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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOAN OF ARC OF THE NORTH
WOODS ***

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JOAN OF ARC OF THE NORTH WOODS

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BOOKS BY
HOLMAN DAY

JOAN OF ARC OF THE NORTH WOODS
WHEN EGYPT WENT BROKE
ALL-WOOL MORRISON
THE RIDER OF THE KING LOG
THE SKIPPER AND THE SKIPPED
THE RED LANE
THE RAMRODDERS
THE LANDLOPER
WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS
SQUIRE PHIN
BLOW THE MAN DOWN

Harper & Brothers Publishers
New York and London

Joan of Arc of the North Woods

By

HOLMAN DAY

Author of

"THE RIDER OF THE KING LOG," "WHEN
EGYPT WENT BROKE," ETC.



HARPER & BROTHERS, PUBLISHERS
NEW YORK AND LONDON

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First Edition
H-W

***Joan of Arc
of the North Woods***

[1]

CHAPTER ONE

THE timber situation in the Tomah country was surcharged.

When Ward Latisan came upon Rufus Craig, one afternoon in autumn, steel struck flint and trouble's fuse was lighted.

Their meeting was on the Holeb tote road just below Hagas Falls.

Young Ward was the grandson of old John, a pioneer who was in his day a saw-log baron of the times of pumpkin pine; by heredity Ward was the foremost champion in the cause of the modern independent operators.

In his own way, Craig, the field director of the Comas Consolidated Paper Company, was the chief gladiator for an invading corporation which demanded monopoly of the Tomah timber by absorption of the independents.

Latisan tramped down the tote road from the shoulder of Holeb Mountain, where he had been cruising alone for a week on the Walpole tract, blazing timber for the choppers, marking out twitch roads and haul-downs, locating yards; his short-handled ax was in his belt, his lank haversack flapped on his back; he carried his calipers in one hand; with the other hand he fed himself raisins from his trousers pocket, munching as he went along. He had eaten the last of his scanty supply of biscuits and bacon; but, like other timber cruisers—all of them must travel light—he had his raisins to fall back on, doling them one by one, masticating them thoroughly and finding the nourishment adequate.

[2]

He had been on the go every day from sunup till dark; nights he cinched his belted jacket closely and slept as best he could, his back against a tree; he had cruised into every nook and corner of the tract, spending strength prodigally, but when he strode down the tote road his vitality enabled him to hit it off at a brisk gait; his belt was a few holes tighter, yet his fasting made him keenly awake; he was more alert to the joy of being alive in the glory of the crisp day; his cap was in his pocket, his tousled brown hair was rampant; and he welcomed the flood of sunshine on his bronzed face.

Craig was making his way along the tote road in a buckboard, with a driver. The road bristled with rocks and was pitted with hollows; the fat horses dragged their feet at a slow walk. Craig was a big man, a bit paunchy, and he grunted while he was bounced. He wore his city hard hat as if he wished by his headgear to distinguish himself from the herd of woodsmen whom he bossed.

Latisan overtook the toiling buckboard, and his stride was taking him past when Craig hailed.

"Ride?"

[3]

"No—thank you!" The negative was sharp. Privation and toil had put an edge on

the young man's temper, and the temper was not amiable where Craig was concerned.

"I've got some business to talk with you, Latisan."

"If that's so I can listen while I walk alongside."

But Craig ordered the driver to halt. Then the Comas director swung around and faced Latisan. "I'm putting it up to you again—will you and your father sell to the Comas?"

"No, sir!"

"What is it going to be—a fight to a finish?"

"If you keep your hands off us saw-log fellows, Mr. Craig, there'll be no fight. We were here first, you know!"

"That's got nothing to do with the present situation, Latisan. We've built a million-dollar paper mill on the Toban, and it's up to me to feed it with pulp stuff. We can't lug our plant off in a shawl strap if supply fails."

"Nor can the folks who have built villages around the sawmills lug away their houses if the mills are closed."

"Paper dominates in this valley nowadays, instead of lumber. Latisan, you're old-fashioned!"

The young man, feeling his temper flame, lighted his pipe, avoiding too quick retort.

"You stand to lose money in the lumber market, with conditions as they are," proceeded Craig, loftily counseling another man about his own business. The Comas director, intent on consolidation, had persistently failed to understand the loyalty, half romantic, which was actuating the old-line employers to protect faithful householders. "Let the workers move down the river to our model town."

[4]

"And live in those beehives of yours, paying big rent, competing with the riffraff help you hire from employment agencies? We can't see it that way, Mr. Craig!"

"Look here! I've got some news for you. I've just pulled five of the independents in with us—Gibson, Sprague, Tolman, Brinton, and Bodwell. The Comas now controls the timber market on the Toban. How about logs for your mills?"

Craig believed he was hitting Latisan five solid jolts to the jaw when he named the recreant operators.

However, the young man had heard rumors of what the bludgeoning methods of the Comas had accomplished; he surveyed Craig resolutely through the pipe smoke.

He had come down from the Walpole tract that day in a spirit of new confidence which put away all weariness from him. He was armed with a powerful weapon. In his exultation, fired by youth's natural hankering to vaunt success in an undertaking where his elders had failed, he was willing to flourish the weapon.

Craig wagged a thick forefinger. "What are you going to saw, Latisan?"

"Two million feet from the Walpole tract—where no ax has chipped a tree for twenty-five years."

It was a return jolt and it made the Comas man blink. "But nobody can buy the right to cut there."

"I have bought the right, Mr. Craig. An air-tight stumpage contract—passed on by the best lawyer in this county—a clear title."

[5]

"Latisan, the Comas has never been able to round up those heirs—and what we can't do with all our resources can't be done by you."

"The Latisans know this region better than the Comas folks know it, sir. Five cousins by hard hunting—two gravestones by good luck! All heirs located! Why don't you congratulate me?"

Just then the Comas director was thinking instead of talking.

In his operations he was a cocksure individual, Mr. Craig was! In his hands, by his suggestion, his New York superiors had placed all the details of business in the field of the north country. He had promised consolidation with full belief in his ability to perform; one explicit promise had been that this season would mark the end of the opposition by the independents; the Comas would secure complete control of the Toban timber and fix prices. But here were the ringleader Latisans in a way to smash the corner which Craig had manipulated by bulldozing and bribery! In the past Craig had not bothered headquarters with any minute explanations of how he

accomplished results. This crusher which threatened all his plans and promises would make a monkey of him in New York, he reflected.

"I want to say a last word to you, Mr. Craig," continued Latisan, stiffly. "Probably we are now in for that fight on which you've been insisting. I don't want to fight, but I'm ready for a fair stand-up. Just a moment, please!" Craig had barked a few oaths preliminary to an outpouring of his feelings. "I'm warning you to let up on those guerrilla tactics of yours. I propose to find out whether your big men in New York are backing you. I'm telling you now to your face, so you can't accuse me later of carrying tales behind your back, of my intention to go to New York and report conditions to the president of the Comas."

[6]

"Don't you dare!"

"I do dare. I'm going. I expect you to run in ahead of me, but no matter. And speaking of tales behind a man's back—"

Craig was having difficulty in finding speech for retort; Latisan was rushing the affair. Again Craig blustered, "Don't you dare!"

"Yes, I do dare. When I went away last summer I had good reasons for keeping my plans to myself. I got back to the Toban and found slander accusing me of sporting in the city, deviling around with liquor and women. That's a damnable lie!"

Latisan delivered the accusation hotly; there was unmistakable challenge in his demeanor. "You yourself have handed around some of that slander, Mr. Craig. I get it straight from men whose word is good!"

"I only said what others were saying."

"I don't know, of course, who started those stories, but I do know that they have been used against me. They have helped you, it seems! I wanted to keep my plans under cover—but I've got to protect myself with the truth, even if the truth gives you a tip. I went away to take a special course in hydraulic engineering, so as to know more about protecting the common rights in the flowage of this river." He swung his hand to indicate the thundering falls of Hagas. "You have used your tongue to hurt my standing with some of the independents—they distrust my reliability and good faith—you have pulled in a few of them. The others will stand by me. Frankly, Mr. Craig, I don't like your style! It'll be a good thing for both of us if we have no more talk after this." He walked rapidly down the tote road, not turning his head when Craig called furiously after him.

[7]

"Pretty uppish, ain't he?" ventured the driver, touching the horses with the whip.

Craig, bouncing alone on the middle seat of the buckboard, grunted.

"Excuse me, Mr. Craig, but that's some news—what he said about getting ahold of the old Walpole tract."

The Comas boss did not comment.

The driver said nothing more for some time; he was a slouchy woodsman of numb wits; he chewed tobacco constantly with the slow jaw motion of a ruminating steer, and he looked straight ahead between the ears of the nigh horse, going through mental processes of a certain sort. "Now 't I think of it, I wish I'd grabbed in with a question to young Latisan. But he doesn't give anybody much of a chance to grab in when he's talking. Still, I'd have liked to ask him something." He maundered on in that strain for several minutes.

"Ask him what?" snapped Craig, tired of the monologue.

"Whuther he's talked with my old aunt Dorcas about the heir who went off into the West somewheres. Grandson of the old sir who was the first Walpole of the Toban—real heir, if he's still alive! My aunt Dorcas had letters about him, or from him, or something like that, only a few years ago."

[8]

"Look here!" stormed Craig. "Why haven't you said something about such letters or such an heir?"

"Nobody has ever asked me. And he's prob'ly dead, anyway. Them lawyers know everything. And he's a roving character, as I remember what my aunt said. No use o' telling anybody about him—it would cost too much to find him."

"Cost too much!" snarled the Comas director. "Oh, you—" But he choked back what he wanted to say about the man's intellect. Craig pulled out notebook and pencil and began to fire questions.

Latisan was headed for home, the old family mansion in the village of Toban Deadwater where Ward and his widowed father kept bachelor's hall, with a veteran woods cook to tend and do for them. The male cook was Ward's idea. The young man had lived much in the woods, and the ways of women about the house annoyed him; a bit of clutter was more comfortable.

It was a long tramp to the Deadwater, but he knew the blazed-trail short cuts and took advantage of the light of the full moon for the last stage of the journey. He was eager to report progress and prospects to his father.

Ward was not anticipating much in the way of practical counsel from Garry Latisan.

Old John had been a Tartar, a blustering baron of the timberlands.

[9]

Garry, his son, had taken to books and study. He was slow and mild, deprecatory and forgiving. Ward Latisan had those saving qualities in a measure, but he was conscious in himself of the avatar of old John's righteous belligerency when occasion prompted.

Ward, as he was trudging home, was trying to keep anger from clouding his judgment. When he felt old John stirring in him, young Latisan sought the mild counsel of Garry, and then went ahead on a line of action of his own; he was steering a safe course, he felt, by keeping about halfway between John's violence in performance and Garry's toleration.

Ward was the executive of the Latisan business and liked the job; his youth and vigor found zest in the adventures of the open. Old John's timber man's spirit had been handed along to the grandson. Ward finished his education at a seminary—and called it enough. His father urged him to go to college, but he went into the woods and was glad to be there, at the head of affairs.

The operations on the old tracts, thinned by many cuttings, had been keeping him closely on the job, because there were problems to be solved if profits were to be handled.

His stroke in getting hold of the Walpole tract promised profits without problems; there were just so many trees to cut down—and the river was handy!

In spite of his weariness, Ward sat till midnight on the porch with his father, going over their plans. The young man surveyed the Latisan mill and the houses of the village while he talked; the moon lighted all and the mill loomed importantly, reflected in the still water of the pond. If Craig prevailed, the mill and the homes must be left to rot, empty, idle, and worthless. As Ward viewed it, the honor of the Latisans was at stake; the spirit of old John blazed in the grandson; but he declared his intention to fight man fashion, if the fight were forced on him. He would go to the Comas headquarters in New York, he said, not to ask for odds or beg for favors, but to explain the situation and to demand that Craig be required to confine himself to the tactics of square business rivalry.

[10]

"And my course in engineering was a good investment; I can talk turkey to them about our dams and the flowage rights. I don't believe they're backing up Craig's piracy!"

Garry Latisan agreed fully with his son and expressed the wistful wish, as he did regularly in their conferences, that he could be of more real help.

"Your sympathy and your praise are help enough, father," Ward declared, with enthusiasm. "We're sure of our cut; all I'm asking from the Comas is gangway for our logs. There must be square men at the head of that big corporation!"

CHAPTER TWO

[11]

IN New York young Latisan plunged straight at his business.

The home office of the Comas Consolidated Company was in a towering structure in the metropolis's financial district. On the translucent glass of many doors there was a big C with two smaller C's nested. In the north country everybody called the corporation The Three C's.

After a fashion, the sight of the portentous monogram made Ward feel more at home. Up where he lived the letters were familiar. Those nested C's stood for wide-flung ownership along the rivers of the north. The monogram was daubed in blue paint on the ends of countless logs; it marked the boxes and barrels and sacks of mountains of supplies along the tote roads; it designated as the property of the Comas Company all sorts of possessions from log camps down to the cant dog in the hands of the humblest Polack toiler. Those nested C's were dominant, assertive, and the folks of the north were awed by the everlasting reduplication along the rivers and in the forests.

Ward, indignantly seeking justice, resolved not to be awed in the castle of the giant. He presented himself at a gate and asked to see the president. The president could not be seen except by appointment, Latisan learned.

What was the caller's business? Latisan attempted to explain, but he was halted by the declaration that all details in the timber country were left to Rufus Craig, field manager! [12]

When Ward insisted that his previous talks with Craig had only made matters worse for all concerned, and when he pleaded for an opportunity to talk with somebody—anybody—at headquarters, he finally won his way to the presence of a fallow man who filmed his hard eyes and listened with an air of silent protest. He also referred Latisan back to Craig. "We don't interfere with his management of details in the north."

Evidently Mr. Craig had been attending to his defenses in the home office.

Ward's temper was touched by the listener's slighting apathy. "I've come here to protest against unfair methods. Our men are tampered with—told that the Latisans are on their last legs. We are losing from our crews right along. We have been able to hire more men to take the places of those who have been taken away from us. But right now we are up against persistent reports that we shall not be able to get down our cut in the spring. Sawmill owners are demanding bonds from us to assure delivery; otherwise they will cancel their orders."

"Do you know any good reason why you can't deliver?" probed the Comas man, showing a bit of interest.

"Your Mr. Craig seems to know. I blame him for these stories."

"I'm afraid you're laboring under a delusion, Mr. Latisan. Why don't you sell out to our company? Most of the other independents have found it to their advantage—seen it in the right light." [13]

"Mr. Craig's tactics have driven some small concerns to see it that way, sir. But my grandfather was operating in the north and supplying the sawmills with timber before the paper mills began to grab off every tree big enough to prop a spruce bud. Villages have been built up around the sawmills. If the paper folks get hold of everything those villages will die; all the logs will be run down to the paper mills."

"Naturally," said the fallow man. "Paper is king these days."

Then he received a handful of documents from a clerk who entered, again referred Ward to Mr. Craig, advised him to treat with the latter in the field, where the business belonged, and hunched a dismissing shoulder toward the caller.

Ward had not been asked to sit down; he swung on his heel, but he stopped and turned. "As to selling out, even if we can bring ourselves to that! Mr. Craig has beaten independents to their knees and has made them accept his price. It's not much else than ruin when a man sells to him."

"Persecutional mania is a dangerous hallucination," stated the fallow man. "Mr. Craig has accomplished certain definite results in the north country. We have used the word Consolidated in our corporation name with full knowledge of what we are after. We assure stable conditions in the timber industry. You must move with the trend of the times." [14]

Latisan had been revolving in his mind certain statements which he proposed to make to the big men of the Comas. He had assorted and classified those statements before he entered the castle of the great corporation. With youth's optimism he had anticipated a certain measure of sympathy—had in some degree pictured at least one kindly man in the Comas outfit who would listen to a young chap's troubles.

Walking to the door, standing with his hand on the knob, he knew he must go back to the woods with the dolorous prospect of being obliged to fight to hold together the remnants of the Latisan business. He set his teeth and opened the door. He would have gone without further words, but the fallow man snapped a half threat which brought Ward around on his heels.

"Mr. Latisan, I hope you will carry away with you the conviction that fighting the Comas company will not get you anything."

Ward choked for a moment. Old John was stirring in him. A fettered yelp was bulging in his throat, and the skin of the back of his head tingled as if the hair were rising. But he spoke quietly when he allowed his voice to squeeze past the repressed impulse. "There's a real fight ready to break in the north country, sir."

"Do you propose to be captain?"

"I have no such ambition. But your Mr. Craig is forcing the issue. No company is big enough to buck the law in our state."

"Look here, my good fellow!" The sallow man came around in his chair. Ward immediately was more fully informed as to the personage's status. "I am one of the attorneys of this corporation. I have been attending to the special acts your legislature has passed in our behalf. We are fully protected by law."

[15]

"The question is how much you'll be protected after facts are brought out by a fight," replied Ward, stoutly. "I know the men who have been sent down to the legislature from our parts and how they were elected. But even such men get cold feet after the public gets wise."

