; "and there's only a few days' rations in the bag. We have got to get back to the valley, and we ought to make another three hours' march, before we stop."

"Yes," Harding slowly assented; "I guess that would be wiser."

Setting off at once, they wearily struggled up the hill; and it had been dark some time when they made camp in a hollow at the foot of a great rock. The rock kept off the wind, and the spruces which

grew close about it further sheltered them, but Blake told his companions to throw up a snow bank while he cut wood.

"I'm afraid we're going to have an unusually bad night, and we may as well take precautions," he said.

His forecast proved correct, for soon after they had finished supper a cloud of snow swept past the hollow, and the spruces roared among the rocks above. Then there was a crash and the top of a shattered tree plunged down between the men and fell on the edge of the fire, scattering a shower of sparks.

"Another foot would have made a difference to two of us," Harding said coolly. "However, it's fallen where it was wanted; help me heave the thing on."

It crackled fiercely as the flame licked about it. Sitting between the snowbank and the fire, the men kept fairly warm, but a white haze drove past their shelter and, eddying in now and then, covered them with snow. In an hour the drifts were level with the top of the bank, but this was a protection, and they were thankful that they had found such a camping place, for death would have been the consequence of being caught in the open. The blizzard gathered strength, but though they heard the crash of broken trees through the roar of the wind no more logs fell, and after a while they went to sleep, secure in the shelter of the rock.

When day broke it was long past the usual hour, and the cloud of driving flakes obscured even the spruces a few yards away. The hollow at the foot of the crag was shadowy, and the snow had piled up several feet above the bank, and lapped over at one end. Still, with wood enough, they could keep warm; and had their supplies been larger they would have been content to rest. As things were, however, they were confronted with perhaps the gravest peril that threatens the traveler in the North—the possibility of being detained by bad weather until their food ran out. None of them spoke of this, but by tacit agreement they made a very sparing breakfast, and ate nothing at noon. When night came, and the storm still raged, their hearts were very heavy.

It lasted three days, and on the fourth morning it seemed scarcely possible to face the somewhat lighter wind and break a trail through the fresh snow. However, they dare risk no further delay. Strapping on their packs, they struggled up the range. At nightfall they were high among the rocks, and it was piercingly cold, but they got a few hours' sleep in a clump of junipers, and struck the valley late the next day. Finding shelter, they made camp, and after dividing a small bannock between them they sat talking gloomily. Their fire had been lighted to lee of a cluster of willows, and it burned sulkily because the wood was green. Pungent smoke curled about them, and they shivered in the draughts.

"How far do you make it to the logging camp?" Benson asked. "I'm taking it for granted that the lumber gang's still there."

"A hundred and sixty miles," said Blake. "And we have food enough for two days; say forty miles."

"About that; it depends on the snow."

Benson made no answer, and Harding was silent a while, sitting very still with knitted brows.

"I can't see any way out," he said at last. "Can you?"

"Well," Blake answered quietly, "we'll go on as long as we are able. Though I haven't had a rosy time, I have faith in my luck."

Conversation languished after this. The men had a small cake of tobacco left, and they sat smoking and hiding their fears while the wind moaned among the willows and thin snow blew past. The camp was exposed, and, hungry and dejected as they were, they felt the stinging cold. After an hour of moody silence, Harding suddenly leaned forward, with a lifted hand.

"What's that?" he said sharply. "Didn't you hear it?"

For a few moments they heard only the rustle of the willows and the swishing sound of driven snow; then a faint patter caught their ears, and a crack like the snapping of a whip.

"A dog team!" cried Benson.

Springing to his feet, he set up a loud shout. It was answered in English; and while they stood, shaken by excitement and intense relief, several low shadowy shapes emerged from the gloom; then a tall figure appeared, and after it two more. Somebody shouted harsh orders in uncouth French; the dogs sped toward the fire and stopped. Their driver, hurrying after them, began to loose the traces,

while another man walked up to Blake.

"We saw your fire and thought we'd make for it," he explained. "I see your cooking outfit's still lying round."

"It's at your service," Blake responded. "I'm sorry we can't offer you much supper, though there's a bit of a bannock and some flour."

"We'll soon fix that," the man declared. "Guess you're up against it, but our grub's holding out." He turned to the driver. "Come and tend to the cooking when you're through, Emile."

Though the order was given good-humoredly, there was a hint of authority in his voice, and the man to whom he spoke quickened his movements. Then another man came up, and while the dogs snapped at each other, and rolled in the snow, the half-breed driver unloaded a heavy provision bag and filled Harding's frying-pan.

"Don't spare it," said the first comer. "I guess these men are hungry; fix up your best menoo."

Sitting down by the fire, shapeless in his whitened coat, with his bronzed face half hidden by his big fur cap, he had nevertheless a soldierly look.

"You're wondering who we are?" he asked genially.

"Oh, no," Blake smiled. "I can make a guess; there's a stamp on you I recognize. You're from Regina."

"You've hit it first time. I'm Sergeant Lane, R.N.W.M.P. This"—he indicated his companion—"is Private Walthew. We've been up on a special patrol to Copper Lake, and left two of the boys there to make some inquiries about the Indians. Now we're on the back trail."

He looked as if he expected the others to return his confidence, and Blake had no hesitation about doing so. He knew the high reputation of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, a force of well-mounted and carefully chosen frontier cavalry. Its business is to keep order on a vast stretch of plain, to watch over adventurous settlers who push out ahead of the advancing farming community, and to keep a keen eye on the reservation Indians. Men from widely different walks of life serve in its ranks, and the private history of each squadron is rich in romance, but one and all are called upon to scour the windy plains in the saddle in the fierce summer heat and to make adventurous sled journeys across the winter snow. Their patrols search the lonely North from Hudson Bay to the Mackenzie, living in the open in arctic weather; and the peaceful progress of western Canada is due largely to their unrelaxing vigilance, Blake gave them a short account of their journey and explained his party's present straits.

"Well," said the Sergeant, "I figure that we have provisions enough to see us down to the settlements all right, and we'll be glad of your company. The stronger the party, the smoother the trail; and after what you've told me, I guess you can march."

"Where did you find the half-breed?" Benson asked. "Your chiefs at Regina don't allow you hired packers."

"They surely don't. He's a Hudson Bay man, working his passage. Going back to his friends somewhere about Lake Winnipeg, and decided he'd come south with us and take the cars to Selkirk. I was glad to get him; I'm not smart at driving dogs."

"We found it hard to understand the few Indians we met," said Harding. "The farther north you go, the worse it must be. How will the fellows you left up yonder get on?"

The Sergeant laughed.

"When we want a thing done, we can find a man in the force fit for the job. One of the boys I took up can talk to them in Cree or Assiniboin; and it wouldn't beat us if they spoke Hebrew or Greek. There's a trooper in my detachment who knows both."

Benson did not doubt this. He turned to Private Walthew, whose face, upon which the firelight fell, suggested intelligence and refinement.

"What do you specialize in?"

"Farriery," answered the young man, he might have added that extravagance had cut short his career as veterinary surgeon in the old country.

"Knows a horse all over, outside and in," Sergeant Lane interposed. "I allow that's why they sent him when I asked for a good dog driver, though in a general way our bosses aren't given to joking. Walthew

will tell you there's a difference between physicking a horse and harnessing a sled team."

"It's marked," Walthew agreed with a chuckle. "When I first tried to put the traces on I thought they'd eat me. Even now I have some trouble; and I'll venture to remind my superior that he'd be short of some of his fingers if they didn't serve us out good thick mittens."

"That's right," admitted Lane good-humoredly. "I'm sure no good at dogs. If you're going to drive them, you want to speak Karalit or French. Plain English cussin's no blame use."

Emile announced that supper was ready, and the police watched their new acquaintances devour it with sympathetic understanding, for they had more than once covered long distances on very short rations in the arctic frost. Afterward they lighted their pipes, and Emile, being tactfully encouraged, told them in broken English stories of the barrens. These were so strange and gruesome that it was only because they had learned something of the wilds that Harding and his friends could believe him. Had they been less experienced, they would have denied that flesh and blood could bear the things the half-breed calmly talked about.

While Emile spoke, there broke out behind the camp a sudden radiance which leaped from the horizon far up the sky. It had in it the scintillation of the diamond, for the flickering brilliance changed from pure white light to evanescent blue and rose. Spreading in a vast, irregular arc, it hung like a curtain, wavering to and fro and casting off luminous spears that stabbed the dark. For a time it blazed in transcendental splendor, then faded and receded, dying out with unearthly glimmering far back in the lonely North.

"That's pretty fine," Lane commented mildly.