"That'll be enough!" snapped the attorney. He turned to his desk again.

"Yes, it looks like it," agreed young Latisan; he did not bang the door after him; he closed it softly.

The attorney was obliged to look around to assure himself that his caller was not in the room. Then he pushed a button and commanded a clerk to ask if Mr. Craig was still in the president's office. Informed that Mr. Craig was there, the attorney went thither.

"I have just been bothered by that young chap, Latisan, from the Tomah region," reported Dawes, the attorney. "He threatens a fight which will rip the cover off affairs in the north country. How about what's underneath, provided the cover is ripped off, Craig?"

"Everything sweet as a nut! Any other kind of talk is bluff and blackmail. So that's young Latisan's latest move, eh?" he ejaculated, squinting appraisingly at Dawes and turning full gaze of candor's fine assumption on Horatio Marlow, the president.

"Just who is this young Latisan?" inquired Marlow.

"Oh, only the son of one of the independents who are sticking out on a hold-up against us. Did he name his price, Dawes?"

[16]

"He didn't try to sell anything," acknowledged the attorney. "Craig, let me ask you, are you moving along the lines of the law we have behind us in those special acts I steered through?"

"Sure thing!" asserted the field director, boldly.

"We've got to ask for more from the next legislature," stated the lawyer.

The president came in with a warning. "Credit is touchy these days, Mr. Craig. We're going into the market for big money for further development. It's easy for reports to be made very hurtful."

"I'm achieving results up there," insisted Craig, doggedly.

"We're very much pleased with conditions," agreed the president. "We're able to show capital a constantly widening control of properties and natural advantages. But remember Achilles's heel, Mr. Craig."

"I haven't been able to fight 'em with feathers all the time," confessed the field director. "There wasn't much law operating up there when I grabbed in. I have done the best I could, and if I have been obliged to use a club once in a while I have made the fight turn something for the corporation." He exhibited the pride of the man who had accomplished.

The attorney warned Craig again. "We can't afford to have any uproar started till we get our legislation properly cinched. Tomah seems to be attended to. But we need some pretty drastic special acts before we can go over the watershed and control the Noda waters and pull old Flagg into line. He's the last, isn't he?—the king-pin, according to what I hear."

[17]

"I'll attend to his case all right," declared Craig, with confidence. "I'll tackle the Noda basin next. Flagg must be licked before he'll sell. He's that sort. A half lunatic on this independent thing. I reckon you'll leave it to me, won't you?"

"We'll leave all the details of operation in the field to you, Craig," promised the president. "But you must play safe."

"I'll take full responsibility," affirmed Craig, whose pride had been touched.

"Then we shall continue to value you as our right bower in the north," said Marlow. "The man on the ground understands the details. We don't try to follow them here in the home office."

Craig walked out with Dawes.

"That talk has put the thing up to you square-edged, Craig."

Craig had been heartened and fortified by the president's compliments. "Leave it to me!"

CHAPTER THREE

[18]

LATISAN had eaten his breakfast in the grill of a big hotel with a vague idea that such an environment would tune him up to meet the magnates of the Comas company.

In his present and humbler state of mind, hungry again, he went into a cafeteria.

Waiting at the counter for his meat stew and tea—familiar woods provender which appealed to his homesickness—he became aware of a young woman at his elbow; she was having difficulty in managing her tray and her belongings. There was an autumn drizzle outside and Ward had stalked along unprotected, with a woodman's stoicism in regard to wetness. The young woman had her umbrella, a small bag, and a parcel, and she was clinging to all of them, impressed by the "Not Responsible" signs which sprinkled the walls of the place. When her tray tipped at an alarming slant, as she elbowed her way from the crowded counter, Ward caught at its edge and saved a spill.

The girl smiled gratefully.

"If you don't mind," he apologized; his own tray was ready. He took that in his free hand. He gently pulled her tray from her unsteady grasp. "I'll carry it to a table."

The table section was as crowded as the counter space. He did not offer to sit opposite her at the one vacant table he found; he lingered, however, casting about himself for another seat.

[19]

"May I not exchange my hospitality for your courtesy?" inquired the girl. She nodded toward the unoccupied chair and he sat down and thanked her.

She was an extremely self-possessed young woman, who surveyed him frankly with level gaze from her gray eyes.

"You performed very nicely, getting through that crush as you did without spilling anything," she commended.

"I've had plenty of practice."

She opened her eyes on him by way of a question. "Not as a waiter," he proceeded. "But with those trays in my hand it was like being on the drive, ramming my way through the gang that was charging the cook tent."

"The drive!" she repeated. He was surprised by the sudden interest he roused in her. "Are you from the north country?" Her color heightened with her interest. She leaned forward.

Latisan, in his infrequent experiences, had never been at ease in the presence of pretty girls, even when their notice of him was merely cursory. In the region where he had toiled there were few females, and those were spouses and helpers of woods cooks, mostly.

Here was a maid of the big city showing an interest disquietingly acute—her glowing eyes and parted lips revealed her emotions. At the moment he was not able to separate himself, as a personality, from the subject which he had brought up. Just what there was about him or the subject to arouse her so strangely he did not pause to inquire of himself, for his thoughts were not coherent just then; he, too, was stirred by her nearer propinquity as she leaned forward, questioning him eagerly.

[20]

He replied, telling what he was but not who he was; he felt a twinge of disappointment because she did not venture to probe into his identity. Her questions were concerned with the north country as a region. At first her quizzing was of a general nature. Then she narrowed the field of inquiry.

"You say the Tomah waters are parallel with the Noda basin! Do you know many folks over in the Noda region?"

"Very few. I have kept pretty closely on my own side of the watershed."

"Isn't there a village in the Noda called Adonia?"

"Oh yes! It's the jumping-off place—the end of a narrow-gauge railroad."

"You have been in Adonia?"

"A few times."

"I had—there were friends of mine—they were friends of a man in Adonia. His

name was—let's see!" He wondered whether the faint wrinkle of a frown under the bronze-flecked hair on her forehead was as much the expression of puzzled memory as she was trying to make it seem; there did appear something not wholly ingenuous in her looks just then. "Oh, his name is Flagg."

"Echford Flagg?"

"Yes, that's it. My friends were very friendly with him, and I'd like to be able to tell them——" She hesitated. [21]

"You have given me some news," he declared, bluntly; in his mood of the day he was finding no good qualities in mankind. "I never heard of Eck Flagg having any friends. Well, I'll take that back! I believe he's ace high among the Tarratine Indians up our way; they have made him an honorary chief. But it's no particular compliment to a white man's disposition to be able to qualify as an Indian, as I look at it."

This time he was not in doubt about the expression on her face; a sudden grimace like grief wreathed the red lips and there was more than a suspicion of tears in her eyes. He stared at her, frankly amazed.

"If I have stepped on toes I am sorry. I never did know how to talk to young ladies without making a mess sooner or later."

She returned no reply, and he went on with his food to cover his embarrassment.

"Do you know Mr. Flagg?" she asked, after the silence had been prolonged.

"Not very well. But I know about him."

"What especially?"

"That he's a hard man. He never forgets or forgives an injury. Perhaps that's why he qualified so well as an Indian."

She straightened in her chair and narrowed those gray eyes. "Couldn't there have been another reason why he was chosen for such an honor?"

"I beg your pardon for passing along to you the slurs of the north country, miss——" he paused but she did not help him with her name. "It's mostly slurs up there," he went on, with bitterness, "and I get into the habit, myself. The Indians did have a good reason for giving Flagg that honor. He is the only one in the north who has respected the Indians' riparian rights, given by treaty and then stolen back. He pays them for hold-boom privileges when his logs are on their shores. They are free to come and go on his lands for birch bark and basket stuff—he's the only one who respects the old treaties. That's well known about Flagg in the north country. It's a good streak in any man, no matter what folks say about his general disposition." [22]

"I'm glad to hear you say that much!"

She pushed back her chair slightly and began to take stock of her possessions. A sort of a panic came upon him. There were a lot of things he wanted to say, and he could not seem to lay a tongue to one of them. He stammered something about the wet day and wondered whether it would be considered impudence if he offered to escort her, holding over her the umbrella or carrying her parcel. He had crude ideas about the matter of squiring dames. He wanted to ask her not to hurry away. "Do you live here in New York—handy by?"

The cafeteria was just off lower Broadway, and she smiled. He realized the idiocy of the question.

"I work near here! You are going home to the north soon?" The polite query was in a tone which checked all his new impulses in regard to her.

"I'm headed north right now. If there's any information I can send you——"

She shook her head slowly, but even the negative was marked by an indecisive quality, as if she were repressing some importunate desire. [23]

"I wish you a pleasant journey, sir." All her belongings were in her hands.

"It's queer—it's almost more than queer how we happened to meet—both interested in the north country," he stuttered, wanting to detain her.

He was hoping she would make something of the matter.

But she merely acknowledged the truth of his statement, adding, "There would be more such coincidences in life if folks took the trouble to interest themselves a bit in one another and compare notes."

She started to walk away; then she whirled and came back to the table and leaned over it. Her soul of longing was in her eyes—they were filled with tears. "You're going back there," she whispered. "God bless the north country! Give a friendly pat to one of the big trees for me and say you found a girl in New York who is homesick."

She turned from him before he could summon words.

He wanted to call after her—to find out more about her. He saw her gathering up her change at the cashier's wicket. The spectacle reminded him of his own check. Even love at first sight, if such could be the strange new emotion struggling within him, could not enable him to leap the barrier of the cashier's cold stare and rush away without paying scot. He hunted for his punched check. He pawed all over the marble top of the table, rattling the dishes.

A check—it was surely all of that!

The search for it checked him till the girl was gone, mingled with the street crowds. He found the little devil of a delayer in the paper napkin which he had nervously wadded and dropped on the floor. He shoved money to the cashier and did not wait for his change. He rushed out on the street and stretched up his six stalwart feet and craned his neck and hunted for the little green toque with the white quill.

[24]

It was a vain quest.

He did not know just what the matter was with him all of a sudden. He had never had any personal experience with that which he had vaguely understood was love; he had merely viewed it from a standpoint of a disinterested observer, in the case of other men. He hated to admit, as he stood there in the drizzle, his defeat by a cafeteria check.

He remained in New York for another night, his emotions aggravatingly complex. He tried to convince his soul that he had a business reason for staying. He lied to himself and said he would make another desperate sortie on the castle of the Comas company. But he did not go there the next day. Near noon he set himself to watch the entrance of the cafeteria. When he saw a table vacant near the door he went in, secured food, and posted himself where he could view all comers.

The girl did not come.

At two o'clock, after eating three meals, he did not dare to brave the evident suspicions of that baleful cashier any longer. Undoubtedly the girl had been a casual customer like himself. He gave it up and started for the north.

CHAPTER FOUR

[25]

WHEN Ward Latisan was home again and had laced his high boots and buttoned his belted jacket, he was wondering, in the midst of his other troubles, why he allowed the matter of a chance-met girl to play so big a part in his thoughts. The exasperating climax of his adventure with the girl, his failure to ask her name frankly, his folly of bashful backwardness in putting questions when she was at arm's length from him, his mournful certainty that he would never see her again—all conspired curiously to make her an obsession rather than a mere memory.

He had never bothered with mental analysis; his effort to untangle his ideas in this case merely added to his puzzlement; it was like one of those patent trick things which he had picked up in idle moments, allowing the puzzle to bedevil attention and time, intriguing his interest, to his disgust. He had felt particularly lonely and helpless when he came away from Comas headquarters; instinctively he was seeking friendly companionship—opening his heart; he had caught something, just as a man with open pores catches cold. He found the notion grimly humorous! But Latisan was not ready to own up that what he had contracted was a case of love, though young men had related to him their experiences along such lines.

He went into the woods and put himself at the head of the crews. He had the ability to inspire zeal and loyalty.

[26]

In the snowy avenues of the Walpole tract sounded the rick-tack of busy axes, the yawk of saws, and the crash of falling timber. The twitch roads, narrow trails which converged to centers like the strands of a cobweb, led to the yards where the logs were piled for the sleds; and from the yards, after the snows were deep and had been iced by watering tanks on sleds, huge loads were eased down the slopes to the landings close to the frozen Tomah.

Ward Latisan was not merely a sauntering boss, inspecting operations. He went out in the gray mornings with an ax in his hand. He understood the value of personal and active leadership. He was one with his men. They put forth extra effort because he was with them.

Therefore, when the April rains began to soften the March snow crusts and the spring flood sounded its first murmur under the blackening ice of Tomah, the Latisan logs were ready to be rolled into the river.

And then something happened!

That contract with the Walpole second cousins—pronounced an air-tight contract by the lawyer—was pricked, popped, and became nothing.

An heir appeared and proved his rights. He was the only grandson of old Isaac. The cousins did not count in the face of the grandson's claims.

In the past, in the Tomah region, there had been fictitious heirs who had worked blackmail on operators who took a chance with putative heirs and tax titles. But the Latisans were faced with proofs that this heir was real and right. [27]

Why had he waited until the cut was landed?

The Latisans pressed him with desperate questions, trying to find a way out of their trouble.

He was a sullen and noncommunicative person and intimated that he had suited his own convenience in coming on from the West.

The Latisans, when the heir appeared, were crippled for ready cash, after settling with the cousin heirs for stumpage and paying the winter's costs of operating. Those cousins were needy folks and had spent the money paid to them; there was no hope of recovering any considerable portion of the amounts.

The true heir attached the logs as they lay, and a court injunction prevented the Latisans from moving a stick. The heir showed a somewhat singular disinclination to have any dealings with the Latisans. He refused their offer to share profits with him; he persistently returned an exasperating reply: he did not care to do business with men who had tried to steal his property. He said he had already traded with responsible parties. Comas surveyors came and scaled the logs and nested C's were painted on the ends of the timber.

The Latisans had "gone bump" the word went up and down the Tomah.

"Well, go ahead and say it!" suggested Rufus Craig when he had set himself in the path of Ward Latisan, who was coming away from a last, and profitless, interview with the obstinate heir.

"I have nothing to say, sir."

Craig calculatingly chose the moment for this meeting, desiring to carry on with the policy which he had adopted. By his system the Comas had maneuvered after the python method—it crushed, it smeared, it swallowed. [28]

The Latisans had been crushed—Craig quieted his conscience with the arguments of business necessity; he had a big salary to safeguard; he had promised boldly to deliver the goods in the north country. Though his conscience was dormant, his fears were awake. He was not relishing Latisan's manner. The repression worried him. The grandson had plenty of John in his nature, and Craig knew it!

Craig tried to smear!

"Latisan, I'll give you a position with the Comas, and a good one."

"And the conditions are?"

"That you'll turn over your operating equipment to us at a fair price and sign a ten-year contract."

"I knew you'd name those conditions. I refuse."

"You're making a fool of yourself—and what for?"

"For a principle! I've explained it to you."

"And I've explained how our consolidated plan butts against your old-fashioned principle. Do you think for one minute you can stop the Comas development?"

"I'm still with the independents. We'll see what can be done."

"You're licked in the Toban."

"There's still good fighting ground over in the Noda Valley—and some fighters are left there."

Craig squinted irefully at the presumptuous rebel. [29]

Latisan hid much behind a smile. "You see, Mr. Craig, I'm just as frank as I was when I said I was going to New York. You may find me in the Noda when you get there with your consolidation plans."

"Another case of David and Goliath, eh?"

"Perhaps! I'll hunt around and see what I can find in the way of a sling and pebble."

CHAPTER FIVE

[30]

A SUMMONS sent forth by Echford Flagg, the last of the giants among the independent operators on the Noda waters, had made that day in early April a sort of gala affair in the village of Adonia.

Men by the hundred were crowded into the one street, which stretched along the river bank in front of the tavern and the stores. The narrow-gauge train from downcountry had brought many. Others had come from the woods in sledges; there was still plenty of snow in the woods; but in the village the runner irons squalled over the bare spots. Men came trudging from the mouths of trails and tote roads, their duffel in meal bags slung from their shoulders.

An observer, looking on, listening, would have discovered that a suppressed spirit of jest kept flashing across the earnestness of the occasion—grins lighting up sharp retort—just as the radiant sunshine of the day shuttled through the intermittent snow squalls which dusted the shoulders of the thronging men.

There was a dominant monotone above all the talk and the cackle of laughter; ears were dinned everlastingly by the thunder of the cataract near the village. The Noda waters break their winter fetters first of all at Adonia, where the river leaps from the cliffs into the whirlpool. The roar of the falls is a trumpet call for the starting of the drive, though the upper waters may be ice-bound; but when the falls shout their call the rivermen must be started north toward the landings where logs are piled on the rotting ice.

[31]

On that day Echford Flagg proposed to pick his crew.

To be sure, he had picked a crew every year in early April, but the hiring had been done in a more or less matter-of-fact manner.

This year the summons had a suggestion of portent. It went by word o' mouth from man to man all through the north country. It hinted at an opportunity for adventure outside of wading in shallows, carding ledges of jillpoked logs, and the bone-breaking toil of rolling timber and riffling jams.

"Eck Flagg wants roosters this year," had gone the word. Spurred roosters! Fighting gamecocks! One spur for a log and one for any hellion who should get in the way of an honest drive!

The talk among the men who shouldered one another in the street and swapped grins and gab revealed that not all of them were ready to volunteer as spurred roosters, ready for hazard. It was evident that there were as many mere spectators as there were actual candidates for jobs. Above all, ardent curiosity prevailed; in that region where events marshaled themselves slowly and sparsely men did not balk at riding or hoofing it a dozen miles or more in order to get first-hand information in regard to anything novel or worth while.

Finally, Echford Flagg stalked down the hill from his big, square house—its weather-beaten grayness matching the ledges on which it was propped. His beard and hair were the color of the ledges, too, and the seams in his hard face were like ledgerifts. His belted jacket was stone gray and it was buttoned over the torso of a man who was six feet tall—yes, a bit over that height. He was straight and vigorous in spite of the age revealed in his features. He carried a cant dog over his shoulder; the swinging iron tongue of it clanked as he strode along.

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The handle of the tool was curiously striped with colors. There was no other cant dog like it all up and down the Noda waters. Carved into the wood was an emblem—it was the totem mark of the Tarratines—the sign manual by Sachem Nicola of Flagg's honorary membership in the tribe.

He was no popular hero in that section—it was easy to gather that much from the expressions of the men who looked at him when he marched through the crowd. There was no acclaim, only a grunt or a sniff. Too many of them had worked for him in days past and had felt the weight of his broad palm and the slash of his sharp tongue. Ward Latisan had truthfully expressed the Noda's opinion of Flagg in the talk with the girl in the cafeteria.

The unroofed porch of the tavern served Flagg for a rostrum that day. He mounted the porch, faced the throng, and drove down the steel-shod point of his cant dog into the splintering wood, swinging the staff out to arm's length.

"I'm hiring a driving crew to-day," he shouted. "As for men——"

"Here's one," broke in a volunteer, thrusting himself forward with scant respect for the orator's exordium. [33]

Flagg bent forward and peered down into the face uplifted hopefully.

"I said men," he roared. "You're Larsen. You went to sleep on the Lotan ledges——"

"I had been there alone for forty-eight hours, carding 'em, and the logs——"

"You went to sleep on the Lotan ledges, I say, and let a jam get tangled, and it took twenty of my men two days to pull the snarl loose."

The man was close to the edge of the porch. Flagg set his boot suddenly against Larsen's breast and drove him away so viciously that the victim fell on his back among the legs of the crowd, ten feet from the porch.

"I never forget and I never forgive—and that's the word that's out about me, and I'm proud of the reputation," declared Flagg. "I don't propose to smirch it at this late day. And now I look into your faces and realize that what I have just said and done adds to the bunch that has come here to-day to listen and look on instead of hiring out. I'm glad I'm sorting out the sheep from the goats at the outset. It happens that I want goats—goats with horns and sharp hoofs and——"

"The word was you wanted roosters," cried somebody from the outskirts of the crowd.

There was laughter, seeking even that small excuse for vent; the hilarity was as expressive as a *viva voce* vote, and its volume suggested that there were more against Flagg than there were for him.

He did not lower his crest. "You all know what is happening this season. You know why I have sent out for men. The Three C's crowd has started stealing from my crews. I want men who have a grudge against the Three C's. I want men who will fight the Three C's. Rufe Craig proposes to steal the Noda as he has stolen the Tomah. He has been making his brags of what he'll do to me. He won't do it, even if I have to make a special trip to hell and hire a crew of devils. Now let me test out this crowd." He was searching faces with a keen gaze. "All proper men to the front ranks! Let me look at you!" [34]

A slow movement began in the throng; men were pushing forward.

"Lively on the foot!" yelled Flagg. "I'm standing here judging you by the way you break this jam of the jillpokes. Walk over the cowards, you real men! Come on, you bully chaps! Come running! Hi yoop! Underfoot with 'em!"

He swung his cant dog and kept on adjuring.

The real adventurers, the excitement seekers, the scrappers, drove into the press of those who were in the way. The field became a scene of riot. The bullies were called on to qualify under the eyes of the master. There were fisticuffs aplenty because husky men who might not care to enlist with old Eck Flagg were sufficiently muscular and ugly to strike back at attackers who stamped on their feet and drove fists into their backs.

Flagg, on the porch, followed all phases of the scattered conflict, estimated men by the manner in which they went at what he had set them to do, and he surveyed them with favor when they crowded close to the edge of his rostrum, dwelling with particular interest on the faces which especially revealed that they had been up against the real thing in the way of a fight. Behind and around the gladiators who had won to the porch pressed the cordon of malcontents who cursed and threatened. [35]

"Much obliged for favor of prompt reply to mine of day and date," said Flagg, with his grim humor. He drove his cant-dog point into the floor of the porch and left the tool wagging slowly to and fro. He leaped down among the men. He did not waste time with words. He went among them, gripping their arms to estimate the biceps, holding them off at arm's length to judge their height and weight. He also looked at their teeth, rolling up their lips, horse-trader fashion. The drive provender did not consist of tender tidbits; a river jack must be able to chew tough meat, and the man in the wilderness with a toothache would have poor grit for work in bone-chilling water after a sleepless night.

Flagg carried a piece of chalk in his right hand. When he accepted a man he autographed the initials "E F" on the back of the fellow's shirt or jacket, in characteristic handwriting. "Show your back as you go north," he proclaimed for the benefit of the strangers to his custom. "My initials are good for stage team, tote

team, lodging, and meals—the bills are sent to Flagg. The sooner you start the sooner you'll get to headwaters."

A big chap followed at Flagg's back as the despot moved among the men. He was Ben Kyle, Flagg's drive boss, the first mate of the Flagg ship of state. He was writing down the names of the men as they were hired. Occasionally the master called on the mate to give in an opinion when a candidate ran close to the line between acceptance or rejection. [36]

Flagg began to show good humor beyond his usual wont. He was finding men who suited him. Many of them growled anathema against the Three C's. They had worked for that corporation. They had been obliged to herd with roughscuff from the city employment agencies, unskilled men who were all the time coming and going and were mostly underfoot when they were on the job. One humorist averred that the Three C's had three complete sets of crews—one working, one coming in, and one going out.

Kyle began to loosen up and copy some of Flagg's good humor.

He encouraged the wag who had described the three shifts to say more about the Comas crews; he had some witticisms of his own to offer.

And so it came to pass that when he tackled one hulking and bashful sort of a chap who stuttered, Kyle was in most excellent mood to have a little fun with a butt. Even Echford Flagg ceased operations to listen, for the humor seemed to be sharp-edged enough to suit his satiric taste.

"You say you're an ox teamster!" bawled the boss. "Well, well! That's good. Reckon we'll put some oxen onto the drive this spring so as to give you a job. How much do you know about teaming oxen?"

After a great deal of mirth-provoking difficulty with b and g, the man meekly explained that he did know the butt end of a gad from the brad end. [37]

"Who in the crowd has got an ox or two in his pocket?" queried Kyle. "We can't hire an ox teamster for the drive"—he dwelt on oxen for the drive with much humorous effect—"without being sure that he can drive oxen. It would be blasted aggravating to have our drive hung up and the oxen all willing enough to pull it along, and then find out that the teamster was no good."

Martin Brophy, tavernkeeper, was on the porch, enjoying the events that were staged in front of his place that day.

"Hey, Martin, isn't there a gad in the cultch under your office desk?"

"Most everything has been left there, from an umbrella to a clap o' thunder," admitted Brophy. "I'll look and see."

"Better not go to fooling too much, Ben," warned the master. "I've seen fooling spoil good business a lot of times."

It was rebuke in the hearing of many men who were showing keen zest in what might be going to happen; it was treating a right-hand man like a child. Kyle resented it and his tone was sharp when he replied that he knew what he was doing. He turned away from the glaring eyes of the master and took in his hand the goad which Brophy brought.

There was a sudden tautness in the situation between Flagg and Kyle, and the crowd noted it. The master was not used to having his suggestions flouted. [38]

The boss thrust the goad into the hand of the bashful fellow. "There's a hitchpost right side of you, my man. Make believe it's a yoke of oxen. What are your motions and your style of language in getting a start. Go to it!"

The teamster swished the goad in beckoning fashion after he had rapped it against the post in imitation of knocking on an ox's nose to summon attention. His efforts to vault lingually over the first "double-u" excited much mirth. Even the corners of Flagg's mouth twitched.

"Wo, wo hysh! Gee up, Bright! Wo haw, Star!" Such was the opening command.

"They don't hear you," declared Kyle. "Whoop 'er up!"

The teamster did make a desperate effort to drive his imaginary yoke of oxen. He danced and yelled and brandished the goad as a crazy director might slash with his baton. He used up all his drive words and invective.

Kyle could not let the joke stop there after the man had thrown down the goad, wiped his forehead, and declared that it wasn't fair, trying to make him start a hitching post.

"Pick up your gad," commanded the boss. He dropped on his hands and knees.

"Now you show us what you can do. I'm a yoke of oxen."

"You ain't."

"I tell you I am. Get busy. Start your team."

"That's about enough of that!" warned Flagg, sourly. "Kyle, get up onto your feet where you belong." [39]

But the spirit of jest made the boss reckless and willfully disobedient. He insisted doggedly on his rôle as a balky ox and scowled at the teamster. "If you want a job you'll have to show *me!*"

The teamster adjured Mr. Kyle in very polite language, and did not bring the swishing goad within two feet of the scornful nose; the candidate wanted a job and was not in a mood to antagonize a prospective boss.

"You're a hell of a teamster!" yapped Kyle. "What's your system? Do you get action by feeding an ox lollypops, kissing him on the nose and saying, 'Please,' and 'Beg your pardon'?"

The big chap began to show some spirit of his own under the lash of the laughter that was encouraging Kyle.

"I ain't getting a square deal, mister. That post wa'n't an ox; you ain't an ox."

"I am, I tell you! Start me."

"You vow and declare that you're an ox, do you, before all in hearing?"

"That's what!" Mr. Kyle was receiving the plaudits and encouragement of all his friends who enjoyed a joke, and was certain in his mind that he had that bashful stutterer sized up as a quitter. Flagg folded his arms and narrowed his eyes—his was the air of one who was allowing fate to deal with a fool who tempted it.

The candidate did not hurry matters. He spat meditatively into first one fist and then into the other. He grasped the goad in both hands. He looked calculatingly at Mr. Kyle, who was on his hands and knees, and was cocking an arch and provocative look upward, approving the grins of the men near him. [40]

When the teamster did snap into action his manner indicated that he knew how to handle balky oxen. First he cracked Mr. Kyle smartly over the bridge of the nose. "Wo haw up!" was a command which Kyle tried to obey in a flame of ire, but a swifter and more violent blow across the nose sent him back on his heels, his eyes shut in his agony.

"Gee up into the yoke, you crumpled-horn hyampus!" The teamster welted the goad across Kyle's haunches and further encouraged the putative ox by a thrust of a full inch of the brad.

When the boss came onto his feet with a berserker howl of fury and started to attack, the ox expert yelled, "Dat rat ye, don't ye try to hook your horns into me!" Then he flailed the stick once more across Kyle's nose with a force that knocked the boss flat on his back.

Echford Flagg stepped forward and stood between the two men when Kyle struggled to his feet and started toward the teamster with the mania of blood lust in his red eyes. The master put forth a hand and thrust back the raging mate. Flagg said something, but for a time he could not be heard above the tempest of howling laughter.

It was riotous abandonment to mirth. Men hung helplessly to other men or flapped their hands and staggered about, choking with their merriment. The savageness of the punishment administered to the boastful Kyle might have shocked persons with squeamish dispositions; it was wildly humorous in the estimation of those men o' the forest. They were used to having their jokes served raw. [41]

The roar that fairly put into the background the riot of the falling waters of the Noda was what all the region recognized as the ruination of a man's authority in the north country; it was the Big Laugh.

Flagg, when he could make himself heard by his boss, holding Kyle in his mighty grip, made mention of the Big Laugh, too. "Kyle, you've got it at last by your damn folly. You're licked forever in these parts. I warned you. You went ahead against my word to you. You're no good to me after this." He yanked the list of names from Kyle's jacket pocket.

"Let me loose! I'm going to kill that——"

"You're going to walk out—and away! You're done. You're fired. You can't boss men after this. A boss, are you?" he demanded, with bitter irony. "All up and down this river, if you tried to boss men, they'd give you the grin and call you 'Co Boss'."

They'd moo after you. Look at 'em now. Listen to 'em. Get out of my sight. I don't forgive any man who goes against my word to him and then gets into trouble." He thrust Kyle away with a force that sent the man staggering. He turned to the bashful chap, who had resumed his former demeanor of deprecation. "You're hired. You've showed that you can drive oxen and I reckon you can drive logs."

The teamster was too thoroughly bulwarked by admirers to allow the rampant Kyle an opportunity to get at him. And there was Flagg to reckon with if violence should be attempted. The deposed first mate slunk away.

[42]

"That, my men," proclaimed the master, "is what the Big Laugh can do to a boss. No man can be a boss for me after he gets that laugh. I reckon I've hired my crew," he went on, looking them over critically. "Stand by to follow me north in the morning."

CHAPTER SIX

[43]

WHEN the autocrat of the Noda strode away, a stalwart young man instantly obeyed Flagg's command—seizing the occasion to follow then and there. He had been standing on the outskirts of the throng, surveying the happenings with great interest. The men who were in his immediate vicinity, lumberjacks who were strangers in the Noda region, were plainly of his appanage and had obeyed his advice to keep out of the mêlée that had been provoked by Flagg's methods of selection.

When the big fellow hurried in pursuit of Flagg a bystander put a question to one of the strangers.

"You ought to know who he is," returned the questioned. "That's Ward Latisan."

And just then, apart from the crowd, having overtaken the autocrat, the young man was informing Flagg to that same effect.

Flagg halted, swung around, and rammed his cant dog into the ground. "You've changed from a sapling into fair-sized timber since I saw you last. You look like old John, and that's compliment enough, I reckon. How do you happen to be over in the Noda country?"

"I don't happen! I heard of the word you sent out. I came here on purpose, sir."

"What for?"

"To hire with you."

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Flagg looked Latisan up and down and showed no enthusiasm. "Yes, I heard that you and your father had let the Three C's slam you flat. And what makes you think I want that kind of a quitter in my crew?"

Ward met the disparaging stare with a return display of undaunted challenge. "Because I belong in the crew of a man who is proposing to fight the Three C's."

Flagg grunted.

Latisan kept on. "You have been hiring men because they have been parading a lot of little grouches against the Comas folks. You need a man who has a real reason for going up against that outfit. And I'm the man."

"What you think about yourself and what I may think about you are two different things," retorted Flagg, with insolence. "Looks to me like you had got the Big Laugh over in your section. You have probably noticed what I just did in a case of that sort."

"I took it all in, sir."

"Well, what then?"

"They are not laughing with us or against us over in the Tomah, Mr. Flagg. They all know what happened, and that we fought the Comas fair and square as long as we could keep on our feet. It was a trick that licked us. Craig held out the Walpole heir on us."

"I know about it; I manage to get most of the news." Flagg started to go on his way, but Ward put his clutch on the autocrat's arm.

"Pardon me, Mr. Flagg, but you're going to hear what I have to ask of you."

Mere apologetic suit would not have served with Flagg. He found this bold young

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man patterning after the Flagg methods in dealings with men. The boldness of the grip on his arm gained more effectively than pleading.

"Ask it. I'm in a hurry."

"You have fired Kyle. I want his place."

"Well, I'll be——"

"You needn't be, sir. I'm a Latisan and I have bossed our drives. I have brought along a bunch of my own men who have bucked white water with me and are with me now in standing up for the principle of the independents. Allow me to say that luck is with you. Here's your chance to get hold of a man who can put heart and soul into this fight you're going to make."

"And now go on and tell me how much you admire me," suggested Flagg, sarcastically.

"I can't do that, sir. I'm going to tell you frankly I don't relish what I have heard about you. It's for no love of you that I'm asking for a chance to go up against the Comas people. It's because you're hard—hard enough to suit me—hard enough to let me go to it and show the Three C's they can't get away with what they're trying to do up here through Rufus Craig."

"All right. You're hired. You've got Ben Kyle's job," stated Flagg.

Latisan was not astonished by this precipitate come-about. He was prepared for Flagg's tactics by what he had set himself to learn about the autocrat's nature—quick to adjudge, tenacious in his grudges, inflexible in his opinion, bitterly ruthless when he had set himself in the way his prejudices selected.

[46]

"You have seen what happened to Kyle. Can you govern yourself accordingly?" Flagg in his turn had set his grip on Ward's arm.

"Yes, sir!"

"I'll kick you out just as sudden as I kicked him if anything happens to make men give you the grin. Can you start north with me in the morning?"

"Now or in the morning; it makes no difference to me, sir."