Blake smiled, but made no answer. He and his comrades were getting drowsy, and although a stinging wind swept the camp and the green wood burned badly, they were filled with a serene content. The keen bodily craving was satisfied; they had eaten and could sleep; and it looked as if their troubles were over. The dogs were obviously fit for travel, for they were still engaged in a vigorous quarrel over some caribou bones; the toil of the journey would be lightened by carrying their loads on the sled; and the party was strong enough to assist any member of it whose strength might give way. There was no reason to apprehend any difficulty in reaching the settlements; and in their relief at the unexpected rescue their thoughts went no farther. After the hunger and the nervous strain they had borne, they were blissfully satisfied with their present ease. There would be time enough to consider the future.

Sergeant Lane got up and shook the snow from his blanket.

"I've seen a better fire, boys, but I've camped with none at all on as cold a night," he said. "So far as I can figure, we have grub enough; but now that there are three more of us we don't want to lose time. You'll be ready to pull out by seven in the morning."

They lay down in the most comfortable places they could find, and slept soundly, although once during the night Harding was awakened by a dog that crept up to him for warmth.

CHAPTER XX

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

It was getting light the next morning when the reinforced party entered a belt of thicker timber where they first clearly realized the fury of the storm. The trees were small and sprang from a frozen muskeg, so that they could not be uprooted, but the gale had snapped the trunks and laid them low in swaths. Even in the spots where some had withstood its force the ground was strewn with split and broken branches, and to lee of them the snow had gathered in billowy drifts. The scene of ruin impressed the men, who were forced to make long rounds in search of a passage for the sled.

"About as fierce a blizzard as I remember," Sergeant Lane remarked. "We were held up three days, and thought ourselves lucky in making a ravine with a steep bank; but the wind couldn't have been quite so strong back north a piece. There'd have been two names less on the roster if we'd been caught down here."

Harding thought this was probable. He had had a protecting rock at his back, but in the valley there was no shelter from the storm that had leveled the stoutest trees. Even the four-footed inhabitants of

the wilds could hardly have escaped. As he stumbled among the wreckage, Harding thought about the man whose footsteps they had seen near the Indian village. Unless he had found some secure retreat he must have had to face the fury of the gale. Harding felt convinced that the man was Clarke. It was curious that he should have been living alone among the empty tepees, but Harding imagined that he was in some way accountable for the Indians' departure, and he wondered where he was going when he crossed the range. There was a mystery about the matter, and if an explanation could be arrived at it would be of interest to him and his friends. Even before Clarke had sent them into the muskeg when he knew it was practically impassable, Harding had entertained a deep distrust of him.

Blake called him to help in dragging the sled over an obstacle, and the difficulties of the way afterward occupied his attention. When they found clearer ground they made good progress, and, late in the afternoon, seeing a rocky spur running out from the hillside, they headed for it to look for a sheltered camping place. There was still some daylight, but a cold wind had sprung up, blowing the loose snow into their faces.

As they neared the spur, the dogs swerved, as if attracted by something, and the half-breed struck the nearest dog and drove them on.

"That was curious," said Private Walthew. "It was old Chasseur who led them off, and he's not given to playing tricks."

"A dead mink or beaver in the snow," the sergeant suggested. "I didn't notice anything, but they have a keen scent. Anyhow, let's get into camp."

They found a nook among the rocks, and Emile loosed the dogs and threw them some frozen fish while the men had supper. It was a heavy, lowering evening, and the bitter air was filled with the murmur of the spruces as the wind passed over them. Though the light was fading, they kept their sharpness of outline, rising, black and ragged, from a sweep of chill, lifeless gray. When the meal was nearly finished, Lane looked round the camp.

"Where are the dogs?" he asked. "They're very quiet."

"I leaf zem *la bas*," explained Emile, waving his hand toward a neighboring hollow. Then, moving a few paces forward, he exclaimed: "Ah! *les coquins!*"

"Looks as if they'd bolted," Walthew said. "I think I know where to find them."

He left the camp with Emile, and presently they heard the half-breed threatening the dogs; then Walthew's voice reached them and there was a hoarse and urgent tone in it. Springing up, they ran back along the trail and found Emile keeping off the dogs while Walthew bent over a dark object that lay half revealed in the clawed up snow. At first Harding saw only a patch or two of ragged fur that looked as if it belonged to an animal; then with a shock he caught the outline of a man's shoulder and arm. The rest of the party gathered round, breathless after their haste, and when Lane spoke there was grave authority in his voice.

"Give me a hand, boys. We have to get him out."

They did so with mingled compassion and reluctance, though Harding was sensible of a curious strained expectation. Soon the body lay clear of the snow, and the dim light fell on the frozen face.

"It's Clarke!" Blake cried.

"Sure," said Harding gravely. "I'm not surprised."

"Then you knew him?" Lane's tone was sharp.

Benson answered him.

"Yes; I knew him pretty well. He lived at Sweetwater, where we're going. I can give you any particulars you want."

"I'll ask you later." The sergeant knelt down and carefully studied the dead man's pose. "Looks as if he'd been caught in the blizzard and died of exposure; but that's a thing I've got to ascertain. I'll want somebody's help in getting him out of this big coat."

None of them volunteered, but when Lane gave Walthew a sharp order Blake and Harding joined them, and Harding afterward held the fur coat. Blake noticed that he folded and arranged it on his arm with what seemed needless care, though he first turned his back toward the others. Lane was now engaged in examining the body, and the men stood watching him, impressed by the scene. All round

the narrow opening the spruces rose darkly against the threatening sky, and in its midst the sergeant bent over the still form. It made a dark blot on the pale glimmer of the snow, and the white patch of the face was faintly distinguishable in the fading light. The spruce tops stirred, shaking down loose snow, which fell with a soft patter, and the wind blew trails of it about.

"I can find nothing wrong," Lane said at last.

"Considering that you came across the man lying frozen after one of the worst storms you remember, what did you expect to find?" Harding asked.

"Well," the sergeant answered dryly, "it's my duty to make investigations. Though I didn't think it likely, there might have been a knife cut or a bullet hole. One of you had better bring up the sled. We can't break this ground without dynamite, but there are some loose rocks along the foot of the spur."

The sled was brought and Clarke was gently placed on it, wrapped in his fur coat. Then they took the traces and started for the ridge, where they built up a few stones above the hollow in which they laid him. It was quite dark when they had finished, and Lane made a gesture of relief.

"Well," he said, "that's done, and he'll lie safely there. Rough on him, but it's a hard country and many a good man has left his bones in it. I guess we'll get back to camp."

They crossed the snow in silence, trailing the empty sled, and for a while after they reached camp nobody spoke. Lane sat near the fire, where the light fell on the book in which he wrote with a pencil held awkwardly in his mittened hand, while Blake watched him and mused. He had no cause to regret Clarke's death, but he felt some pity for the man. Gifted with high ability, he had, through no fault of his own, been driven out of a profession in which he was keenly interested, and made an outcast. His subsequent life had been a hard and evil one, but it had ended in a tragic manner; and this was made all the more impressive because Blake and his companions had narrowly escaped the same fate. In spite of the cheerful fire, the camp had a lonely air, and Blake shivered as he glanced at the gleaming snow and the dusky trees that shut it in. There was something in the desolate North that daunted him.

Harding's reflections also centered on the dead man, and he had food for thought. There was a mystery to be explained. He imagined that he had a clue to it in his pocket, though he could not follow it up for the present. He waited with some anxiety until Lane closed his book.

"Now," said the sergeant, "there are one or two points I want explained, and as you know the man, it's possible that you can help me. How did he come to be here with only about three days' rations?"

"I can answer that," said Harding. "He was in the habit of staying at the Indian village we told you of. We saw tracks coming from it when we were there the day before the blizzard began."

"A white man's tracks? Why did you go to the village?"

"I believe they were. We went to look for provisions, and didn't get them, because the place was empty."

"Then how do you account for the fellow's being there alone?"

"I can't account for it," Blake said quietly.

Lane turned to Harding. The American had a theory, but he was not prepared to communicate it to the police.

"It's certainly curious," he said evasively.

"We'll start for the village to-morrow."

"As the Indians are away, there won't be much to be learned," Benson suggested.

"They may have come back. Anyway, it's my business to find out all I can."

Soon afterward they went to sleep; and, rising an hour or two before daylight, they broke camp and turned back across the hills. The march was rough and toilsome, and when they camped at night fatigue and drowsiness checked conversation, but Blake and his comrades were sensible of a difference in Lane's manner. It had become reserved, and he had a thoughtful look. Reaching the village one evening, they were surprised to find that some of the Indians had returned. After supper Lane summoned them into the tepee he occupied. Emile interpreted, but he had some difficulty in making himself understood, for which Harding was inclined to be thankful.