Flagg shifted his hand from Ward's arm to the young man's shoulder and propelled him back a few paces toward the crowd in front of the tavern. "Listen, one and all! Here's my drive boss. He's old John Latisan's grandson. If that isn't introduction enough, ask questions about old John from those who remember him; this chap is like his grandfather."

Latisan went into the tavern after Flagg had marched away to the big house on the ledges. The crowd made way for the new drive boss; those in his path stared at him with interest; mumble of comment followed as the men closed in behind him. When he sat down in a corner of the tavern office and lighted his pipe his subalterns showed him deference by leaving him to himself. That isolation gave Landlord Brophy his opportunity to indulge his bent in gossip unheard by interlopers.

Brophy plucked a cigar from a box in the little case on the desk and sat down beside Ward. "I sympathize with you," he said by way of backhanded congratulation.

"Thank you."

[47]

"I was born in this tavern; my father built it and run it before me," said Brophy, tucking his cigar through the shrubbery of his gray mustache. "And so I've had the chance to know Ech Flagg a good many years. He's a turk."

"I have heard so."

"He has always had a razor edge to his temper. Maybe you know what put the wire edge onto it?" It was query with the cock of an eyebrow accompanying.

"What I know about Mr. Flagg is only a general reputation of being a hard man. I can say that much to you because I told him the same thing. And that's as far as I care to gossip about an employer," stated Ward, stiffly.

"That's a safe stand," said Brophy, unperturbed. "Keep to it and they can't be running to him with stories about what you have said. But he don't pay me wages and I can say what I feel like saying. A new boss ought to know a few things about the man who hires him. It's my disposition to set a good chap on the right road with a tip. Whatever you may say to Flagg in the way of chat, don't you ever try to bring up the subject of his family affairs."

"I'm not at all likely to," snapped Latisan, with asperity.

"Oh, such a subject is easy out when folks get to going confidential," pursued the persistent Brophy. The suggestion that he would ever be on confidential terms with

Flagg provoked an ill-tempered rebuke from Ward, but Brophy paid no attention.

"If you lose your job with him, as you probably will, Latisan, let it be in the straight way of business, as he conducts it, instead of being by some fool slip of your tongue about family matters." He puffed at his cigar complacently and still was giving no heed to Ward's manifest repugnance at being made the repository of gossip. [48]

"Eck's wife died when the daughter Sylvia was small, and he sent the girl off to school somewhere when she was big enough to be sent. And she fell in with a dude kind of a fellow and came back home married to him. She was so much in love that she dared to do a thing like that with Eck Flagg—and that's being in love a whole lot, I'll say. Well, none of us knew what was said back and forth in the family circle, but we figured that the new husband's cheeks didn't tingle with any kisses that Eck gave him. At any rate, Eck set Kennard to work—that was the name, Alfred Kennard. Eck was never much good at ciphering. Office had been in his hip pocket, where he carried his timebook and his scale sheet. Kennard had an education and it came about that Eck let Alf do the ciphering; then he let him keep the books; then he let him handle contracts and the money; then he gave him power of attorney so that Alf wouldn't be hampered whilst Eck was away in the woods. Just handed everything over for the first and the only time in his life, figuring that it was all in the family. I guess that Alf went to figuring the same way, seeing that he was good at figures; felt that what was Eck's was his, or would be later—and Alf proceeded to cash in. Stole right and left, that was the amount of it. Prob'ly reckoned he'd rather have a sore conscience than have his feelings all ripped to pieces when he asked Eck for money. [49]

"We all knew when Eck found out that he had been properly trimmed by the only man he had ever trusted.

"It happened in the dooryard of the big house up there, when Eck came home, wised up, and tackled Alf. Eck felt that the inside of the house might get mussed up by his language, so he stood in the yard and hollered for Alf to come out. We all went up and stood around; it seemed to be a free show, all welcome. We got the full facts in the case from Eck.

"Sylvia came out on the heels of Alf, and she had with her the little Lida, Eck's granddaughter. And after Eck had had his say to Alf and had thrown him over the fence, he gave Sylvia her choice—stay with her father or go away with Alf. Well, she had loved Alf well enough to come home and face Eck with him; she loved Alf enough to turn her back on Eck and face the world with her husband. Natural, of course! Eck tried to grab the little girl away—to save his own from the thieves, so he said. Sylvia fought him off and hung to the girl. It was a tough sight, Latisan! And he stood there and shook his fists and cast 'em all off for ever and aye. That's his nature—no allowance made if anybody does him dirt.

"I'll admit that Eck did make an allowance later, after Alf died and the news of it got back here to Adonia. Lida was grown up to around sixteen by that time. I got this from Rickety Dick. Know him?"

Latisan, relighting his pipe, shook his head with an indifferent wag. [50]

"Well, you soon will. He cooks and waits and tends on Eck. Looks up to Eck. Loves Eck—and that's going some! Dick told me about the allowance Eck made for once in his life after I had touched Dick up by telling him that Eck Flagg never made an allowance to anybody. Eck allowed to Dick that Lida was too young to choose the right way that day in the yard. When she had grown up Eck sent old Dick to hunt for her in the city, to tell her she could come back to him, now that she was old enough to make her choice. Said Sylvia couldn't come back. Now that was a devil of a position to put a girl in. What? Hey?"

Latisan nodded, displaying faint interest.

"And Sylvia right then was in bed with her never-get-over, so Dick told me. Of course Lida wouldn't come back. And she was working her fingers to the bone to take care of her mother. Old Dick cried like a baby when he was telling me. He cries pretty easy, anyway. He never dared to give to Eck the word that Lida sent back. She's got the spirit of the Flaggs, so I judge from what Dick told me. She wouldn't even take the eggs and the truck Dick lugged down, though Dick had bought 'em with his own money; she thought the stuff came from her grandfather. Dick had to hide 'em under the table when he came away. And so Eck has crossed Lida off for ever and aye. Now that's some story, ain't it?"

"I haven't enjoyed it," said Ward, brusquely.

"Prob'ly not. I wasn't telling it thinking you'd give three cheers when I finished. But I've been warning you not to make a foolish break by stubbing your toe over the family topic. I've heard what has happened to the Latisans over Tomah way. You're our real sort, and I'm blasted sorry for you. I reckon you need a job and I'm trying to help you hold it. I like your looks, young Latisan. I hate the Comas crowd. Craig has never set down to my table but what he has growled about the grub. The cheap [51]

rowdies he hires for his operations on these waters come through here with bootleg booze and try to wreck my house. I'd like to be friends with you, young Latisan, and if you feel that way about it, put it there!"

Brophy held out a fat hand and Latisan grasped it cordially.

"In my position I hear all the news," stated the landlord. "I'll sift the wheat out of the chaff and hand you what's for your own good. And now you'll have to excuse me whilst I go and pound steak and dish up dinner and wait on the table. That's the trouble with running a tavern up here in the woods. I can't keep help of the girl kind. They either get homesick or get married."

There was an ominous crash in the dining room.

Brophy swore roundly and extricated his rotund haunches from the arms of his chair. "There goes Dirty-Shirt Sam! I have to double him as hostler and waiter. He'd smash the feed pails in the stable if they wasn't galvanized iron."

He pounded with heavy gait across the office and flung open the dining-room door, disclosing a lop-sided youth who was listlessly kicking broken dishes into a pile. [52]

"You're fourteen dollars behind your wages, already, with dishes you've dropped and smashed," shouted Brophy. "I'd give a thousand dollars for the right kind of a girl to stay here and wait on tables if she wouldn't get married or homesick. I'll make it a standing offer." He cuffed the youth in a circle around the heap of broken crockery and went on his way to the kitchen.

Latisan smoked and reflected on the nature of Echford Flagg as Brophy had exposed it from the family standpoint.

Then he looked at the sullen youth who was sweeping up the fragments of the dishes. The whimsical notion occurred to Ward that he might post Brophy on the advantages of a cafeteria plan of operating his hostelry. But he had by these thoughts summoned the memory of one certain cafeteria, and of a handsome girl who sat across from him and who had so suddenly been swallowed up in the vortex of the city throngs—gone forever—only a memory that troubled him so much and so often that he was glad when his own Tomah men appeared to him, asking for commands and taking his mind off a constantly nagging regret.

CHAPTER SEVEN

 [53]

THE set-off of the Flagg expedition in the gray of early dawn had an element of picaresque adventure about it.

Latisan was making an estimate of his crew while he mixed with the men, checking them up, as they assembled again in front of the tavern of Adonia. Old Cap'n Blackbeard would have cheerfully certified to the eminent fitness of many of them for conscienceless deeds of derring-do. The nature of Flagg's wide-flung summons and his provocative method of selection must needs bring into one band most of the toughest nuts of the region, Latisan reflected, and he had brought no milk-and-water chaps from the Tomah. He had come prepared for what was to face him. He had led his willing men in more or less desperate adventures in his own region; his clan had been busy passing the word among the strangers that old John Latisan's grandson was a chief who had the real and the right stuff in him. It was plain that all the men of the crew were receiving the information with enthusiasm. Some of them ventured to pat him on the shoulder and volunteered profane promises to go with him to the limit. They did not voice any loyalty to Flagg. Flagg was not a man to inspire anything except perfunctory willingness to earn wages. The men saw real adventure ahead if they followed at the back of a heroic youth who was avenging the wrongs dealt to his family fortunes. [54]

There were choruses of old river chanteys while the men waited for the sleds. A devil-may-care spirit had taken possession of the crew. Latisan began to feel like the brigand chief of bravos.

He was jubilantly informed by one enthusiast that they were all in luck—that Larry O'Gorman, the woods poet, had picked that crew as his own for that season on the river.

The songs of Larry O'Gorman are sung from the Mirimichi to the Megantic. He is analyst as well as bard. He makes it a point—and he still lives and sings—to attach himself only to forces which can inspire his lyre.

It was conveyed to the new boss that already was Larry busy on a new song. Ward, his attention directed, beheld the lyricist seated on the edge of the tavern porch, absorbed in composition, writing slowly on the planed side of a bit of board, licking the end of a stubby pencil, rolling his eyes as he sought inspiration.

A bit later Larry rehearsed his choristers and Latisan heard the song.

Come, all ye bold and bully boys—come lis-sun unto me!
'Tis all abowit young Latis-an, a riverman so free.
White water, wet water, he never minds its roar,
'Cause he'll take and he'll kick a bubble up and ride all safe to shore.
Come, all, and ruffle the ledges! Come, all, and bust the jam!
And for all o' the bluff o' the Comas crowd we don't give one good—
 Hoot, toot, and a hoorah!
We don't give a tinker's dam.

Every man in the crowd was able to come in on the simple chorus.

[55]

They were singing when Echford Flagg appeared to them. He was riding on a jumper, with runners under it, and he was galloping his strapping bay horses down from the big house on the ledges. On the bare ground the runners shrieked, and he snapped his whip over the heads of the horses.

"What is this, a singing school or a driving crew?" he demanded, raucously.

"The sleds have just come, sir," explained Latisan, who had been marshaling the conveyances.

"Listen, all ye!" shouted Flagg. "Nothing but dunnage bags go on those sleds till the runners hit the woods tote road and there's good slipping on the snow. The man who doesn't hoof it till then hears from me."

He ordered Latisan to get onto the jumper seat beside him, slashed his horses with the whip, and led the way toward the north.

There was no word between the two for many a mile.

Near noon they arrived at a wayside baiting place, a log house in a clearing. They ate there and the horses were fed. There was plenty of snow in the woods and the first rains of April had iced the surface so that the slipping had been good.

As if the chewing of food had unlocked Flagg's close-set jaws, he talked a bit to Latisan after the meal and while the horses were put to the jumper.

"I'm going to swing off here and ride down to Skulltree dam. I'm hearing reports of something going on there."

They heard something very definite in the way of reports before they reached Skulltree. The sound of explosions came booming through the trees. It was dynamite. Its down-thrusting thud on the frozen ground was unmistakable.

[56]

"I knew that all those boxes of canned thunder that have been going through Adonia, with the Three C's on the lid, weren't intended to blow up log jams," vouchsafed Flagg, after a few oaths to spice his opinion of the Comas company.

Latisan knew something about the lay of the land at Skulltree, himself. When he was a young chap the Latisans had operated in a small way as a side-line on the Noda waters. There was a rift in the watershed near Skulltree. There was a cañon leading down to the Tomah end, and the waters of the gorge were fed by a chain of ponds whose master source was near the Noda. The Latisans had hauled over to the pond from the Noda Valley.

When Flagg pulled his horses to a halt on the edge of a cliff which commanded a view of the Skulltree and its purlieus, he sat in silence for five minutes until he had taken in every detail of what was going on there.

Every little while there was an explosion across the river among the trees, and clotted frozen earth and rocks shot up into the air. When the horses leaped in fright Flagg slashed them and swore. It was plain that his ire was mounting as he made sure of what was taking place.

They were blasting a rude canal from the Noda across the low horseback which divided the Noda waters from Tomah ponds. It meant the diversion of flowage. It was contemptuous disregard of the Noda rights in favor of the million-dollar paper mill of the Three C's on the Tomah lower waters. Rufus Craig had said something to young Latisan about the inexpediency of picking up a million-dollar paper mill and lugging it off in a shawl strap. It would be easier to blow a hole through the earth and feed in the logs from the Noda.

[57]

"By the red-hot hinges of Tophet!" bawled Flagg, having made sure that the enormity he was viewing was not a dream. He cut his whip under the bellies of his horses, one stroke to right and the other to left, and the animals went over the cliff

and down the sharp slope, skating and floundering through the snow. The descent at that place would have been impossible for horses except for the snow which trigged feet and runners in some degree; it was damp and heavy; but the frantic threshing of the plunging beasts kicked up a smother of snow none the less. It was like a thunderbolt in a nimbus—the rush of Flagg down the mountain.

Rufus Craig was in the shack at the end of Skulltree dam—his makeshift office. Somebody called to him, and from his door he beheld the last stages of Flagg's harebrained exploit, a veritable touch-and-go with death.

"There ain't much doubt about who it is that's coming for a social call," said the understrapper who had summoned the field director. "And the question is whether he's bound for hell or Skulltree."

Craig did not comment; he had the air of one who had been expecting a visitor of this sort and was not especially astonished by the mode of getting there suddenly, considering the spur for action. [58]

Tempestuous was the rush of the horses across the narrow flats between the cliff and the end of the dam. So violently did Flagg jerk them to a standstill in front of the shack, one horse fell and dragged down the other in a tangle of harness. Flagg left them to struggle to their feet as best they were able. He leaped off the jumper and thrust with the handle of his whip in the direction of the dynamite operations.

The old man's features were contorted into an arabesque—a pattern of maniacal rage. His face was purple and its hue was deepened because it was set off against the snow which crusted his garments after his descent through the drifts. Knotted veins stood out on his forehead. There was no coherence in the noises he was making in his effort to speak words. He kept jabbing with his whip handle.

Evidently Craig's first thought was that the menace of the whip was for him; he half put up a curved arm to ward off blows. In spite of his attention to Flagg he surveyed Latisan with considerable astonishment.

Ward had not recovered his poise. A passenger is usually more perturbed than a driver in desperate situations. That crazy dash down the cliff had frightened him into speechless and numb passivity. He still clung to the jumper seat with his stiffened fingers.

"Before you do anything you'll be sorry for, Mr. Flagg, let me assure you that we have the law behind us in what we're doing," suggested Craig, with nervous haste. "The legislature extended our charter for development purposes and a special act protects us." [59]

Flagg strode away a dozen paces and then came back with better command over his faculties of speech. "Damn your legislature! What right has it got to tamper with a landbreak that God Almighty has put between waters?"

"The act was passed, Mr. Flagg. There was an advertised hearing. If you were interested you should have been there."

"What does a legislature know about conditions up here?" demanded Flagg, with fury. "They loaf around in swing chairs and hearken to the first one who gets to 'em. They pass laws with a joker here and a trick there, and they don't know what the law is really about. You're stealing my water. By the gods! there's no law that allows a thief to operate. And if you've got a law that helps you steal I'll take my chance on keeping my own in spite of your pet and private law."

"Go ahead, Flagg," said Craig, impudently, no longer apprehensive about the whip. "I'm not your guardian to save you from trouble. There's water enough for all of us."

"You have swept the slopes so clean for your cursed pulp-wood slivers that you have dried up the brooks, and there isn't enough water any more, and you know it. Your damnation canal will suck the life out of the Noda."

"You listen to me, Flagg!" adjured Craig, getting back all his confidence as the executive of a powerful corporation. "Another special act allows us to raise this dam and conserve the water so that there'll be plenty after we use our share for the canal. You're safe and—" [60]

"Safe!" raged the old man, and again the veins knotted on his forehead and he panted for breath. Latisan wanted to urge him to be careful. Flagg was exhibiting the dread symptoms of apoplexy. "Safe! I'll be locked into this dam by you, with sluiceway refused to me—that's what it will come to—you offering me a cut price for the logs I can't get down to the Adonia sawmills. If you can't kill one way, as you killed off the Latisans, you'll kill in another way. You're a devilish thief, Craig. I wonder if the men who hire you know what you are. Special acts, hey? That legislature has given a robber a loaded gun without knowing it. By the bald-headed jeesicks! I've got a drive coming down this river! And for fifty years, every spring, it has gone through. It's going through this year, too, and if you're underfoot here

you'll be walked on. And that's just as good as your trumped-up law; it's better—it's justice."

Flagg acted like a man who did not dare to remain longer in the presence of such an enemy; his big hands were doubling into hard fists; he was shaking in all his muscles. He leaped back onto the seat of his jumper, swung his team and sent his horses leaping up a whiplash road which traversed the cliff—a road he had disdained in his wild impatience to meet his foe.

When they reached the level of the wooded country Flagg had something to say about his abrupt departure from Craig, as if the master feared that his employe might suspect that there was an element of flight in the going-away. "There's a law against killing a man, and I've got to respect that law even if I do spit on special acts that those gum-shoers have put through. I didn't go down to their legislature and fight special acts, Latisan. I found these waters running downhill as God Almighty had set 'em to running. I have used 'em for my logs. And if any man tries now to steal my water at Skulltree, or block me with a raised dam, there's going to be one devil of a fight at Skulltree and I'll be there in the middle of it. What I wanted to do to Craig to-day can well wait till then when the doing can count for full value."

[61]

Ward had been casting solicitous side glances at the empurpled face and the swollen veins. He did not dare to counsel Flagg as to his motions or his emotions. But he felt sure that an old man could not indulge in such transports without danger. He knew something about the effects of an embolism. His violent grandfather had been a victim of a fit of flaming anger in his old age.

"I'll be in the middle of it, a club in each hand," promised Flagg. And his molten ponderings kept alight the fires in his face.

They halted for the night at one of the Flagg store depots and were lodged in the office camp, reserved sacred to the master and his boss.

Latisan slept in the bunk above the master.

Flagg had been silent all the evening, poring over the accounts that the storekeeper had turned over.

He sighed frequently; he seemed to be weary. After a time he kicked off his larrigans and rolled into his bunk, ready dressed as he had stood. He seemed to lack the volition to remove his clothing.

[62]

He was snoring calmly when Latisan went to sleep.

Sometime in the night the young man awoke. The sounds which he heard below him were not the snores of a man who was sleeping peacefully. There was something ominous about the spasmodic and stertorous breathing.

Latisan slipped to the floor and lighted a lamp. He found the wide eyes of Flagg staring from the gloom of the bunk.

"What is it, Mr. Flagg? What is the matter?" he asked, with solicitude.

Flagg slowly reached with his left hand, picked up his right hand, and when he released it the hand fell as helplessly as so much dead flesh. "That's it," he said, without apparent emotion. "It's a shock." He employed the colloquial name for a stroke of paralysis. "My mother was that way. I've been afraid of it—have expected it, as you might say. Mother lived ten years after her shock. I hope to God I won't. For it has taken me just when I'm ready to put up my best fight—and it's my good right hand, Latisan, my right hand!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

[63]

THAT was Flagg's reiterated lament on the journey back to Adonia. "It's my right hand, Latisan!"

Ward had insisted on being the charioteer for the stricken master, promising to rush back to headwaters and take charge of the crew. He tried to console the old man by urging that getting in touch as soon as possible with capable doctors might restore his strength. "It may be only a clot in the brain, sir. Such cases have been helped."

"It's my right hand. It's like my mother's. She never could lift it again."

They had started before dawn; a gibbous moon shed enough light on the tote road

to serve Latisan. Flagg was couched on a sled, his blanket propped up by hay. His scepter, the curiously marked cant dog, lay beside him. He had made sure of that before he allowed the team to start.

"I propose to be your right hand in so far as I'm able, Mr. Flagg," declared Latisan, at last, pricked by the repeatedly iterated plaint. "You can depend on me just as far as I can stretch my ability."

"But you told me you didn't like me for myself. You said you were joining drives with me because I was proposing to fight. Now I can't fight. No man will do my fighting for me unless he likes me for myself."

"I'll do it for you, sir," insisted Ward, determinedly. "It's right in line with my plans. I'll take your orders. I'll come to you regularly at Adonia. You shall know every move. I'll be merely your right hand to do what you want done." [64]

"I'm a hard man with my help, Latisan. You have agreed with me on that point. I shall be ugly when I'm chained up. I shall say something to you, and then you'll quit."

Latisan had been looking the situation squarely in the eye on his own account. He was confronted by something wholly outside all his calculations. He had enlisted merely as a lieutenant and had never considered that he would be called on to assume authority as chief in the field. He had been led to serve with Flagg because the old man was the personification of permanency in the north country—seemed to be something that could not be shaken by the assaults of the Comas—a man who impressed all as being above the hazards of death and accident. Somehow, after all the years and because he had been there as a fixture through so many changes, Echford Flagg was viewed as something perennial—as sure as sunrise, as solid and everlasting as the peak of Jerusalem Knob, which overshadowed the big house on the ledges at Adonia; he was a reality to tie to in a fight against a common foe.

But right then he was a whimpering old man who plucked and fumbled at a dead right hand.

He was as helpless as a little man whom Latisan had plucked from a brutal clutch of an assailant in front of a bulletin board. Craig was still able enough. Craig was man size. Craig would be even more vicious when the news of Flagg's condition reached him; he would perceive his opportunity. [65]

"It's sort of the code up where I come from. There's no objection to a clean fight. But if you don't pick your bigness you must expect that your bigness will offer himself mighty sudden." Latisan was not recollecting what he had said to the chaps of Tech; he was putting before his mind one of his fundamental principles as he listened to the laments of the stricken giant and urged the horses down the tote road. Craig would keep on fighting; but Flagg was no longer of Craig's bigness. There was only one thing for Latisan to do—so that was why he put so much of determination and warmth into his pledges to a man whom he did not like from a personal standpoint. Flagg could not understand why this stranger should be loyal; the old man's wits were numbed along with his body.

"I'll be ripping at you with my tongue, because it's been my style—and I'll be worse when I'm penned up." Flagg could not seem to hope for any reform in himself. He was accepting his nature as something forged permanently in the fires of his experience, not to be remolded.

"I'm not thin-skinned, sir. If you can't keep from abusing me about business details, go ahead and abuse. It will ease your feelings and the abuse will not hurt me, because I don't propose to do anything knowingly to justify abuse. Twitting on real facts is what hurts. You hired me because you knew I had good reasons for fighting the Comas on account of the principle involved in the stand of the independents; you know that I still have the reasons, no matter how much your tongue may run away with you about foolish details." [66]

He was looking forward to an opportunity to place himself even more definitely on record in the hearing of Flagg. After the sun was up Latisan expected to be able to grasp that opportunity at almost any turn of the tote road. He knew he would meet the upcoming crew. Flagg's horses on the trip north had made twice the speed of the plodding woods teams, and the crew had been ordered to spend the night at any camp where darkness overtook them.

Latisan heard, long before he came in sight of them, the shrill yells with which sled load interchanged repartee with sled load; everlastingly there was the monotone of the singers. It was plain that the same spirit of gay adventure was inspiring the men.

The tote road was a one-track thoroughfare; Latisan picked a cleared knoll at one side for his turnout switch and swung his horses up there in order to give the heavy sleds passage.

"How the hell can they come singing? Stop 'em," moaned Flagg.

There were half a dozen sleds in close procession, and Ward's upflung hand halted them when the leading sled came abreast.

By his own efforts Flagg propped himself into a sitting posture, braced by his left arm.

Men leaped off the sleds and crowded forward in a phalanx, cupping with their ranks the sledge where their master was couched. Voices were hushed and eyes were wide. [67]

"I've been hit a wallop, boys," quavered the old man. "Overnight it has hit me. Shock. It ain't surprising at my age. Mother had the same."

For that moment Flagg had put aside the shell of his nature; he found instant sympathy in the gaze which rough men of the forest bestowed on a stricken one of their ilk. He was responding to that sympathy. There were tears in his eyes.

"Men, I'm hurrying Mr. Flagg home where he can be looked after by the doctors. I'm sure he'll soon be all right again," Latisan assured them, lying for the good of the cause. "In the meantime I'm saying to him for myself that I'm standing by for every ounce that's in me. What do you say to him?"

"The same!" they yelled, in a ragged chorus.

"Fact is," went on Ward, as spokesman for all, "to make up for your not being with us, Mr. Flagg, we've got to put in twice as many licks because you're not on the job, and you can depend on us. What, boys?"

They bellowed promises and shrieked a pledge.

"Get along to headwaters and start to rolling the jackstraws onto the ice," shouted Latisan. "Have the dynamite warmed when I get back there. If we have to do it, well beat the April rains to the job."

They went on their way, cheering.

"You've heard us. It ought to help some," stated Ward, urging his team along toward Adonia.

"The songs of the angels never will sound any better, and the angels will never look any better than those men did just now," declared the old man, still in his softened mood. [68]

Latisan turned about and grinned at the master.

"I know what you mean," averred Flagg. "Of course I know. I was after pirates and I've got the toughest gang in the north country. Feed 'em raw meat, Latisan!"

Over the snow, which was slushy under the April sun of midday, and finally into Adonia over the rutted grit that the evening chill had frozen, the baron of the Noda was driven to the door of his mansion on the ledges.

Latisan had picked up men at the tavern as helpers.

A hail brought out a little old man whose white, close beard and fluffy hair gave his face the appearance of a likeness set into a frame of cotton batting. It was Rickety Dick; Brophy had told Latisan about him. He flung his hands above his head; it was his involuntary action when deep emotion stirred him; and his customary ejaculation was, "Praise the Lord!" It was possible that he would have shouted those words even then without regard to their irrelevance; but he was not able to utter a sound when Brophy and Latisan and the other men came bearing Flagg into the house.

The master stoutly refused to be laid in his bed. There was his big armchair in the middle of the sitting room; he commanded that he be placed there. "I can't fight lying down. If I can't stand up, I can sit up."

"Praise the Lord!" cried old Dick, finding an opportunity to interject his thanksgiving phrase.

"I'll come to you often, Mr. Flagg," promised Ward, taking leave. "I'll not neglect matters up the river, of course. But I want you to feel that I'm merely your right hand, moving according to your orders." [69]

He went away with a thrill of sympathy inspiring his new resolution in behalf of the master's interests. The spectacle that he closed the door on had pathos in it. The tyrant of the Noda was shut away from the woods where he had ruled—away from the rush of white water under the prow of his great bateau; he could hear only the tantalizing summons of the cataract whose thunder boomed above the village of Adonia.

Latisan had promised to send for the best doctors in the city—he had a messenger already on the way. But he knew well enough that Echford Flagg, if he lived, was doomed to sit in that big chair and wield his scepter vicariously. And Latisan knew,

too, what sort of the torments of perdition Flagg would endure on that account.

In the office of Brophy's tavern Rufus Craig, apparently a casual wayfarer, was sitting when Latisan entered after leaving the big house on the ledges.

Craig either felt or assumed contrite concern. "Excuse me, Latisan, but is it true that Mr. Flagg has suffered a stroke of paralysis?"

"It is true, sir."

"I'm sorry. I'm not on pleasant terms with him, or with you, for that matter. But I hate to see a good fighter struck down."

Latisan went to the desk and wrote his name on a leaf of the dog-eared register. He proposed to stay the night at Brophy's and start north in the morning. [70]

"Go up and take Number Ten," said Brophy, who had been called as a helper and who had walked down from the mansion with Latisan.

When Craig plodded heavily along the upper corridor, on his way to bed a little later, the door of Number Ten was open for ventilation; Latisan was smoking his pipe and reading a newspaper which he had picked up in the tavern office. His stare, directed at Craig over the top of the newspaper, was inhospitable when the Comas man stopped and leaned against the door jamb.

"Latisan, I'm presuming on that frankness of yours; you have bragged about it in the past."

"That was before my experience with you in the Walpole matter, sir. But go ahead! What do you want?"

"You're over here in the Noda region, according to your threat. You may be willing to inform me as to your status in the Flagg proposition, now the old man is on his back."

"Mr. Flagg has put me in full charge of his drive."

"Has he delegated to you any authority to compromise?"

"No, sir!"

"There ought to be an opportunity to compromise, now that he's down and out."

"I just left Mr. Flagg sitting in his chair, and he says he intends to keep sitting there. Therefore, he isn't down."

"Is his mind clear for business?" [71]

"I should say so—yes!"

Craig tipped his hat and scratched the side of his head. "Then I'm afraid there isn't much use in my going to him to talk compromise," he confessed.

"That's your affair, Mr. Craig."

"And your affair—where he's concerned——"

"Is to bring down his drive."

"He has threatened a big fight at Skulltree. You heard him."

"Yes."

"And if he gives his orders to blow hell out of the bottom of the river, I suppose you'll obey, eh?"

"He has ordered me to bring his logs into the hold-boom here at Adonia. I have promised to do so. I see no need of going into details of how I'm to do it." Latisan raised the shield of his newspaper in front of his face.

But Craig persisted. He had promised the Noda to his superiors; he had not been sure how he could maneuver to deliver, but his past success had impelled him to go on with his cocksure pledges of performance; he was spurred by a hint of a raise in salary, a gift of Comas common stock; he had depended on the situation at Skulltree as his principal weapon, if bravado backed the special legislative act. But that act had been juggled, just as Echford Flagg had asserted. The thing was ticklish, and Craig knew it. Anger and apprehensiveness were working twin leverage on the Comas executive.

"Latisan, by coming over here into the Noda and grabbing in where you have no timber interests of your own, you have shown your animus. You have made it a personal matter between you and me." [72]

"There's a lot of truth in what you say," admitted Ward, lowering his shield. "Let's exchange accusations! You held that Walpole heir up your sleeve till we had our cut

on the landings. If you had worked such a trick on my grandfather he wouldn't be sitting on this chair, as I'm doing. He'd be kicking you around this tavern. I'll save my strength for the Flagg drive."

"I've got some frankness of my own, Latisan. I'm at a point where my future with the Comas is in the balance, and I'm going to fight for that future. I'm not asking you to lie down. But you have it in your power—the circumstances being as they are—to swing the Flagg interests in with ours to mutual advantage. Why isn't that better than a fight?"

"It would be better!"

Craig brightened.

But Latisan added: "For your interests! You're afraid of a fight—at Skulltree!"

"Yes, I am," blurted Craig, trying candor. "Let's arrange a hitch-up!"

"Now the trouble with that plan is this," returned Latisan, quietly, slowly. "It can't be done, not with a man like you've shown yourself to be. Hold in your temper, Mr. Craig! You're coming round now to ask square men to deal with you. You can't appeal on the ground of friendship—you haven't tried to make any friends up here. You have played too many tricks. We're all doubtful in regard to your good faith, no matter what the proposition may be. We can't deal with you. It's all your own doing. You are paying the penalty." [73]

"Much obliged for the sermon!"

"I could say a lot more, but it wouldn't amount to anything in your case."

"Then it has settled into a personal fight between you and me, has it?"

"Bluntly speaking, yes!"

"You have accused me of playing tricks!" Craig's rage burst bounds. "You young hick, you have never seen real tricks yet! You don't think I'm coming after you with fists or a cant dog, do you?"

"I wish you were younger and would try it!"

"I'm from the city. In the city we use our brains. Latisan, I have tried to show you in the past that the Comas means business. If you'll go back to the Toban, where you belong, I'll do something for you on that Walpole matter, now that I've taught you a lesson."

"The Latisans are not out after charity, Mr. Craig."

"You're out after punishment—a damnation good smashing, personally, and you're going to get it!"

Latisan leaped from his chair and slammed the door suddenly and violently; expecting an attack. Craig leaped back and saved his fingers from a jamming.

From behind his curtain in the morning he saw Latisan drive the Flagg team into the tavern yard.

"I'll be coming down often, Brophy, to see Mr. Flagg. I'll depend on you to save out a room for me."

"Number Ten is yours if it suits."

Craig grunted with the satisfaction of one who had received interesting information; knowledge that Latisan would be regularly in Adonia helped some plans which the director had been revolving. [74]

Latisan lashed his horses away toward the north.

Craig took the forenoon train down over the narrow-gauge, headed for New York. He was seeking that aid of which he had boasted—city brains. In handling certain affairs of his in the past he had found the Vose-Mern Detective Agency both crafty and active—and the roundabout method of craft, he decided, was the proper way to get at Latisan, without involving the Comas folks in any scandal.

CHAPTER NINE

NOT cattishly, but with patronizing pity, Miss Leigh, bookkeeper, remarked to Miss Javotte, filing clerk, that if Miss Kennard did not change that green toque with the white quill to something else pretty soon, she could be identified by her hat better than by her fingerprints.

Miss Leigh had been showing one of her new spring hats to Miss Javotte; she was able to express a *sotto voce* opinion about Miss Kennard's toque because Miss Kennard, stenographer, was rattling her typewriter full tilt. Miss Javotte agreed, spreading her fingers fan shape and inspecting certain rings with calm satisfaction. "And not even a rock—only that same old-fashioned cameo thing—speaking of fingers."