The sergeant began by explaining the authority and business of the North-West Police, of whom it

appeared one or two of the Indians had heard. Then he made Emile ask them if they knew Clarke. One of them said that they did, and added that he stayed with them now and then. Lane next asked why they took him in, and the Indian hesitated.

"He was a big medicine man and cured us when we were ill," he answered cautiously.

"Do you know these white men?" Lane asked, indicating Blake's party.

An Indian declared that they had never seen them, though he added that it was known that they were in the neighborhood. Being questioned about this, he explained that about the time of Clarke's arrival one of the tribe had come in from the North, where he had met a half-breed who told him that he had traveled some distance with three white men who were going to the settlements. Knowing the country, they had calculated that the white men could not be very far off.

Harding felt anxious. He saw where Lane's questions led, and realized that the sergeant meant to sift the matter thoroughly. There was not much cause to fear that he and his friends would be held responsible for Clarke's death; but he suspected things he did not wish the police to guess; and the Indians might mention having seen a white man's footprints on the occasion when he had forcibly taken Clarke away. Owing perhaps to their difficulty in making themselves understood, nothing, however, was said of this.

"How was it you left the white man in your village by himself?" Lane asked.

The Indians began to talk to one another, and it was with some trouble that Emile at last elicited an answer.

"It is a thing that puzzles us," said one. "The white man came alone and told us he had seen tracks of caribou three days' journey back. As we had no meat, and our fish was nearly done, six of us went to look for the deer."

"Six of you? Where are the rest? These tepees would hold a good many people."

"They are hunting farther north," the Indian explained. "When we got to the place the white man told us of, we could see no caribou tracks. As he was a good hunter, we thought this strange; but we went on, because there was another muskeg like the one he spoke of, and we might not have understood him. Then the snow came and we camped until it was over, and afterward came back, finding no deer. When we reached the tepees, he had gone, and we do not know what has become of him. We could not follow because the snow had covered his trail."

"He is dead," Lane said abruptly. "I found him frozen a few days ago."

Their surprise was obviously genuine, and Lane was quick to notice signs of regret. He imagined that Clarke had been a person of some importance among them.

"Tell them I don't want them any more," he said to Emile, and when the Indians went out he turned to Benson. "Give me all the information you are able to about the man."

Benson told him as much as he thought judicious, and Lane sat silent for a while.

"There is no reason to doubt that he came to his death by misadventure," he decided. "I don't quite understand what led him to visit these fellows; but, after all, that doesn't count."

"It isn't very plain," Benson replied. "Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"No," said Lane, looking at him steadily. "You can take it that this inquiry is closed; we'll pull out the first thing to-morrow." He beckoned Walthew. "Now that we're here, we may as well find out what we can about these fellows, and how they live. It will fill up our report, and they like that kind of information at Regina."

When the police had left the tepee Harding turned to his companions with a smile.

"Sergeant Lane is a painstaking officer, but his shrewdness has its limits, and there are points he seems to have missed. It would have been wiser not to have let Clarke's coat out of his hands until he had searched it."

"Ah!" Blake exclaimed sharply. "You emptied the pockets?"

"I did. My action was hardly justifiable, perhaps, but I thought it better that the police shouldn't get on the track of matters that haven't much bearing on Clarke's death. I found two things, and they're both of interest to us. We'll take this one first."

He drew out a metal flask, and when he unstopped it a pungent smell pervaded the tepee.

"Crude petroleum," he explained. "I should imagine the flash-point is low. I can't say how Clarke got the stuff when the ground's hard frozen, but here it is."

"Isn't a low flash-point a disadvantage?" Benson asked. "It must make the oil explosive."

"It does, but all petroleum's refined, and the by-products they take off, which includes gasoline, fetch a remarkably good price. Shake a few drops on the end of a hot log and we'll see how it lights."

A fire burned in a ring of stones in the middle of the tepee, and Benson carefully did as he was told. Hardly had the oil fallen on the wood before it burst into flame.

"As I thought!" exclaimed Harding. "I suspect the presence of one or two distillates that should be worth as much as the kerosene. We'll get the stuff analyzed later; but you had better stopper the flask, because we don't want the smell to rouse Lane's curiosity. The important point is that, as I've reasons for believing the oil is fresh from the ground, Clarke must have found it shortly before the blizzard overtook him. That fixes the locality, and we shouldn't have much trouble in striking the spot when we come back again." His eyes sparkled. "It's going to be well worth while; this is a big thing!"

Blake did not feel much elation. He had all along thought his comrade too sanguine; though he meant to back him.

"In a way, it was very hard luck for Clarke," he said. "If you're right in your conclusions, he's been searching for the oil for several years; and now he's been cut off just when it looks as if he'd found it."

"You don't owe him much pity. What would have happened if we hadn't met the police?"

"It's unpleasant to think of. No doubt we'd have starved to death."

"A sure thing!" said Harding. "It hasn't struck you that this was what he meant us to do."

Blake started.

"Are you making a bold guess, or have you any ground for what you're saying?"

"I see you'll have to be convinced. Very well; in the first place, the man would have stuck at nothing. I've already tried to show you that he had something to gain by Benson's death. I suspected when we took you away from him that you were running a big risk, Benson."

"I was running a bigger one before that, if you can call a thing a risk when the result's inevitable," Benson replied. "The pace I was going would have killed me in another year or two, and even now I'm half afraid—" He paused for a few moments, with somber face and knitted brows. "I believe you're right, Harding," he went on thoughtfully; "but you haven't told us how he proposed to get rid of me."

"I'm coming to that. There was, however, another member of this party who was in his way, and he made his plans to remove you both."

"You mean me?" Blake broke in. "I don't see how he'd profit by my death."

"First, let's look at what he did. As soon as he reached the village, he heard that we had started from the Hudson Bay post. It wouldn't be difficult to calculate how long the food we could carry would last, and he'd see that the chances were in favor of our calling at the village for provisions. Presuming on that, he sent his friends away to look for caribou which they couldn't find. They admitted that they were puzzled, because he was a good hunter. Then he cleared out by himself; and I believe that if there was any food left in the place he carefully hid it."

Harding took out a letter and handed it to Blake.

"That," he said, "will show you how he would have profited. I found it in his pocket."

Blake started. It was Colonel Challoner's handwriting, and was addressed to Clarke.

"Read it," Benson advised; "it's justifiable."

Blake read it aloud, holding the paper near the fire, where the light showed up the grimness of his face:

"In reply to your letter, I have nothing further to say. I believe I have already made my intentions plain. It would be useless for you to trouble me with any further proposals."

Blake folded the letter and put it into his pocket before he spoke.

"I think I see," he said very quietly. "The man has been trying to bleed the Colonel, and has got his answer."

"Is that all?" Harding asked.

"Well, I believe it proves that your conclusions are right. I won't go into particulars, but where my uncle and cousin are threatened I'm, so to speak, the leading witness for the defense, and it wouldn't have suited Clarke to let me speak. No doubt, that's why he took rather drastic measures to put me out of the way."

"Then you mean never to question the story of the Indian affair?"

"What do you know about it?" Blake asked curtly.

Harding laughed.

"I know the truth. Haven't I marched and starved and shared my plans with you? If there had been any meanness in you, wouldn't I have found it out? What's more, Benson knows what really happened, and so does Colonel Challoner. How else could Clarke have put the screw on him?"

"He doesn't seem to have made much impression; you have heard the Colonel's answer." Blake frowned. "We'll drop this subject. If Challoner attached any importance to what you think Clarke told him, his first step would have been to send for me."

"I expect you'll find a letter waiting for you at Sweetwater," Harding replied.

Blake did not answer, and soon afterward Sergeant Lane came in with Walthew.

CHAPTER XXI

A MATTER OF DUTY

The campfire burned brightly in a straggling bluff at the edge of the plain. The scattered trees were small and let in the cold wind, and the men were gathered close round the fire in a semi-circle on the side away from the smoke. Sergeant Lane held a notebook in his hand, while Emile repacked a quantity of provisions, the weight of which they had been carefully estimating. The sergeant's calculations were not reassuring, and he frowned.

"The time we lost turning back to the Stony village has made a big hole in our grub," he said. "Guess we'll have to cut the menoo down and do a few more miles a day."

"Our party's used to that," Blake answered with a smile. "I suggest another plan. You have brought us a long way, and Sweetwater's a bit off your line. Suppose you give us food enough to last us on half rations and let us push on."

"No, sir!" said Lane decidedly. "We see this trip through together. For another thing, the dogs are playing out, and after the way they've served us I want to save them. With your help at the traces we make better time."