"I was speaking of fingerprints," said Miss Leigh, tartly, frowning at the display of rings, perfectly well aware that they were not bought on the installment plan out of a filing clerk's wages.

It was quite natural for Miss Leigh to speak of fingerprints. She was an employe in the Vose-Mern offices. "Vose-Mern Bureau of Investigation" was the designation on the street corridor directory board of a building in the purlieus of New York City Hall. On the same board other parties frankly advertised themselves as detectives. The Vose-Mern agency called its men and women by the name of operatives. The scope of its activities was unlimited. It broke strikes, put secret agents into manufacturing concerns to stimulate efficiency, or calculatingly and in cold blood put other agents in to wreck a concern in the interests of a rival. It was a matter of fees. Mern could defend the ethics of such procedure with interesting arguments; he had been an inspector of police and held ironic views of human nature; he had invented an anticipatory system, so he called it, by which he "hothouse" criminal proclivities in a person in order to show the person's latent possibilities up to an employer before damage had been wrought to the employer's business or funds. That is to say—and this for the proper understanding of Mr. Mern's code in his operations as he moved in the special matters of which this tale treats—his agency deliberately set women of the type well hit off by the name "vamps" "sicked" those women onto bank clerks and others who could get a hand into a till, and if the women were able to cajole the victim to the point of stealing or of grabbing in order to make a get-away to foreign parts with the temptress, the trick was considered legitimate work of the "anticipatory" sort. The operative would order the treasure *cached*, would appoint the day and hour for the get-away—and a plain-clothes man would be waiting at the *cache*! The Vose-Mern system thus nabbed the culprit, who had revealed his lack of moral fiber by reason of the hothouse forcing of the situation; Mern insisted that if the germ were there it should be forced. By his plan the loot was pulled back and returned to the owner.

[76]

Mern had broken the big paper-mill strike for the Comas Consolidated; he calmly assured his clients that he could furnish a thousand men as well as one. When he did a thing it was expensive—for he had bands of picked men always on call, and the men must be paid during their loafing intervals, waiting for other strikes.

[77]

Craig had been close to Mern during the strike. Mern stated that the ethics of the law allowed a lawyer to defend and extricate, if he could, a criminal whom he knew was hideously guilty; the lawyer's smartness was applauded if he won by law against justice. Mern excused on the same lines his willingness to accept any sort of a commission. It was a heartless attitude—Mern admitted that it was and said that he didn't pose as a demon. He seemed to get a lot of comfort out of declaring that if the fellow he was chasing had the grit and smartness to turn around and do Mern up, Mern would heartily give the fellow three cheers. Thus did Mern put his remarkable business on the plane of a man-to-man fight by his argument, not admitting that there was any baseness in his plots and his persecution.

Miss Lida Kennard, as confidential stenographer, was deep into the methods of Mern. It was Mern's unvarying custom to have Miss Kennard in to listen to and take down all that a client had to state. She was extremely shocked in the first stages of her association with the Vose-Mern agency by the nature of the commissions undertaken. But it was the best position she had secured, after climbing the ladder through the offices of more or less impecunious attorneys. She needed the good pay because her mother was an invalid; she continued to need the pay after her mother died. There were bills to be settled. She had grown used to setting the installments on those bills ahead of new hats, and the cameo ring which had been her mother's keepsake was for the sake of memory, not adornment.

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By dint of usage, the Vose-Mern business had come to seem to her like a real business. Certainly some big men came and solicited Mern's aid and appeared to think that his methods were proper. In course of time, listening to Mern's ethics, she came to accept matters at their practical value and ceased to analyze them for the sake of seeking for nice balances of right and wrong. She was in and of the Vose-Mern organization! She sat in on conferences, wrote down placidly plots for doing up men who had not had the foresight to hire Mern—Vose had been merely an old detective, and he was dead—and she sometimes entertained a vague ambition to be

an operative herself. She liked pretty hats and handsome rings—though she was scornfully averse to the Leigh-Javotte system as she was acquainted with it by the chance remarks the associates dropped. As to operatives—Miss Kennard had heard—well, she had heard Miss Elsham, for instance, a crack operative, reveal what the rewards of the regular work were; and, the way Miss Elsham looked at it, a girl did not have to lower her self-respect.

In the midst of these thoughts, getting a side glance at the new hat which Miss Leigh was showing to Miss Javotte, Miss Kennard was called to conference; the buzzer summoned her.

Mern introduced her to the client of the day; the chief made that his custom; it always seemed to put the client more at his ease because an introduction made her an important member of the party—and Mern stressed the “confidential secretary” thing. [79]

The client was Director Craig of the Comas company.

He rose with a haste which betrayed a natural susceptibility to the charms of pretty women. He cooed at her rather than spoke, altering his natural tone, smoothing out all the harshness; it was that clumsy gallantry by which coarse men strive to pay court to charm.

The girl warranted the approving gaze which Mr. Craig gave to her. He looked from her frank eyes to her copper-bronze hair, which seemed to have a glint of sunshine in its waves. He liked the uplift of that round chin—he remembered that it had seemed to indicate spirit—and he liked spunk in a girl. He had enjoyed the conferences of the days of the strike-breaking when he could survey her profile as she busied herself with her writing, admiring the beauty curve of her lips.

Now he was thrilled by her manner of recognition; he had not expected that much.

“I remember you, Mr. Craig,” she assured the big man, her fingers as firm in the grip as were his. “You were in here so much on the strike matter two years ago.”

“That’s a long time for a New York young lady to remember a man from the north woods.”

“To save myself from seeming like a flatterer, I must say it’s because of the woods feature that I remember you so well. The forest interests me. I’m afraid I’m inclined to be very foolish about the woods. Why, in a cafeteria—last fall—there was—” [80]

But she checked herself and flushed. She turned to Mern. “I beg your pardon. I’m ready.” She sat down and opened her notebook.

“But what about it?” quizzed Craig.

“A mere chance meeting with a man from the north country. I really don’t understand why I mentioned it. My interest in the woods—the thought of the woods—tripped my tongue.” She nodded to the stolid Mern as if to remind him of the business in hand, and Mern ducked his square head at Craig.

It was the habit of Mern to go thoroughly over a case with a client before calling in Miss Kennard. At the second going-over in her presence the topic was better shaken down, was in a more solidified form for her notebook. The Comas director had already told his story once to the chief.

Craig leaned back in his chair and gazed up at the ceiling, again collecting his data in his mind. He had dictated before to Miss Kennard and knew how Mern wanted his names and his facts. “Subject, the spring drives on the Noda water. Object, hanging up or blocking the independent drive of Echford Flagg and—”

Miss Kennard’s pencil slipped somehow. It fell from her fingers, bounced from the floor on its rubber tip, and ticked off the sharpened lead when it hit the floor again. [81]

Lida darted for it, picked it up, and ran out of the room. “I’m going for another,” she explained.

She was gone for some time. Craig glanced out of the window into the slaty sky, from which rain was falling. It was a day unseasonably warm and humid for early spring. “I hope it’s raining in the Noda. But it’s just as liable to be snow. Latisan can’t do much yet awhile.” He looked at his watch as if starting the Noda drives was a matter of minutes. He was showing some impatience when Miss Kennard returned. She went to the window, and sat in a chair there, her face turned from them. “If you don’t mind,” she apologized. “It’s on account of the light. I can hear perfectly from here.”

She heard then that the Comas wanted to put Echford Flagg down and out as an operator, now that paralysis had stricken him. She had Craig’s assurance delivered to Mern that, without a certain Ward Latisan old Flagg would not be able to bring his drive down. The Comas director declared that an ordinary boss could never get along

with the devils who made up the crew. He declared further that Latisan was of a sort to suit desperadoes and had put into the crew some kind of fire which made the men dangerous to vested interests on the river. He devoted himself to Latisan with subdued profanity, despite the presence of the young woman. He averred that Latisan himself had no love for Flagg—nobody up-country gave a tinker's hoot for Flagg, anyway. He insisted, desperate in spite of certain modifying private convictions, that Latisan could be pried off the job if some kind of a tricky influence could be brought to bear or if his interest in the fight, as just a fight, could be dulled or shifted to something else or side-tracked by a ruse. He pictured Flagg as a man for whom nobody would stand up in his present state, now that he was sick and out of the game.

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"I hate to kick a cripple, even in my business," demurred Mern. "I have flashes of decency," he continued, dryly. "You seem to be particularly set on getting to the lumberjack, Latisan. Can't you do him up, and then let Flagg have half a show for this season—probably his last?"

"Now you're talking of violence to Latisan, aren't you?"

"Let the plug-ugly have what he seems to be looking for," advised Mern. "That is, if I get it straight from you what his nature is."

"He's all of that—what I have said," reaffirmed Craig, venomously. "But look here, Mern, you can't go up into that region, where everything is wide open to all men, and kill a man or abduct him. I'm obliged to gum-shoe. I have to keep my own executive details away from the home office, even. We're waiting on the courts for law and on the legislature for more favors." Craig was sweating copiously, and he wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "It's touchy business. If I can pull old Flagg into camp, it's my biggest stroke outside of nailing the Latisans in the Tomah. A monopoly will give us settled prices and control of the flowage. But I insist on doing the job through Latisan. I'm after him! Now do some thinking for me. No violence, however—nothing which can be traced to the Three C's."

[83]

In the silence Miss Kennard asked, "How do you spell Latisan, Mr. Craig?"

He told her. "First name Ward. He's the grandson of old John of the Tomah."

"I'm trying to get the facts straight for Mr. Mern. Do I understand you to say that the Latisans have failed in their business?"

"They're down and out. I gave the young fool a good tip to save the remnants, but he wouldn't take it. The only thing I'll give him after this is poison—if it can't be traced to me or my company."

Mern had swung about in his chair, his vacant stare on the murky sky, doing the thinking to which he had been exhorted by his client. "Suppose I slip a picked crowd of my operatives into his crew?"

"He's too wise to take on strangers. And while he's on the job with the crew the men are so full of that hell-whoop spirit that they can't be tampered with. Mern, he's got to be cut out of the herd."

"What's his particular failing?"

Craig, if his sour rage against Latisan had been less intense, might have been less ready to believe that Latisan had taken several months off as a prodigal son. But Craig wanted to believe that the young man had been doing what scandal said he had done. That belief strengthened Craig's hopes. He affected to believe in the reports. He told Mern that Latisan had been leading a sporting life in the city until the family money gave out.

[84]

"How about bumping him on his soft spot?"

Craig asked questions with his eyes, blinking away the perspiration.

"With a girl," Mern explained. "With one who looks as if she had been picked right out of the rosy middle of the big bouquet he was attracted by in the city. With the background of the woods, a single bloomer will surely hold his attention."

Craig showed interest; he had been obliged to pass up violence, bribery, bluster. This new plan promised subtlety and subterfuge that would let out the Three C's. "Got her?"

"Call Miss Elsham on the phone, Miss Kennard! You may do it from the other room. Ask her to hurry down."

The girl, her face hidden from them, paused at the door. "Are there more notes? Shall I come back?" She was having difficulty with her voice, but the men were now talking eagerly about the new plan, and her discomposure was not remarked.

"I think not," said Mern. "Write out what you have. Make especially full characterizations of Flagg and Latisan as you have gathered facts about them from

our talk." He had found Miss Kennard to be especially apt in that work. Not only did she deduce character from descriptions, but she worked in many valuable suggestions as to how men of a certain nature should be handled. She seemed to understand the vagaries of men's dispositions very well indeed.

"What's the matter with Ken?" muttered Miss Javotte, nudging the bookkeeper.

[85]

Lida had flung her arms across the frame of her typewriter and had hidden her face in her hands.

"Headache," returned Miss Leigh, sapiently. "That toque has struck into the brain. No girl ought to take chances that way."

CHAPTER TEN

[86]

HOWEVER, by the time Miss Marguerite Elsham—having given full attention to her person and attire—arrived at the office, Miss Kennard had completed her manuscript and the sheets were lying at Mern's elbow on his desk.

In order to bridge a part of the gap of waiting Mern had given his client some information about Miss Elsham and her ability.

"Very competent on the coax, Mr. Craig. Last job was a paying teller. He had twenty thousand in his jeans when he stepped out of the taxi that had taken him and Elsham to the steamer dock. Tickets for Rio! Crowley, our pinch artist, nabbed him and bawled out Elsham, who was weeping in the cab. Crowley and Elsham work well together. You understand that if she goes to the woods Crowley must go along on the side. They won't appear as knowing each other. But Crowley may be called on to shove his mitt between Elsham and trouble."

"I don't care how many are on pay—if you achieve results," said Craig.

The field director, introduced to Miss Elsham when she entered breezily, termed her in his thoughts as being at least a 1925 model. He wondered just what words he would find in the way of advice about toning down her style for north country operations.

She took her seat sideways on the edge of Mern's desk, thus testifying to her sure standing in the establishment, her tightly drawn skirt displaying an attractive contour. For a fleeting moment—hating Latisan so venomously—Craig rather envied Latisan his prospects as a victim.

[87]

Miss Elsham produced a silver cigarette case, lighted up, and exhaled twin streams of smoke from a shapely nose. "Shoot!" she counseled.

Mern, after his slow fashion, fumbled with the sheets of Miss Kennard's manuscript.

Miss Elsham thriftily utilized the moments allowed her by Mern's hesitation. She always tried to impress a client favorably. "I don't presume to pick and choose when it comes to cases," she informed Craig. "I'm an All-for-the-good-cause Anne! But I hope—I'm allowed to hope, I suppose—I do hope that my next one is going to remember some of the lessons he learned at mother's knee. The last one had forgotten everything. I was dragged through cafés till at the present time a red-shaded table lamp and a menu card make me want to bite holes in any man with a napkin over his arm. I've danced to jazz and listened to cabaret—"

Mern was trying to say something, but she rattled on: "And that flask on his hip—he must have done all his breathing while he was asleep; he never allowed time enough between drinks while he was awake."

"The next one is different," stated Mern.

"Much obliged! But of course it's cafés again and—"

Mern sliced off her complaints, chopping his flat hand to and fro in the air. "Nothing to it, sis! It's a tall-timber job, this time."

[88]

"In the woods—the real woods," supplemented Craig.

"Great!" indorsed Miss Elsham, accustomed to meeting all phases of action with agility. "I've just seen a movie with that kind of a girl in it. Leggings and knicks. I can see myself. Great!"

Director Craig surveyed her and nodded approvingly.

"We'll decide on what part you'll play before we measure you for a rig," objected the chief, with his official caution. "Listen to the size-up of your man." He began to read from Miss Kennard's manuscript. "'Ward Latisan. Young woodsman. Has lived and worked among rough men and has no particular amount of moral stamina, a fact shown by his desertion of his father in time of need in order to indulge in orgies in the city.'"

"Oh, it's to go and set my hook and fish him out of the woods, and then he and I lean on our elbows across from each other—the cafés some more," said Miss Elsham, pouting.

Mern suspended, for a moment, his reading and addressed Craig. "Miss Kennard, of course, is sizing up according to what you have said of Latisan. You're sure about his weakness for dames, are you? We don't want to give Miss Elsham any wrong tips."

Craig hung tenaciously to his estimate of Latisan, in no mood to uproot the opinion which gossip had implanted and hatred had watered. And at the end of his arraignment he attempted an awkward compliment. "And even if he could have stood out against the Queen of Sheba up till now, I'll say he'll—" Craig gazed with humid indorsement of Miss Elsham's attractions and waved his hand in the way of a mute completion of the sentence. [89]

Miss Elsham smiled broadly and patted together her manicured thumbnails. "Loud applause!" she cried. "Pardon me if I don't blush, sir. I have used up my stock. The last case was oozing with flattery—after the flask had got in its work."

Mern went on with his reading, portraying the character of Latisan as Miss Kennard had gathered and assimilated data. She had even gone to the extent of giving Latisan a black mustache and evil eyes.

"Hold on," objected Craig. "Nothing was said about his looks. She's picking that up because I was strong on how he had acted. He doesn't look as savage as he is; he fools a lot of folks that way," stated Craig, in surly tones.

"Well, how will I know when I meet up with him in the woods?"

"You go to the Adonia tavern and make your headquarters, and you won't miss him. How does the thing look to you as a proposition?" demanded Craig, solicitously. "You ought to know pretty well what you can do with men, by this time."

Miss Elsham tossed away her cigarette butt and referred mutely to Mern by a wave of her hand.

"She always gets 'em—gets the better of the best of 'em. Rest easy," said the chief.

"And it must be worked easy," warned Craig, catching at the word. "That's why you're in it, Miss Elsham, instead of its being a man's fight up there. We can't afford to let Latisan slam that drive down through our logs, as he threatens to do. If he does it—if we turn on Flagg and sue for damages, as we can do, of course—court action will only bring out a lot of stuff that better be kept covered. I want the agency to understand fully, Mern!" [90]

"We're on."

"I'm achieving results without showing all the details to the home office. And I'm not a pirate. You spoke of kicking a cripple, Mern. We'll take over Flagg's logs as soon as he gets reasonable. His fight is only an old notion about the independents sticking on. Sawmills are in our way these days. Flagg is done, anyway. He ought to be saved from himself. I'm after Latisan. He's ready to fight and to ruin Flagg," declared Mr. Craig, with a fine assumption of righteous desire to aid a fallen foe, "just to carry out his grudge against me—using Flagg's property as his tool. It'll be too bad. So get busy, Miss Elsham—and keep him busy—off the drive."

"Read on, Chief," she implored Mern. "I'm seeing as quick as this just how I'll do it."

The conference continued.

When Miss Elsham departed she stopped in the main office on her way out. "Good-by, girls! I'm off for the big sticks. I'll bring each of you a tree."

She went to a mirror, taking out her vanity case. Beside the mirror were hooks for hats and outer garments. "Perfect dream!" she commented, examining a hat. "Whose?"

"Mine," said Miss Leigh. [91]

Miss Elsham took the hat in admiring hands, dislodging a green toque, which fell upon the floor. She did not notice the mishap to the toque and left it where it had fallen. She touched up her countenance and went away.

"Your hat is on the floor," Miss Leigh informed Miss Kennard. The girl did not reply; she was looking down upon the keys of her typewriter, and her demeanor suggested that her heart was on the floor, too.

When Lida sat by the open window of her room that evening her depression had become doleful to the point of despair.

The night was unseasonably warm with enervating humidity; in that atmosphere the dormant germs of the girl's general disgust with the metropolis and all its affairs were incubated. Breathing the heavy air which sulked at the window, she pondered on the hale refreshment of the northern forests. But it seemed to her that there was no honesty in the woods any more. That day, fate searching her out at last, she had been dragged in as a party in a plot against her stricken grandfather. She indulged her repugnance to her employment; it had become hateful beyond all endurance. Her association with the cynical business of the agency and her knowledge of the ethics of Mern had been undermining the foundations of her own innate sense of what was inherently right, she reflected, taking account of stock.

Dispassionately considered, it was not right for her to use her acquired knowledge of the plot against Echford Flagg in order to circumvent the plans of an employer who trusted her. But after a while she resolutely broke away from the petty business of weighing the right and the wrong against each other; she was bold enough to term it petty business in her thoughts and realized fully, when she did so, that her Vose-Mern occupation had damaged her natural rectitude more than she had apprehended. [92]

But there was something more subtle, on that miasmatic metropolitan night, something farther back than the new determination to break away from Mern and all his works of mischief. It was not merely a call of family loyalty, a resolve to stand by the grandfather who had disowned his kin. She was not sure how much she did care for the hard old man of the woods. But right then, without her complete realization of what the subtle feeling was, the avatar of the spirit of the Open Places was rising in her. She longed avidly for the sight and the sound of many souging trees. She was urged to go to her own in some far place where her feet could touch the honest earth instead of being insulated by the pavements which were stropped glossy by the hurry of the multitude.

That urge really was just as insistent as consideration of the personal elements involved, though she did not admit it, not being able to analyze her emotions very keenly right then. Family affection needs propinquity and service to develop it. Her sentiments in regard to Echford Flagg were vague. This Latisan, whoever he was, was plainly a rough character with doubtful morals who was loyal to a grudge instead of to her grandfather. She knew what the Elsham girl had been able to with other men, in the blasé city; it stood to reason that in the woods, having no rivals to divert the attentions of a victim, Elsham would be still more effective. [93]

At last, having kept her thoughts away from an especial topic because of the shame that still dwelt with her, Lida faced what she knew was the real and greater reason for her growing determination to step between Echford Flagg and his enemies. Alfred Kennard had stolen money from Echford Flagg. Sylvia Kennard had grieved her heart out over the thing. There were the bitter letters which Lida had found among her mother's papers after Sylvia died. The mother had torn the name from the bottoms of those letters; it was as if she had endeavored to shield Echford Flagg from the signed proof of utter heartlessness.

The debt to Echford Flagg had not been canceled. Could the daughter of Alfred Kennard repay in some degree for the sake of the father? That sense of duty surmounted all qualms involved in the betrayal of an employer, if it could be called betrayal, considering the ethics that had been adopted and preached by Mern.

It was midnight when she reached her firm decision. She would go to the north country. She would do her best, single-handed, as opportunity might present itself. She would fight without allowing her grandfather to know her identity. Perhaps she might tell him when it was all over, if she won. The debt was owed by the father; it might help if it was known that the daughter had paid. Then she would go away; it was not in her mind to gain any favor for herself. If she merely ran to him, tattling an exposure of the plot, Echford Flagg, if her well-grounded estimate of his character were correct, might repudiate her as a mere tale-bearer; she remembered enough to know that he was a square fighter. She felt that she had some of the Flagg spirit of that sort in her. She had been fighting her battle with the world without asking odds of anybody or seeking favors from her only kin. [94]

She would go north and do her best, for her own, according to the code she had laid down.

She was conscious then, having made up her mind, of the subtle longing that was back of the fierce impatience to repay her father's debt: the woods of the north and the hale spirit of the Open Places were calling her home again.

She would not admit to herself that she was engaged in a quixotic enterprise, and in order to keep herself from making that admission she resolutely turned her thoughts away from plans. To ponder on plans would surely sap her courage. She could not foresee what would confront her in the north country and she was glad because her ideas on that point were hazy. It was not in her mind to hide herself from the other operatives of the Vose-Mern agency when she was at the scene; her experience had acquainted her with the efficacy of guile in working with human nature, and she was well aware that her bold presence where the operatives were making their campaign would prove such a mixture of honesty and guile that Miss Elsham and Crowley, and even Mern, himself, when he learned, would be obliged to expend a portion of their energy on guessing.

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She did not know how or whether one girl could prevail against the organization threatening her grandfather and Latisan, but she was fully determined to find out.

She served the agency dutifully for one more day. She learned that the two operatives had started for the north.

A day later she departed from New York on their trail. She did not inform Chief Mern that she was leaving.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

[96]

A DONIA, terminus of the narrow-gauge, has one train arrival per day, in the late afternoon. That arrival always attracts the populace of the village. The train brings freight and mail and passengers.

Ward Latisan had come down from the headwaters of the Noda and was at the station, waiting for the train. He had ordered more dynamite for the drive and proposed to take especial charge of the consignment. The drive was starting off slowly. There was ice in the gorges; the first logs through would have the freshet head of water. Latisan had heard more threats and he had definitely detected the trigs which the river bosses of the Three C's were laying—and he had ordered more dynamite!

The arriving train dragged slowly into the station and Latisan kept pace with the freight car which was attached next behind the locomotive.

The conductor swung off the steps of the coach before the train halted. He hailed Latisan, calling the name loudly. He beckoned with vigor and the drive master swung around and walked back to meet the trainman.

"I did my best, Latisan, to have your shipment loaded from the freight car on the main line, but they wouldn't let me."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Our super. He was acting under orders from higher up. There was a special officer on hand to see that the orders were obeyed. Law says that explosives shall not be conveyed on a mixed train."

[97]

"I know all about that law," retorted Latisan. "But it has been eased up on in these parts because you pull a passenger coach on every train."

"But law is law; it has been jammed down on us!"

"You mean that Craig has put the twist ring into your snout," shouted the drive master. "And he's leading your railroad by the nose like he's leading a good many others in the Noda country."

"I'm only a hired man——"

"And the Three C's will have everybody in this section hired if the money holds out, and that's the hell of it!"

"Look here, Latisan, you're on railroad property, and that's no kind of talk to have over in front of passengers."

The train was at a standstill; the new arrivals were on the platform.

Latisan, well advertised by the name the conductor had bawled, glanced around and perceived that he was the center of observation. Especially was he concerned with the direct stare of a young woman; she continued to regard him steadfastly and he allowed his attention to be engaged with her for a moment.

Latisan had his own mental tags for womankind; this was "a lady." He had set himself back to the plane of the woods and his rough associates. He felt a woodsman's naïve embarrassment in the presence of a lady. Her survey of him was rebuke for his language, he was sure. There could be no other reason why "a lady" should look at a man who was fresh down from the drive, unshaven and roughly garbed. She was from town, he could see that. Those sparkling eyes seemed like something that was aimed at him; he was in a helpless, hands-up sort of mood!

[98]

He pulled off his cap. He had the courageous frankness of sincere manhood, at any rate. "I'm sorry! I was expecting dynamite. It didn't come. I blew up just the same."

The lady smiled.

Then she turned and started away.

A stout man had been standing close behind her. Nobody among the loungers at the railroad station entertained any doubt whatever as to just what this stranger was. His clothes, his sample case, his ogling eyes, his hat cockily perched on one side of his head proclaimed him "a fresh drummer," according to Adonia estimates.

He leaped forward and caught step with the girl. "Pardon! But I'm going your way! Allow me!" He set his hand on her traveling case.

She halted and frowned. "I thank you. I can carry it myself!"

"But I heard you asking the conductor the way to the hotel. I'm going right there!"

"So am I, sir! But not in your company."

"Oh, come on and be sociable! We're the only two of our kind up among these bushwhackers."

Miss Elsham's fellow operative was stressing his play; he grabbed away her bag. "We may as well get a quick rise out of him," muttered Crowley. It was a plan they had devised in case their man should help their luck by being at the railroad station.

[99]

"I'll call an officer!" she threatened.

"You don't need to," Latisan informed her. He had followed the couple. "Besides, there isn't any. The only place they need officers is in a city where a rab like this is let run loose." He leaped to the stout chap and yanked away the girl's bag. "I'll carry it if you're going to the tavern."

She accepted his proffer with another smile—a smile into which she put a touch of understanding comradeship. They walked along together.

There was no conversation. The spring flood of the Noda tumbled past the village in a series of falls, and the earth was jarred, and there was an everlasting grumble in the air. The loungers stared with great interest when the drive master and the girl went picking their way along the muddy road.

The volunteer squire delivered the traveling bag into the hand of Martin Brophy, who was on the porch of the tavern, his eye cocked to see what guests the train had delivered into his net. Mr. Brophy handled the bag gingerly and was greatly flustered when the self-possessed young lady demanded a room with a bath.

Latisan did not wait to listen to Brophy's apologies in behalf of his tavern's facilities. He touched his cap to the discomposing stranger and marched up to the big house on the ledges; he was not approaching with alacrity what was ahead of him.

He had arrived in Adonia from headwaters the previous evening, and had spent as much of that evening as his endurance would allow, listening to Echford Flagg, sitting in his big chair and cursing the fetters of fate and paralysis. Unable to use his limbs, he exercised his tongue all the more.

[100]

That forenoon and again in the afternoon Latisan had gone to the big house and had submitted himself to unreasonable complaints when he reported on what was going forward at headwaters. He had ventured to expostulate when the master told him how the thing ought to be done.

"No two drive bosses operate the same, sir. And the whole situation is different this season."

"It was your offer to be my right hand, young Latisan—and I'm drive boss still! You move as I order and command."

Ward was wondering how long the Latisan temperament could be restrained. In the matter of Craig at the tavern the scion of old John had been afforded disquieting evidence that the temperament was not to be trusted too far.

He entered the mansion without knocking; it was the custom.

Flagg was reading aloud from a big Bible for which Rickety Dick had rigged props on the arm of the chair. Dick was sitting on a low stool, the sole auditor of the master's declamation. The old servitor was peeling onions from a dish between his knees; therefore, his tears of the moment were of questionable nature.

The caller stood for a time outside the open door of the room, averse to tempting the hazard of Flagg's temper by an interruption of what seemed to be absorbing all the attention of the old man. [101]

"My flesh and my skin hath he made old; he hath broken my bones. He hath builded against me, and compassed me with gall and travail. He hath set me in dark places as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy."

Flagg halted and looked up from the page. "Lamentations—lamentations, Dick! The best of 'em have whined when the smash came. It's human nature to let out a holler. Jeremiah did it. I'm in good company; it ain't crying baby; it's putting up a real man holler. It's—"

Latisan stepped through the doorway.

Flagg instantly grabbed at a wooden spill that made a marker in the volume and nipped back the pages. He shook aloft his clinched left hand. He raised his voice and boomed. "And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."

Flagg beat his knotted fist on the open page. "Do you hear that, Latisan? That's for you. I hunted it up. I haven't had time till now to read the Bible like I should. Plenty of good stuff in it—but in the Old Testament, mind you! Too much turn-your-cheek stuff in the New Testament. 'Eye for an eye.' Do you know who said that?"

"No, sir. I'm sorry to admit it, but—"

"God Almighty said it. Said it to Moses on the mount. First straight-arm orders from God to man. It ought to be good enough for you and me, hadn't it? Take it for rule o' conduct, and if Rufe Craig says anything to you on the drive refer him here—to headquarters!" Again he beat his fist on the page. [102]

"I don't know what part of the Bible Craig ought to study, sir, but some of it ought to be good for him. I'm just from the train. They wouldn't load our dynamite at the junction. Craig is behind that!"

"Wouldn't haul our dynamite?" raged Flagg. "And he has been shipping his canned thunder through here for Skulltree by the carload! Latisan, you're falling down on the job. When I, myself, was attending to it, my dynamite was loaded for Adonia all right enough!"

The drive master did not reply to that amazing shifting of blame to him.

"Did you say what ought to be said to that conductor?"

"When I started to say something he bawled me out for using that kind of language on railroad property."

Flagg lifted the useless right hand with his left, let it fall again, and groaned. "How many times, and where, did you hit him? And then what did you say?"

"I did not hit him, sir. I said nothing more. And there was a lady present."

Flagg choked and struggled with words before he could speak. "Do you mean to tell me you're allowing any ladee"—he put exquisite inflection of sarcasm on the word—"to stand betwixt you and your duty, when that duty is plain? Latisan, they tell me that you're a sapgag where women are concerned. I'm told that you have been down to the city and—"

"Mr. Flagg, we'll stick to the subject of the dynamite!" broke in the young man, sharply. [103]

"Women are the same thing and belong in the talk."

"Then we'll stick to the dynamite that comes in boxes." Latisan was just as peremptory as the master and was hurrying his business; he felt the dog of the Latisan temperament slipping neck from the leash. "You may have been able to make 'em haul dynamite for you, in spite of the law. I can't make 'em, it seems. I'm here merely to report, and to say that I'll have the dynamite up from the junction just the same." He started for the door.

"By tote team—three times the cost! My Gawd! why ain't I out and around?" lamented the Adonia Jeremiah.

Latisan wanted to say that he would pay the extra cost of transportation out of his

own pocket, if that would save argument, but he did not dare to trust himself. He hurried out of the big house and slammed the door.

On his way down the hill he was obliged to marshal a small host of reasons for hanging on to his job; the desire to quit then and there was looming large, potent, imperative.

He was still scowling when he tramped into the office of the tavern where many loafers were assembled. Through the haze of tobacco smoke he saw Martin Brophy beckoning, and went to the desk. Brophy ran his smutted finger along under a name; [104]
"Mrs. Dana Haines Everett, New York City."

"She has been asking for you. Matter o' business, she says. I've had to give her the front parlor for her room. Say, she's the kind that gets what she goes after, I reckon. Is eating her supper served in there private. Never was done in my tavern before."

"Business—with me?" demanded Latisan. "Brophy, what's her own business in these parts?"

"Can't seem to find out," admitted the landlord, and the young man bestowed on Brophy an expansive grin which was a comment on the latter's well-known penchant for gimleting in search of information. "Will say, however, that she's a widder—grass if I ain't much mistook—believes that a woman is equal to a man and should have all a man's privileges about going around by her lonesome if she so feels."

"Well, you seem to have extracted a fair amount of information, considering that she's hardly got her feet planted."

"Oh," confessed Brophy, "it came out because I made her mad when I hinted that it was kind of queer for a woman to be traveling around alone up here. Well, now that they're voting, you can look for 'most anything. What shall I tell her from you when I take in her pie?"

"I'll wait on the lady after I eat my supper."

When the drive master was ushered into the parlor-presence by the landlord, the lady was sitting in front of an open Franklin stove, smoking a cigarette. She had made a change in attire since her arrival, the new garb suggesting that she proposed to suit herself to the nature of the region to which she had come. She was in knickerbocker costume, had tipped back her chair, one foot on the hearth and the other foot propped on her knee, and she asked Latisan to sit down, pointing to a chair beside her. She offered a cigarette with a real masculine offhandedness. The caller faltered something about a pipe. She insisted that he smoke his pipe. "It rather puts strangers at their ease, don't you think, a little tobacco haze in the room?" [105]

Latisan, packing the bowl of his briar, agreed.

"I take it that you're well acquainted with this region?"

"Fairly so, though I know the Tomah country better."

"You're a guide, I understand."

"I don't understand where you got that information, madam," replied the drive master, a bit pricked.