Blake could not deny this. The snow had been in bad condition for the last week, and the men had relieved each other in hauling the sled. The police camp equipment was heavy, but it could not be thrown away, for the men preferred some degree of hunger to lying awake at nights, half frozen. Moreover, neither Blake nor his comrades desired to leave their new friends and once more face the rigors of the wilds alone.

"Then we'll have to make the best speed we can," he said.

They talked about the journey still before them for another hour. It was a clear night and very cold, but there was a crescent moon in the sky. The wind had fallen; the fragile twigs of the birches which shot up among the poplars were still, and deep silence brooded over the wide stretch of snow.

"Ah!" Emile exclaimed suddenly. "You hear somet'ing?"

They did not, though they listened hard; but the half-breed had been born in the wilderness, and they could not think him mistaken. For a minute or two his pose suggested strained attention, and then he smiled.

"White man come from ze sout'. *Mais, oui!* He come, sure t'ing."

Lane nodded.

"I guess he's right. I can hear it now; but I can't figure on the kind of outfit."

Then Blake heard a sound which puzzled him. It was not the quick patter of a dog team, nor the sliding fall of netted shoes. The noise was dull and heavy, and as the snow would deaden it, whoever was coming could not be far away.

"Bob-sled!" Emile exclaimed with scorn. "*V'la la belle chose!*
Arrive ze great horse of ze plow."

"The fellow's sure a farmer, coming up with a Clydesdale team," Lane laughed. "One wouldn't have much trouble in following his trail."

A few minutes later three men appeared, carefully leading two big horses through the trees.

"Saw your fire a piece back," said one, when they had hauled up a clumsy sled. "I'm mighty glad to find you, Blake; we were wondering how far we might have to go."

"Then you came up after me, Tom?" exclaimed Blake. "You wouldn't have got much farther with that team; but who sent you?"

"I don't quite know. It seems that Gardner got orders from somebody that you were to be found, and he hired me and the boys. We had trouble in getting here, but we allowed we could bring up more grub and blankets on the sled, and we could send Jake back with the team when we struck the thick bush. Then we were going to make a cache, and pack along as much stuff as we could carry. But I have a letter which may tell you something."

Blake opened it, and Harding noticed that his face grew intent; but he put the letter into his pocket and turned to the man.

"It's from a friend in England," he said. "You were lucky in finding me, and we'll go back together in the morning."

After attending to their horses, the new arrivals joined the others at the fire, and explained that at the hotel-keeper's suggestion they had meant to head for the Indian village, and make inquiries on their way up at the logging camp. Though Blake talked to them, he had a preoccupied look, and Harding knew that he was thinking of the letter. He had, however, no opportunity for questioning him, and he waited until the next day, when Emile, whom they were helping, chose a shorter way across a ravine than that taken by the police and the men with the bob-sled. When they reached the bottom of the hollow, Blake told the half-breed to stop, and he took his comrades aside.

"There's something I must tell you," he said. "It was Colonel Challoner who sent the boys up from the settlement with food for us, and he begs me to come home at once. That's a point on which I'd like your opinion; but you shall hear what he has to say."

Sitting down on a log, he began to read from his letter:

"*A man named Clarke, whom you have evidently met, lately called on me and suggested an explanation of the Indian affair. As the price of his keeping silence on the subject, he demanded that I should take a number of shares in a syndicate he is forming for the exploitation of some petroleum wells.*"

"It was a good offer," Harding interrupted. "Clarke must have had reason for believing he was about to make a big strike; he'd have kept quiet until he was sure of it."

"*The fellow's story was plausible,*" Blake continued reading. "*It seems possible that you have been badly wronged; and I have been troubled—*" He omitted the next few lines, and went on: "*After giving the matter careful thought, I feel that the man may have hit upon the truth. It would, of course,*

afford me the keenest satisfaction to see you cleared, but the thing must be thoroughly sifted, because
——"

Blake stopped and added quietly:

"He insists on my going home."

"His difficulty is obvious," Benson remarked. "If you are blameless, his son must be guilty."

Blake did not answer, but sat musing with a disturbed expression. There was now no sign of the men with the bob-sled, and no sound reached them from the plain above. Emile stood patiently waiting some distance off, and though they were sheltered from the wind it was bitterly cold.

"In some ways, it might be better if I went home at once," Blake said at last. "I could come back and join you as soon as I saw how things were going. The Colonel would feel easier if I were with him; but, all the same, I'm inclined to stay away."

"Why?" Harding asked.

"For one thing, if I were there, he might insist on taking some quite unnecessary course that would only cause trouble."

"I'm going to give you my opinion," said Harding curtly. "I take it that your uncle is a man who tries to do the square thing?"

Blake's face relaxed and his eyes twinkled.

"He's what you call white, and as obstinate as they're made. Convince him that a thing's right and he'll see it done, no matter how many people it makes uncomfortable. That's why I don't see my way to encourage him."

"Here's a man who's up against a point of honor; he has, I understand, a long, clean record, and now he's prepared to take a course that may cost him dear. Are you going to play a low-down game on him; to twist the truth so's to give him a chance for deceiving himself?"

"Aren't you and Benson taking what you mean by the truth too much for granted?"

Harding gave him a searching look.

"I haven't heard you deny it squarely; you're a poor liar. It's your clear duty to go back to England right away, and see your uncle through with the thing he means to do."

"After all, I'll go to England," Blake answered with significant reserve. "However, we'd better get on, or we won't catch the others until they've finished dinner."

Emile started the dogs, and when they had toiled up the ascent they saw the men with the bob-sled far ahead on the great white plain.

"We may not have another chance for a private talk until we reach the settlement," Blake said. "What are you going to do about the petroleum?"

"I'll come back and prospect the muskeg as soon as the frost goes,"
Harding answered promptly.

"It will cost a good deal to do that thoroughly. We must hire transport for a full supply of all the tools and food we are likely to need; one experience of the kind we've had this trip is enough. How are you going to get the money?"

"I'm not going to the city men for it until our position's secure. The thing must be kept quiet until we're ready to put it on the market."

"You were doubtful about taking me for a partner once," Benson interposed. "I don't know that I could blame you; but now I mean to do all I can to make the scheme successful, and I don't think you'll have as much reason for being afraid that I might fail you."

"Call it a deal," said Harding. "You're the man we want."

"I ought to be back before you start," Blake said; "and if I can raise any money in England I'll send it over. You're satisfied that this is a project I can recommend to my friends?"

"I believe it's such a chance as few people ever get," Harding answered in a tone of firm conviction.

"Then we'll see what can be done. It won't be your fault if the venture fails."

Harding smiled.

"There's hard work and perhaps some trouble ahead, but you won't regret you faced it. You'll be a rich man in another year or two!"

Blake smiled at his enthusiasm.

"Emile and the dogs are leaving us behind," he said. "We'll have to hustle!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE GIRL AND THE MAN

It was a clear winter afternoon and the sunshine that entered a window of the big hall at Hazlehurst fell upon Millicent as she sat in one of the recesses reading a book. Blake thought she looked very beautiful. As she raised her eyes and caught sight of him she started, and, dropping the book, she rose with a tingle of heightened color, while Blake felt his heart beat fast. Thrown off her guard as she had been, he caught the gladness in her eyes before she could hide it.

"You are surprised at my turning up?" he asked, holding her hand an unnecessarily long time and smiling into her eyes.

The color was still in Millicent's cheeks and she was conscious of an unusual shyness; but she tried to answer naturally.

"I knew that Colonel Challoner had given orders for you to be traced, if possible, and I knew that you had been found; but that was all Mrs. Keith told me. I suppose she didn't know—didn't think, I mean—that I was interested."

"I shall believe that was very foolish of her," Blake said softly, with a question in his voice.

Millicent smiled.

"It really was foolish. But you must have some tea and wait until she comes. I don't think she will be long. She has gone out with Mrs. Foster."

The tea was brought in and Millicent studied Blake unobtrusively as he sat opposite her at the small table. He had grown thin, his bronzed face was worn, and he looked graver. She could not imagine his ever becoming very solemn, but it was obvious that something had happened in Canada which had had its effects on him.

Looking up suddenly, Blake surprised her attentive glance.

"You have changed," she said.

"That's not astonishing," Blake laughed. "We didn't get much to eat in the wilds, and I was thinking how pleasant it is to be back again." He examined his prettily decorated cup. "It's remarkable how many things one can do without. In the bush, we drank our tea, when we had any, out of a blackened can, and the rest of our table equipment was similar. But we'll take it that the change in me is an improvement?"

It was an excuse for looking at her, as if demanding a reply, but she answered readily.

"In a sense, it is."

"Then I feel encouraged to continue starving myself."

"There's a limit; extremes are to be avoided. But did you starve yourselves in Canada?"

"I must confess that the thing wasn't altogether voluntary. I'm afraid we were rather gluttonous when we got the chance."

He smiled, but Millicent's eyes were full of compassion.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" she asked softly.

"No; I think it was a serious disappointment for Harding, and I was very sorry for him at first."

"So am I," Millicent responded. "It must have been very hard, after leaving his wife alone and badly provided for and risking everything on his success. But why did you say you *were* sorry for him? Aren't you sorry now?"

"Though we didn't find what we were looking for, we found something else which Harding seems firmly convinced is quite as valuable. Of course, he's a bit of an optimist, but it looks as if he were right this time. Anyway, I'm plunging on his scheme."

"You mean you will stake all you have on it?"

"Yes," Blake answered with a humorous twinkle. "It's true that what I have doesn't amount to much, but I'm throwing in what I should like to get—and that's a great deal."

Millicent noticed his expression suddenly grow serious.

"Tell me about your adventures up in that wilderness," she begged.

"Oh," he protested, "they're really not interesting."

"Let me judge. Is it nothing to have gone where other men seldom venture?"

He began rather awkwardly, but she prompted him with tactful questions, and he saw that she wished to hear his story. By degrees he lost himself in his subject, and, being gifted with keen imagination, she followed his journey into the wilds. It was not his wish to represent himself as a hero, and now and then he spoke with deprecatory humor, but he betrayed something of his character in doing justice to his theme. Millicent's eyes sparkled as she listened, for she found the story moving; he was the man she had thought him, capable of grim endurance, determined action, and steadfast loyalty.

"So you carried your crippled comrade when you were exhausted and starving," she exclaimed, when he came to their search for the factory. "One likes to hear of such things as that! But what would you have done if you hadn't found the post?"

"I can't answer," he said soberly. "We didn't dare think, of it: a starving man's will gets weak." Then his expression grew whimsical. "Besides, if one must be accurate, we dragged him."

"Still," said Millicent softly, "I can't think you would have left him."

Something in her voice made Blake catch his breath. She looked very alluring as she sat there with the last of the sunshine sprinkling gold over her hair and her face and her light gown. He leaned forward quickly; and then he remembered his disgrace.

"I'm flattered, Miss Graham," he said; "but you really haven't very strong grounds for your confidence in me."

"Please go on with your story," Millicent begged, disregarding his remark. "How long did you stay at the factory?"

Blake told of their journey back, of the days when starvation faced them, and of the blizzard, though he made no reference to Clarke's treachery; and Millicent listened with close attention. It grew dark but they forgot to ring for lights; neither of them heard the door open when he was near the conclusion, nor saw Mrs. Keith, entering quietly with Mrs. Foster, stop a moment in surprise. The room was shadowy, but Mrs. Keith could see the man leaning forward with an arm on the table and the girl listening with intent face. There was something that pleased her in the scene.

As Mrs. Keith moved forward, Millicent looked up quickly and Blake rose.

"So you have come back!" Mrs. Keith said. "How was it you didn't go straight to Sandymere, where your uncle is eagerly awaiting you?"

"I sent him a cablegram just before I sailed, but on landing I found there was an earlier train. As he won't expect me for another two hours, I thought I'd like to pay my respects to you."

Mrs. Keith smiled as she glanced at Millicent.

"Well, I'm flattered," she responded; "and, as it happens, I have something to say to you."

Mrs. Foster joined them, and it was some time before Mrs. Keith had a chance to take Blake into the

empty drawing-room.

"I'm glad you have come home," she said abruptly. "I think you are needed."

"That," replied Blake, "is how it seemed to me."

His quietness was reassuring. Mrs. Keith knew that he was to be trusted, but she felt some misgivings about supporting him in a line of action that would cost him much. Still, she could not be deterred by compassionate scruples when there was an opportunity for saving her old friend from suffering. Troubled by a certain sense of guilt, but determined, she tried to test his feelings.

"You didn't find waiting for us tedious," she said lightly. "I suppose you and Millicent were deep in your adventures when we came in—playing Othello and Desdemona."

Blake laughed.

"As you compare me to the Moor, you must admit that I have never pretended to be less black than I'm painted."

"Ah!" Mrs. Keith exclaimed with marked gentleness. "You needn't pretend to me, Dick. I have my own opinion about you. I knew you would come home as soon as you could be found."

"Then you must know what has been going on in my absence."

"I have a strong suspicion. Your uncle has been hard pressed by unscrupulous people with an end to gain. How much impression they have made on him I cannot tell; but he's fond of you, Dick, and in trouble. It's a cruel position for an honorable man with traditions like those of the Challoners' behind him."

"That's true; I hate to think of it. You know what I owe to him and Bertram."

"He's old," continued Mrs. Keith. "It would be a great thing if he could be allowed to spend his last years in quietness. I fear that's impossible, although perhaps to some extent it lies in your hands." She looked steadily at Blake. "Now that you have come back, what do you mean to do?"

"Whatever is needful; I'm for the defense. The Colonel's position can't be stormed while I'm on guard; and this time there'll be no retreat."

"Don't add that, Dick; it hurts me. I'm not so hard as I sometimes pretend. I never doubted your staunchness; but I wonder whether you quite realize what the defense may cost you. Have you thought about your future?"

"You ought to know that the Blakes never think of the future. We're a happy-go-lucky, irresponsible lot."

"But suppose you wished to marry?"

"It's a difficulty that has already been pointed out. If I ever marry, the girl I choose will believe in me in spite of appearances. In fact, she'll have to: I have no medals and decorations to bring her."

"You have much that's worth more!" Mrs. Keith declared warmly, moved by his steadfastness. "Still, it's a severe test for any girl." She laid her hand gently on his arm. "In the end, you won't regret the course you mean to take. I have lived a long while and have lost many pleasant illusions, but I believe that loyalty like yours has its reward. I loved you for your mother's sake when you were a boy; afterward when things looked blackest I kept my faith in you, and now I'm proud that I did so."

Blake looked confused.

"Confidence like yours is an embarrassing gift. It makes one feel that one must live up to it; and that isn't easy."

Mrs. Keith regarded him affectionately.

"It's yours, Dick; given without reserve. But I think there's nothing more to be said; and the Colonel will be expecting you."

They moved toward the hall as she spoke; and when Blake had gone Mrs. Keith looked searchingly at Millicent. The girl's face shone with a happiness which she could not conceal: she knew that Blake loved her; and she knew, too, that she loved Blake; but she was not ready to admit this to Mrs. Keith.

CHAPTER XXIII

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Dinner was finished at Sandymere, Miss Challoner had gone out, and, in accordance with ancient custom, the cloth had been removed from the great mahogany table. Its glistening surface was broken only by a decanter, two choice wine-glasses, and a tall silver candlestick. Lighting a cigar, Blake looked about while he braced himself for the ordeal that must be faced.

He knew the big room well, but its air of solemnity, with which the heavy Georgian furniture was in keeping, impressed him. The ceiling had been decorated by a French artist of the eighteenth century, and the faded delicacy of the design, bearing as it did the stamp of its period, helped to give the place a look of age. Challoner could trace his descent much farther than his house and furniture suggested, but the family had first come to the front in the East India Company's wars, and while maintaining its position afterward had escaped the modernizing influence of the country's awakening in the early Victorian days.

It seemed to Blake, fresh from the new and democratic West, that his uncle, shrewd and well-informed man as he was, was very much of the type of Wellington's officers. For all that he pitied him. Challoner looked old and worn, and round his eyes there were wrinkles that hinted at anxious thought. His life was lonely; his unmarried sister, who spent much of her time in visits, was the only relative who shared his home. Now that age was limiting his activities and interests, he had one great source of gratification: the career of the soldier son who was worthily following in his steps. His nephew determined that this should be saved for him, as he remembered the benefits he had received at the Colonel's hands.

"Dick," Challoner said earnestly, "I'm very glad to see you home. I should like to think you have come to stay."

"Thank you, sir. I'll stay as long as you need me."

"I feel that I need you altogether. It's now doubtful whether Bertram will leave India, after all. His regiment has been ordered into the hills, where there's serious trouble brewing, and he has asked permission to remain. Even if he comes home, he will have many duties, and I have nobody left."

Blake did not answer immediately, and his uncle studied him. Dick had grown thin, but he looked very strong, and the evening dress set off his fine, muscular figure. His face was still somewhat pinched, but its deep bronze and the steadiness of his eyes and the firmness of his lips gave him a very soldierly look and a certain air of distinction. There was no doubt that he was true to the Challoner type.

"I must go back sooner or later," Blake said slowly; "there is an engagement I am bound to keep. Besides, your pressing me to stay raises a question. The last time we met you acquiesced in my decision that I had better keep out of the country, and I see no reason for changing it."

"The question must certainly be raised; that is why I sent for you. You can understand my anxiety to learn what truth there is in the story I have heard."

"It might be better if you told me all about it."

"Very well; the task is painful, but it can't be shirked."

Challoner carefully outlined Clarke's theory of what had happened during the night attack, and Blake listened quietly.

"Of course," Challoner concluded, "the man had an obvious end to serve, and I dare say he was capable of misrepresenting things to suit it. I'll confess that I found the thought comforting; but I want the truth, Dick. I must do what's right."

"Clarke once approached me about the matter, but he will never trouble either of us again. I helped to bury him up in the wilds."

"Dead!" exclaimed Challoner.

"Frozen. In fact, it was not his fault that we escaped his fate. He set a trap for us, intending that we

should starve."

"But why?"

"His motive was obvious. There was a man with us whose farm and stock would, in the event of his death, fall into Clarke's hands; and it's clear that I was a serious obstacle in his way. Can't you see that he couldn't use his absurd story to bleed you unless I supported it?"

Challoner felt the force of this. He was a shrewd man, but just then he was too disturbed to reason closely and he failed to perceive that his nephew's refusal to confirm the story did not necessarily disprove it. That Clarke had thought it worth while to attempt his life bulked most largely in his uncle's eyes.

"He urged me to take some shares in a petroleum syndicate," he said.

"Then, I believe you missed a good thing." Blake seized upon the change of topic. "The shares would probably have paid you well. He found the oil, and put us on the track of it, though of course he didn't have any wish to do that. We expect to make a good deal out of the discovery."

"It looks like justice," Challoner declared. "But we are getting away from the point. I'd better tell you that after my talk with the man, I felt that he might be dangerous and that I must send for you."

"Why didn't you send for Bertram?"

Challoner hesitated.

"When I cabled out instructions to find you, there was no word of his leaving India; then, you must see how hard it would have been to hint at my suspicions. It would have opened a breach between us that could never be closed."

"Yes," said Blake, leaning forward on the table and speaking earnestly, "your reluctance was very natural. I'm afraid of presuming too far, but I can't understand how you could believe this thing of your only son."

"It lies between my son and my nephew, Dick." There was emotion in the Colonel's voice. "I had a great liking for your father, and I brought you up. Then I took a keen pride in you; there were respects in which I found you truer to our type than Bertram."

"You heaped favors on me," Blake replied. "That I bitterly disappointed you has been my deepest shame; in fact, it's the one thing that counts. For the rest, I can't regret the friends who turned their backs on me; and poverty never troubled the Blakes."

"But the taint—the stain on your name!"

"I have the advantage of bearing it alone, and, to tell the truth, it doesn't bother me much. That a man should go straight in the present is all they ask in Canada, and homeless adventurers with no possessions—the kind of comrades I've generally met—are charitable. As a rule, it wouldn't become them to be fastidious. Anyway, sir, you must see the absurdity of believing that Bertram could have failed in his duty in the way the tale suggests."

"I once felt that strongly; the trouble is that the objection applies with equal force to you. Do you deny the story this man told me?"

Blake felt that his task was hard. He had to convict himself, and he must do so logically: Challoner was by no means a fool. As he nerved himself to the effort he was conscious of a rather grim amusement.

"I think it would be better if I tried to show you how the attack was made. Is the old set of Indian chessmen still in the drawer?"

"I believe so. It must be twenty years since they were taken out. It's strange you should remember them."

A stirring of half-painful emotions troubled Blake. He loved the old house and all that it contained and had a deep-seated pride in the Challoner traditions. Now he must make the Colonel believe that he was a degenerate scion of the honored stock and could have no part in them.

"I have forgotten nothing at Sandymere; but we must stick to the subject." Crossing the floor he came back with the chessmen, which he carefully arranged, setting up the white pawns in two separate ranks

to represent bodies of infantry, with the knights and bishops for officers. The colored pieces he placed in an irregular mass.

"Now," he began, "this represents the disposition of our force pretty well. I was here, at the top of the ravine"—he laid a cigar on the table to indicate the spot—"Bertram on the ridge yonder. This bunch of red pawns stands for the Ghazee rush."

"It agrees with what I've heard," said Challoner, surveying the roughly marked scene of battle with critical eyes. "You were weak in numbers, but your position was strong. It could have been held!"

Blake began to move the pieces.

"The Ghazees rolled straight over our first line; my mine, which might have checked them, wouldn't go off—a broken circuit in the firing wires, I suppose. We were hustled out of the trenches; it was too dark for effective rifle fire."

"The trench the second detachment held should have been difficult to rush!"

"But," Blake insisted, "you must remember that the beggars were Ghazees; they're hard to stop. Then, our men were worn out and had been sniped every night for the last week or two. However, the bugler's the key to my explanation; I'll put this dab of cigar ash here to represent him. This bishop's Bertram, and you can judge by the distance whether the fellow could have heard the order to blow, 'Cease fire,' through the row that was going on."

He resumed his quick moving of the chessmen, accompanying it by a running commentary.

"Here's another weak point in the tale, which must be obvious to any one who has handled troops; these fellows couldn't have gained a footing in this hollow because it was raked by our fire. There was no cover and the range was short. Then, you see the folly of believing that the section with which the bugler was could have moved along the ridge; they couldn't have crossed between the Ghazees and the trench. They'd have been exposed to our own fire in the rear."

He added more to much the same effect, and then swept the chessmen up into a heap and looked at his companion.

"I think you ought to be convinced," he said.

"It all turns upon the bugler's movements," Challoner contended.

"And he was killed. I've tried to show you that he couldn't have been where Clarke's account had him."

Challoner was silent for a while, and Blake watched him anxiously until he looked up.

"I think you have succeeded, Dick, though I feel that with a trifling alteration here and there you could have cleared yourself. Now we'll let the painful matter drop for good; unless, indeed, some fresh light is ever thrown on it."

"That can't happen," Blake declared staunchly.

Challoner rose and laid a hand on his arm. "If you were once at fault, you have since shown yourself a man of honor. Though the thing hurt me at the time, I'm glad you are my nephew. Had there been any baseness in you, some suspicion must always have rested on your cousin. Well, we are neither of us sentimentalists, but I must say that you have amply made amends."

He turned away and Blake went out into the open air to walk up and down. The face of the old house rose above him, dark against the clear night sky; in front the great oaks in the park rolled back in shadowy masses. Blake loved Sandymere; he had thought of it often in his wanderings, and now he was glad that through his action his cousin would enjoy it without reproach. After all, it was some return to make for the favors he had received. For himself there remained the charm of the lonely trail and the wide wilderness.

For all that, he had been badly tempted. Poverty and disgrace were serious obstacles to marriage, and had he been free to do so, he would eagerly have sought the hand of Millicent Graham. It was hard to hold his longing for her in check. However, Harding was confident that they were going to be rich, and that would remove one of his disadvantages. Thinking about the girl tenderly, he walked up and down the terrace until he grew calm, and then he went in to talk to Miss Challoner.

CHAPTER XXIV

A WOMAN'S ADVICE

A fortnight later, Blake met Millicent in a fieldpath and turned back with her to Hazlehurst. It was a raw day and the wind had brought a fine color into the girl's face, and she wore a little fur cap and fur-trimmed jacket which he thought became her very well.

"You have not been over often," she said; "Mr. Foster was remarking about it."

Blake had kept away for fear of his resolution melting if he saw much of her.

"My uncle seems to think he has a prior claim," he explained; "and I may not be able to stay with him long."

"You are going back to Canada?" The quick way the girl looked up, and something in her tone, suggested unpleasant surprise, for she had been taken off her guard.

"I shall have to go when Harding needs me. I haven't heard from him since I arrived, but I'll get my summons sooner or later."

"I thought you had come home for good!" Millicent's color deepened, and she added quickly: "Do you like the life in the Northwest?"

"It has its charm. There are very few restrictions—one feels free. The fences haven't reached us yet; you can ride as far as you can see over miles of grass and through the clumps of bush. There's something attractive in the wide horizon; the riband of trail that seems to run forward forever draws you on."

"But the arctic frost and the snow?"

"After all, they're bracing. Our board shacks with the big stoves in them are fairly warm; and no one can tell what developments may suddenly come about in such a country. A railroad may be run through, wheat-land opened up, minerals found, and wooden cities spring up from the empty plain. Life's rapid and strenuous; one is swept along with the stream."

"But you were in the wilds!"

Blake laughed.

"We were indeed; but not far behind us the tide of population pours across the plain, and if we had stayed a year or two in the timber, it would have caught us up. That flood won't stop until it reaches the Polar Sea."

"But how can people live in a rugged land covered with snow that melts only for a month or two?"

"The climate doesn't count, so long as the country has natural resources. One hears of precious metals, and some are being mined." He paused and added in a tone of humorous confidence: "My partner believes in oil."

They were now close to Hazlehurst, and as they left the highway Mrs. Keith joined them.

"Dick," she said, laying her hand affectionately on his arm, "I have had a talk with your uncle. You have convinced him thoroughly, and have taken a great load off his mind." Admiration shone in her eyes. "None of the Challoners ever did so fine a thing, Dick!"

Blake felt embarrassed, and Millicent's face glowed with pride in him. No further reference was made to the subject, however, and he spent a pleasant hour in, the great hall at Hazlehurst, where Mrs. Keith left him with Millicent when tea was brought in.

That night Blake sat with Challoner in the library at Sandymere. The Colonel was in a big leather chair near a good fire, but he had a heavy rug wrapped about him, and it struck Blake that he looked ill.

He turned and regarded Blake affectionately.

"You have been a good nephew, Dick, and since you came home I have felt that I ought to make some provision for you. That, of course, was my intention when you were young, but when the break

occurred you cut yourself adrift and refused assistance."

Blake colored, for there were, he thought, adequate reasons why he should take no further favors from his uncle. If the truth about the frontier affair ever came out, it would look as if he had valued his honor less than the money he could extort and the Colonel would bear the stigma of having bought his silence.

"I'm grateful, sir, but I must still refuse," he said. "I'm glad you made me the offer, because it shows I haven't forfeited your regard; but I'm sorry I cannot consent."

"Have you any plan for the future?"

"My partner has," Blake answered, smiling. "I leave that kind of thing to him. I told you about the oil."

"Yes; and Clarke had something to say on the subject. However, he gave me to understand that capital was needed."

"That is true," Blake replied unguardedly, for he did not see where his uncle's remark led. "Boring plant is expensive, and transport costs something. Then you have to spend a good deal beforehand if you wish to float a company."

"But you believe this venture will pay you?"

"Harding is convinced of it; and he's shrewd. Personally, I don't know enough about the business to judge, but if I had any money to risk I'd take his word for it."

Challoner made no reply; and when Blake left him he grew thoughtful. His nephew's demonstration with the chessmen had lifted a weight off his mind, but he was troubled by a doubt about the absolute correctness of his explanation. Moreover, when he dwelt upon it, the doubt gathered strength; but there was nothing that he could do: Dick obviously meant to stick to his story, and Bertram could not be questioned.

In the meanwhile, Blake sought Miss Challoner.

"I don't think my uncle's looking well. Mightn't it be better to send for Dr. Onslow?" he said.

"He wouldn't be pleased," Miss Challoner answered dubiously. "Still, he sometimes enjoys a talk with Onslow, who's a tactful man. If he looked in, as it were, casually——"

"Yes," assented Blake; "we'll give him a hint. I'll send the groom with a note at once."

The doctor came, and left without expressing any clear opinion, but when he returned the next day he ordered Challoner to bed and told Blake he feared a sharp attack of pneumonia. His fears were justified, for it was several weeks before Challoner was able to leave his room. During his illness he insisted on his nephew's company whenever the nurses would allow it, and when he began to recover, he again begged him to remain at Sandymere. He had come to lean upon the younger man and he entrusted him with all the business of the estate, which he no longer was able to attend to.

"Dick," he said one day, when Blake thought he was too ill to perceive that he was casting a reflection on his son, "I wish my personal means were larger, so that I could give Bertram enough and leave Sandymere to you; then I'd know the place would be in good hands. On the surface, you're a happy-go-lucky fellow; but that's deceptive. In reality, you have a surprising grip of things—however, you know my opinion of you. But you won't go away, Dick?"

The nurse interrupted them, and Blake was glad that he had written to Harding stating his inability to rejoin him. A week or two later he had received a cable message: "*No hurry.*"

When spring came he was still at Sandymere, for Challoner got better very slowly and would not let his nephew go. Blake saw Millicent frequently during those days. At first he felt that it was a weakness, as he had nothing to offer her except a tainted name; but his love was getting beyond control, and his resistance feebler. After all, he thought, the story of the Indian disaster must be almost forgotten; and Harding had a good chance for finding the oil. If he had not already started for the North, he would do so soon; but Blake had had no news from him since his cabled message.

Then, after a quiet month, Blake suggested that as the Colonel was getting stronger again he ought to go back to Canada.

"If you feel that you must go, I'll have to consent," Challoner said.

"I have a duty to my partner. It's probable that he has already set off, but I know where to find him,

and there'll be plenty to do. For one thing, as transport is expensive, we'll have to relay our supplies over very rough country, and that means the same stage several times. Then, I don't suppose Harding will have been able to buy very efficient boring plant."

"He may have done better than you imagine," Challoner suggested with a smile. "A man as capable as he seems to be would somehow get hold of what was needful."

Blake was surprised at this, because his uncle understood their financial difficulties.

"Well, there's a fast boat next Saturday," he said. "I think I'll go by her."

"Wait another week, to please me," Challoner urged him. "You have had a dull time since I've been ill, and now I'd like you to get about. I shall miss you badly, Dick."

Blake agreed. He felt that he ought to have sailed earlier, but the temptation to remain was strong. He now met Millicent every day, and it might be a very long time before he returned to England. He feared that he was laying up trouble for himself, but he recklessly determined to make the most of the present, and, in spite of his misgivings, the next eight or nine days brought him many delightful hours. Now that she knew he was going, Millicent abandoned the reserve she had sometimes shown. She was sympathetic, interested in his plans, and, he thought, altogether charming. They were rapidly drawn closer together, and the more he learned of her character, the stronger his admiration grew. At times he imagined he noticed a tender shyness in her manner, and though it delighted him he afterward took himself to task. He was not acting honorably; he had no right to win this girl's love, as he was trying to do; but there was the excuse that she knew his history and it had not made her cold to him.

Mrs. Keith looked on with observant eyes. She had grown very fond of her companion and she made many opportunities for throwing the two together. One afternoon a day or two before Blake's departure she called Millicent into her room.

"Have you ever thought about your future?" she asked her abruptly.

"Not often since I have been with you," Millicent answered. "Before that it used to trouble me."

"Then I'm afraid you're imprudent. You have no relatives you could look to for help, and while my health is pretty good I can't, of course, live for ever. I might leave you something, but it would not be much, because my property is earmarked for a particular purpose."

Millicent wondered where this led, but Mrs. Keith went on abruptly:

"As you have found out, I am a frank old woman and not afraid to say what I think. Now, I want to ask you a question. If you liked a man who was far from rich, would you marry him?"

"It would depend," Millicent replied, with the color flaming up in her cheeks. "Why do you ask? I can't give you a general answer."

"Then give me a particular one; I want to know."

The girl was embarrassed, but she had learned that her employer was not to be put off easily.

"I suppose his being poor wouldn't daunt me, if I loved him enough."

"Then we'll suppose something else. If he had done something to be ashamed of?"

Millicent looked up with a flash in her eyes.

"People are so ready to believe the worst! He did nothing that he need blush for—that's impossible!" Then she saw the trap into which her generous indignation had led her, but instead of looking down in confusion she boldly faced Mrs. Keith. "Yes," she added, "if he wanted me, I would marry him in spite of what people are foolish enough to think."

"And you would not regret it." Mrs. Keith laid her hand on the girl's arm with a caressing touch. "My dear, if you value your happiness, you will tell him so. Remember that he is going away in a day or two."

"How can I tell him?" Millicent cried with burning face. "I only—I mean you tricked me into telling you."

"It shouldn't be difficult to give him a tactful hint, and that wouldn't be a remarkably unusual course," Mrs. Keith smiled. "The idea that a proposal comes quite spontaneously is to some extent a convention nowadays. I don't suppose you need reminding that we dine at Sandymere to-morrow."

Millicent made no reply; she seemed rather overwhelmed by her employer's frankness, and Mrs. Keith took pity on her and let her go, with a final bit of advice:

"Think over what I told you!"

Millicent thought of nothing else. She knew that Blake loved her and she believed that she understood why he had not declared himself. Now he might go away without speaking. It was hateful to feel that she must make the first advances and reveal her tenderness for him. She felt that she could not do so; and, yet, the alternative seemed worse.

CHAPTER XXV

LOVE AND VICTORY

Millicent accompanied Mrs. Keith to Sandymere in a troubled mood; and dinner was a trying function. She sat next to Foster, and she found it hard to smile at his jokes; and she noticed that Blake was unusually quiet. It was his last evening in England.

When they went into the drawing-room Challoner sat talking with her for a while, and then she was asked to sing. An hour passed before Blake had an opportunity for exchanging a word with her.

"They'll make you sing again if you stay here," he said softly.

She understood that he wanted her to himself, and she thrilled at something in his voice.

"You're interested in Eastern brasswork, I think?" he went on.

"I hardly know," said Millicent. "I haven't seen much of it."

She was vexed with herself for her prudish weakness. An opportunity that might never be repeated was offered her, and she could not muster the courage to seize it. Blake, however, did not seem daunted.

"You said you were delighted with the things my uncle showed you the last time you were here, and a friend has just sent him a fresh lot from Benares." He gave her an appealing look. "It struck me you might like to see them."

The blood crept up into Millicent's face, but she answered with forced calm:

"Yes; I really think I should."

"Will you give me the key to the Indian collection?" Blake asked Challoner.

"Here it is," said the Colonel; and then turned to Mrs. Keith. "That reminds me, you haven't seen my new treasures yet. Dryhurst has lately sent me some rather good things; among others, there's a small Buddha, exquisitely carved. Shall we go and look at them?"

Mrs. Keith felt angry with him for a marplot.

"Wouldn't it be better to wait until I'm here in the daylight? If I try to examine anything closely with these spectacles, they strain my eyes."

"I've had a new lamp placed in front of the case," Challoner persisted; and Mrs. Keith found it hard to forgive him for his obtuseness.

"Very well," she said in a resigned tone; and when Millicent and Blake had gone out she walked slowly to the door with Challoner.

They were half-way up the staircase, which led rather sharply from the hall, when she stopped and grasped the banister.

"It's obvious that you have recovered," she said.

"I certainly feel much better; but what prompted your remark?"

"These stairs. You don't seem to feel them, but if you expect me to run up and down, you'll have to make them shallower and less steep. I've been up twice since I came. I must confess to a weakness in my knee."

Challoner gave her a sharp glance.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Mrs. Foster mentioned something about your not walking much; I should have remembered."

"It's the weather; I find the damp troublesome. If you don't mind, I think we'll go down."

Challoner gave her his arm, and Millicent, standing in the picture gallery, noticed their return. She suspected that it was the result of some maneuver of Mrs. Keith's intended for her advantage, and she tried to summon her resolution. The man she loved would sail the next day, believing that his poverty and the stain he had not earned must stand between them, unless she could force herself to give him a hint to the contrary. This was the only sensible course, but she timidly shrank from it.

Blake unlocked a glass case and, taking out two shelves, he carefully laid them on a table.

"There they are," he said with a rather nervous smile. "I've no doubt the things are interesting, and if our friends come up they can look at them. But it wasn't Benares brassware that brought me up here."

"Wasn't it?" Millicent asked demurely.

"Certainly not! One couldn't talk with Foster enlarging upon the only rational way of rearing pheasants!" He paused a moment. "You know I'm going away the first thing to-morrow," he added softly.

"Yes; I know. I'm sorry."

"Truly sorry? You mean that?"

He gave her a searching glance and then laid his hand on her shoulder, holding her a little away from him.

"Dear little girl," he said, "you don't know what a struggle it is between the knowledge of the duty I owe you and my own selfish longing—my uncontrollable longing for you. You are very young and beautiful, and I love you—but I am a broken man."

"Does that matter, when it is through no fault of yours?" She smiled up at him as she spoke.

For one instant he hesitated; then, all his good resolutions forgotten, he gathered the girl in his arms.

"Millicent!" he breathed. Then, after a long silence: "We'll laugh at cold-blooded prudence and take our chances. It's a wide world, and we'll find a nook; somewhere if we go out and look for it. All my care will be to smooth the trail for you, dear."

They spent a half-hour in happy talk, and Blake murmured when Millicent protested that they must go back; and she feared that her lover's exultant air would betray them as they entered the drawing-room.

"Where's the key?" Challoner asked.

"I'm afraid I forgot it, sir," Blake confessed. "Very sorry, but I'm not even sure I put the things away."

Challoner rang a bell and gave an order to a servant.

"Did you see the Buddha?" he asked Millicent.

"No," she said. "I don't think so."

"Or the brass plate with the fantastic serpent pattern round the rim?"

"I'm afraid I didn't," Millicent answered in confusion.

Challoner looked hard at Blake, and then his eyes twinkled.

"Well," he laughed, "perhaps it wasn't to be expected."

There was a moment's silence. Millicent looked down with the color in her face; Blake stood very straight, smiling at the others.

"We are all friends here," he said, "and I'm proud to announce that Millicent has promised to marry me as soon as I return from Canada." He bowed to Mrs. Keith and the Colonel. "As you have taken her guardian's place, madam, and you, sir, are the head of the house, I should like to think we have your approval."

"How formal, Dick!" Mrs. Keith laughed. "I imagine that my consent is very much a matter of form, but I give it with the greatest satisfaction."

Challoner put one arm round Millicent.

"My dear, I am very glad, and I think Dick has shown great wisdom. I wish you both all happiness."

Mrs. Foster and her husband offered their congratulations, and for the next hour they discussed Blake's future plans. Then they were interrupted by the entrance of a servant with a small silver tray.

"Cablegram, sir, for Mr. Blake," he said. "Hopkins was at the post-office, and they gave it to him."

Blake took the envelope and looked at Miss Challoner for permission to open it. When he had read it, he started, and gave the cablegram to Millicent.

"Oh, Dick!" she cried with sparkling eyes. "How splendid!"

Blake explained to the others.

"It's from my partner in Canada, and I'm sure you'll be interested to bear it." He read the message aloud: "*Come. Struck it. Tell Challoner.*"

He folded the paper and replaced it in its envelope. "I don't understand the last part of it," he said to Challoner. "Why does he wish you to know?"

The Colonel chuckled.

"I sent Mr. Harding five hundred pounds to buy anything he needed for his prospecting, and told him to give me an option on a good block of shares in the new syndicate at par. You're very independent, Dick, but I can't see why you should object to your relatives putting money into what looks like a promising thing."

"I've no doubt it was mainly through your help that Harding found the oil," Blake said gratefully.

Soon afterward the Fosters rose to go, but they waited a few moments in the hall while Millicent lingered with Blake in the drawing-room.

"Dick," she said, blushing in a way that he thought quite charming, "you made a rash statement. I didn't really promise to marry you as soon as you came back."

"Then it was understood," Blake answered firmly. "And I shan't let you off."

"Well, if it will bring you home any quicker, dear! But how long must you stay?"

"I can't tell; there may be much to do. If Harding needs me, I must see him out. But I won't delay a minute more than's needful, you may be sure! You know we may have to live in Canada?"

"I won't object. Where you are will be home," she said shyly; and once more he gathered her to him.

Blake sailed the next day, and he found, on reaching the timber belt, that there was much to be done. After some months of hard work, Harding left him in charge while he set off for the cities to arrange about pipes and plant and the raising of capital. It was early winter when he returned, satisfied with what he had accomplished and confident that the oil would pay handsomely, and Blake saw that he would be able to visit England in a few weeks.

He was sitting in their office shack one bitter day when a sled arrived with supplies, and the teamster brought him a cablegram. His face grew grave as he read it aloud to Harding:

"*Bertram killed in action. Challoner.*"

"That sets you free, doesn't it?" Harding asked after expressing his sympathy.

"I can't tell," Blake answered. "I haven't thought of it in that light. I was very fond of my cousin."

When Blake reached England, Millicent met him at the station. Mrs. Keith, she told him, had taken a

house near Sandymere. She looked grave when he asked about his uncle.

"I'm afraid you will see a marked change in him, Dick. He has not been well since you left, and the news of Bertram's death was a shock."

She was with him when he met Challoner, who looked very frail and forlorn.

"It's a comfort to see you back, Dick; you are all I have now," he said, and went on with a break in his voice: "After all, it was a good end my boy made—a very daring thing! The place was supposed to be unassailable by such a force as he had, but he stormed it. In spite of his fondness for painting, he was true to the strain!"

When Blake was alone with Millicent in the dimly lighted drawing-room, he took her into his arms very gently.

"My secret must still be kept, dear," he said; "I can't speak."

"No," she agreed, "not while your uncle lives. It's hard, when I want everybody to know what you are!"

He kissed her.

"Perhaps it's natural for you to be prejudiced in my favor—but I like it."

"One reason for my loving you, Dick," she said softly, with her face close against his, "is that you are brave enough to take this generous part!"

THE END

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