"I don't remember that anybody did tell me that in so many words. Somehow it was my impression. But no matter. Please listen a moment." She smiled on him, checking his attempt at a statement regarding himself; she had conned her little speech and used her best vocabulary to impress this woodsman. "No doubt you have something very important in the way of occupation. A man of your bearing is bound to. You needn't thank me for a compliment—I'm very frank. That's the way to get on and accomplish things quickly. So I'm frank enough to say it's my habit to meet men on the plane of man to man. Please do not regard me as a woman—that sort of stuff is old-fashioned in these days. I vote and pay taxes. Yet if I were merely a woman you gave evidence on the station platform to-day that you know how to protect one from insults. I was attracted by that trait in you—and afterwards minded your own business quite after my heart. I need outdoor life. I'm up here early for the first fishing. I want to tour the woods. I may invest in timberlands. Putting out of your mind all this foolish sex matter—as I have explained my man-to-man theory—will you go with me? I'll have a cook, of course. Pardon my sudden reference to pay—I'll pay you twice what you're getting now—providing you're working for wages." [106]

"I am working for wages. And I can't leave the work."

"What is it?"

"I'm the master of the Flagg drive on these waters."

"And you prefer to boss rough men and endure hardship rather than to come with me?"

The bitterness of the last interview with Flagg was still with Latisan. "If it was a matter of preference—but that isn't the way of it!" He returned her gaze and flushed. In spite of his resolve to go on with the battle that was ahead, he was tempted, and acknowledged to himself the fact; but Flagg was trying him cruelly.

"You have been the drive master here for a long time—that's why you cannot be spared?" She tossed away her cigarette and gave him earnest attention.

"I'm just beginning my work with Flagg."

[107]

"Then of course you're not vital. Let the man who used to be master—"

"That was Flagg, himself. He's laid up with paralysis."

"Oh!" she drawled, provokingly. "A matter of conscientiousness—loyal devotion—champion of the weak—or a young man's opportunity to be lord of all for the future!"

"He's an old devil to work for, and the job promises no future," blurted Latisan, his manner leaving no doubt as to his feelings.

"Then come with me," she invited. "If I get to own timberlands, who knows?"

He shook his head. "There are reasons why I can't quit—not this season."

"I hoped I'd seem to you like a good and sufficient reason," she returned, insinuatingly; in her anxiety to make a quick job of it, in her cynical estimate of men as she had been finding them out in the city, she was venturing to employ her usual methods as a temptress, naturally falling into the habit of past procedure.

She found it difficult to interpret the sudden look he gave her, but her perspicacity warned her that she was on the wrong tack with this man of the north country.

"I'm afraid you're finding me a peculiar person, Mr. Latisan," she hastened to say. "I am. I'm quick to judge and quick to decide. Your gallantry at the railroad station influenced me in your behalf. I like your manners. And I know now what's in your mind! You think it will be very easy for me to find somebody else as a guide—and you're quite sure that you can't give up your responsibility for a woman's whim."

[108]

The drive master owned to himself that she had called the turn.

"I'll continue with my frankness, Mr. Latisan. It's rather more than a guide I'm looking for on that man-to-man plane I have mentioned. You can readily understand. I need good advice about land. Therefore, mine is not exactly a whim, any more than your present determination to go on with your job is a whim. This matter has come to us very suddenly. Suppose we think it over. We'll have another talk. At any rate, you can advise me in regard to other men."

She rose and extended her hand. "We can be very good friends, I trust."

He took her hand in a warm clasp. "I'll do what I can—be sure of that."

"I feel very much alone all of a sudden. I'm depending on you. You're not going back to the drive right away, are you?" she asked, anxiously.

"I'll be held here for a day or so." The matter of the dynamite was on his mind.

"Good!" she said, and patted his arm when he turned to leave the room.

CHAPTER TWELVE

[109]

LATISAN took the forenoon train down from Adonia to the junction the next day. He was keeping his own counsel about his intent.

He had done some busy thinking during the evening after he left the new star boarder in her parlor. In spite of his efforts to confine his attention, in his thoughts, to business, he could not keep his mind wholly off her attractive personality and her peculiar proposition. He was obliged to whip up his wrath in order to get solidly down to the Flagg affairs.

By the time he went to sleep he knew that he was determinedly ugly. There was the slur of Flagg about his slack efficiency in meeting the schemes of Craig. There was the ireful consciousness that the narrow-gauge folks were giving him a raw deal on that dynamite matter. They had hauled plenty of explosive for the Comas—for Craig. To admit at the outset of his career on the Noda that he could not get what the Three C's folks were getting—to advertise his impotency by making a twenty-mile tote trip over slushy and rutted roads—was a mighty poor send-off as a boss, he told himself.

He knew what sort of tattle would pursue him.

The stout young man—that “drummer”—was at the station. Latisan was uncomfortably conscious that this person had been displaying more or less interest in him. In the dining room at breakfast, in the office among the loafers, and now at the railroad station the stranger kept his eyes on Latisan. [110]

The drive master was just as ugly as he had been when he went to sleep. He was keeping his temper on a wire edge for the purposes of the job of that day, as he had planned the affair. He did not go up to the impertinent drummer and cuff his ears, but the stranger did not know how narrowly he escaped that visitation of resentment.

The fellow remained on the platform when the train pulled out; it occurred to Latisan that the fresh individual maybe wished to make sure of a clear field in order to pursue his crude tactics with the lady of the parlor.

After the arrival at the junction Latisan had matters which gave him no time to ponder on the possible plight of the lady.

As he had ascertained by cautious inquiry, the crew of the narrow-gauge train left it on its spur track unattended while they ate at a boarding house. There were workmen in the yard of a lumber mill near the station, loafing after they had eaten their lunches from their pails. The Flagg dynamite was in a side-tracked freight car of the standard gauge. Latisan promptly learned that the lumber-yard chaps were ready and willing to earn a bit of change during their nooning. He grabbed in with them; the boxes of dynamite were soon transferred to the freight car of the narrow-gauge and stacked in one end of the car. Latisan paid off his crew and posted himself on top of the dynamite. In one hand he held a coupling pin; prominently displayed in the other hand was a fuse. [111]

“I’m in here—the dynamite is here,” he informed the conductor when that official appeared at the door of the car, red-faced after hearing the news of the transfer. “I’m only demanding the same deal you have given the Three C’s. You know you’re wrong. Damn the law! I’m riding to Adonia with this freight. What’s that? Go ahead and bring on your train crew.” He brandished coupling pin and fuse. “If you push me too far you’ll have a week’s job picking up the splinters of this train.”

Bravado was not doing all the work for Latisan in that emergency. The conductor’s conscience was not entirely easy; he had made an exception in the case of the Three C’s—and Craig, attending to the matter before he went to New York, had borne down hard on the need of soft-pedal tactics. The conductor was not prepared to risk things with canned thunder in boxes and an explosive young man whose possession just then was nine points and a considerable fraction.

Latisan was left to himself.

At last the train from downcountry rumbled in, halted briefly, and went on its way. From his place in the end of the freight car Latisan could command only a narrow slice of outdoors through the open side door. Persons paraded past on their way to the coach of the narrow-gauge. He could see their backs only. There had been a thrill for him in the job he had just performed; he promptly got a new and more lively thrill even though he ridiculed his sensations a moment later. Among the heads of the arrivals he got a glimpse of an object for which he had stretched his neck and strained his eyes—the anxious soul of him in his eyes—on the street in New York City. He saw a green toque with a white quill. [112]

As though a girl—such a girl as he judged her to be—would still be wearing the same hat, all those months later! But that hat and the very cock of the angle of the quill formed, in a way, the one especially vivid memory of his life. However, he had a vague, bachelor notion that women’s hats resembled their whims—often changed and never twice alike, and he based no hopes on what he had seen.

Whoever she was, she was on the train. But there were stations between the junction and Adonia—not villages, but the mouths of roads which led far into remote regions where a green toque could not be traced readily. He acutely desired to inform himself regarding the face under that hat. But he had made possession the full ten points of his law, sitting on that load of dynamite. What if he should allow that train crew an opening and give Echford Flagg complete confirmation of the report that his drive master was a saggag with women?

After the intenseness of the thrill died out of him he smiled at the idea that a chance meeting in New York could be followed up in this fashion in the north country. At any rate, he had something with which to busy his thoughts during the slow drag of the train up to Adonia, and he was able to forget in some measure that he was sitting on dynamite and would face even more menacing explosives of another kind when the drive was on its way. [113]

He posted himself in the side door of the car when the train rolled along beside the platform at Adonia. He had ordered men of the Flagg outfit to be at the station with

sleds, waiting for the train; they were on hand, and he shouted to them, commanding them to load the boxes and start north.

There was a man displaying a badge on the platform—a deputy sheriff who had his eye out for bootleggers headed toward the driving crews; the conductor ran to the officer and reported that Latisan had broken the law relating to the transportation of explosives; the trainman proposed to shift the responsibility, anticipating that the sheriff might give official attention to the cargo.

Just then Latisan spied the green toque; the face was concealed because the head was bowed to enable the toque's wearer to pick her way down the steps of the coach.

The drive master leaped from the door of the car and his men scrambled past him to enter.

"About that dynamite——"

Latisan elbowed aside the questioning sheriff, and looked straight past the officer. "If you go after me on that point you'll have to go after Craig and the Three C's, too—and I'll put the thing up to the county attorney myself. Right now I'm busy."

The men were lugging out the boxes. "If anybody gets in your way, boys, drop a box on his toes," he shouted, starting up the platform.

"Leave it to us, Mr. Latisan," bawled one of the crew.

[114]

The drive master had his eyes on the girl who was walking ahead of him. He could hardly believe that the voicing of his name attracted her attention. She did not know his name! But she stopped and whirled about and stared at him.

It was surely the girl of the cafeteria!

She plainly shared Latisan's amazement, but there was in her demeanor something more than the frank astonishment which was actuating him.

He pulled off his cap and hurried to her and put out his hand. "I saw you—I mean I saw your hat. I thought it might be you—but I looked for you in New York—for that hat——" He knew he was making a fool of himself by his excitement and incoherence. "I have been thinking about you——" He was able to check himself, for her eyes were showing surprise of another sort. Her manner suggested to Latisan that she, at any rate, had not been thinking especially about him during the months. She had recovered her composure.

"It is not surprising about the hat, Mr.—I believe I heard somebody call your name—Mr. Latisan?" There was an inflection of polite query, and he bowed. "My sarcastic friends are very explicit about this hat serving as my identifier."

"I didn't mean it that way. I don't know anything about girls' hats. But to see you away up here——"

She forced a flicker of a smile.

"It seems quite natural to find you here in the woods, though I believe you did tell me that your home is over Tomah way."

[115]

He was not able to understand the strange expression on her countenance. And she, on her part, was not able to look at him with complete composure; she remembered the character given to this man by Craig, and she had ventured to give him something else in her report—the swagger of a *roué* and a black mustache!

There was an awkward moment and he put his cap back on his head. He looked about as if wondering if she expected friends. He had treasured every word of hers in the cafeteria. She had spoken of the woods as if her home had been there at one time.

"I'm not expecting anybody to meet me—here—to-day," she informed him, understanding his side glances. She was showing incertitude, uneasiness—as if she were slipping back into a former mood after the prick of her surprise. "There's a hotel here, I suppose."

He took her traveling case from her hand, muttering a proffer to assist her. They walked away together. For the second time the loafers at Adonia saw Latisan escorting a strange woman along the street, and this one, also, was patently from the city, in spite of her modest attire.

"Seems to be doing quite a wholesale business, importing dynamite and wimmen," observed a cynic.

"According to the stories in Tomah, he has put in quite a lot of time looking over the market in regard to that last-named," agreed another detractor.

"And when Eck Flagg gets the news I'd rather take my chances with the dynamite than with the wimmen," stated the cynic.

[116]

"I guess I talked to you like an idiot at first," said Latisan, when he and his companion were apart from the persons on the station platform. "I'm getting control of my surprise. I remember you told me you were homesick for the woods. That's why you're up here, I suppose."

"It's one reason, Mr. Latisan."

"I'm sorry it isn't a better time of year. I'd like to—to—If you aren't going to be tied up too much with friends, I could show you around a little. But right now I'm tied up, myself. I'm drive master for Echford Flagg—you remember about speaking of him."

"Yes; but I shall not trouble Mr. Flagg," she hastened to say. "He will not be interested in me simply on account of my friends. You are very busy on the drive, are you?" she questioned, earnestly.

"Oh yes. I've got to start for headwaters in the morning." There was doleful regret in his tones.

He was rather surprised to find so much pleased animation in her face; truly, this girl from the city acted as if she were delighted by the news of his going away; she even seemed to be confessing it. "I'm glad!" she cried. Then she smoothed matters after a glance at his grieved and puzzled face. "I'm glad to hear a man say that he's devoted to his work. So many these days don't seem to take any interest in what they're doing—they only talk wages. Yours must be a wonderful work—on the river—the excitement and all!"

"Yes," he admitted, without enthusiasm.

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The street was muddy and they went slowly; he hung back as if he wanted to drag out the moments of their new companionship.

He cast about for a topic; he did not feel like expatiating on the prospects ahead of him in his work. "If you're going to make much of a stop here—"

She did not take advantage of his pause; he hoped she would indicate the proposed length of her stay, and he was worrying himself into a panic for fear she would not be in Adonia on his next visit to report to Flagg.

"I wish we had a better hotel here, so that you'd stay all contented for a time—and—and enjoy the country hereabouts."

"Isn't the hotel a fit place for a woman who is unaccompanied?"

"Oh, that isn't it! It's the slack way Brophy runs it. The help question! Martin does the best he knows how, but he finds it hard to keep table girls here in the woods. Has to keep falling back on his nephew, and the nephew isn't interested in the waiter job. Wants to follow his regular line."

"And what's that?" she asked, holding to a safe topic.

"Running Dave's stable. Nephew says the horses can't talk back."

She stopped and faced him. "Do you think the landlord would hire me as a waitress?" She had come to Adonia in haste, leaving her plans to hazard. Now she was obeying sudden inspiration.

If she had slapped him across the face she could not have provoked more astonishment and dismay than his countenance showed.

[118]

"I have done much waiting at tables." She grimly reflected on the cafés where she had sought the most for her money. "I'm not ashamed to confess it."

He stammered before he was able to control his voice. "It isn't that. You ought to be proud to work. I mean I'm glad—no, what I mean is I don't understand why—why—"

"Why I have come away up here for such a job?"

"I haven't the grit to ask any questions of you!" he confessed, plaintively, his memory poignant on that point.

The stout "drummer" had been trailing them from the station. When they halted he passed them slowly, staring wide-eyed at the girl, asking her amazed questions with his gaze. She flung the Vose-Mern operative a look of real fury; she had come north in a fighting mood.

"I have left the city to escape just such men as that—men who aren't willing to let a girl have a square chance. I lost my last position because I slapped a cheap insulter's face in a hotel dining hall." She looked over Latisan's head when she twisted the truth. "I came north, to the woods, just as far as that railroad would take me. I hate a city!" Then she looked straight at him, and there was a ring of sincerity in her tone. "I'm glad to be where those are!" She pointed to the trees which thatched the slopes of the hills.

"You're speaking of friends of mine!"

They had stopped, facing each other. Crowley, lashed by looks from the girl and Latisan, had hurried on toward the tavern. [119]

Lida knew that the drive master was having hard work to digest the information she had given him.

"They are standing up straight and are honest old chaps," he went on. He was looking into her eyes and his calm voice had a musing tone. "I like to call them my friends."

He was trying hard to down the queer notions that were popping up. He would not admit that he was suspecting this girl of deceit. But she was so manifestly not what she claimed that she was! Still, there were reverses that might—

"I am alone in a strange land—nobody to back my word about myself. I must call on a reliable witness. You know the witness." She put up her hand and touched her hat. Then came laughter—first from her and then from Latisan—to relieve the situation. "You saw me wearing it more than six months ago. What better proof of my humble position in life do you want?"

"I don't dare to tell you what you ought to be, Miss—"

"Patsy Jones," she returned, glibly; his quest for her name could not be disregarded.

"But what you are right now is good enough because it's honest work."

"Do you think I can get the job?"

"I am a witness of Martin Brophy's standing offer to give one thousand dollars for a table girl who won't get homesick or get married."

"Take me in and collect the reward, Mr. Latisan. I'm a safe proposition, both ways." [120]

"I hope not!" he blurted—and then marched on with the red flooding beneath his tan.

And though he strove to put all his belief in her word about herself, he was conscious of a persistent doubt, and was angered by it.

"If you please, I'll do the talking to Mr. Brophy—is that his name?—when we reach the hotel," said the girl. "You really do not know me." There was a flash of honesty, she felt, in that statement, and she wanted to be as honest as she could—not wholly a compound of lies in her new rôle. "It might seem queer, my presenting myself under your indorsement, as if we had been acquainted somewhere else. Gossip up here is easily started, isn't it?"

"It is."

He surrendered her bag to her at the porch, as if his services had been merely the cursory politeness of one who was traveling her way. It was in Latisan's mind to go along to the big house on the ledges and inform Flagg what had been done that day, and glory in the boast that there was a new man in the region who could make a way for himself in spite of Flagg's opinions as to the prowess of an old man.

Latisan was feeling strangely exhilarated. She had come there to stay! Martin Brophy was in the desperate state of need to chain a girl like that one to a table leg in his desire to keep her. And she had announced her own feelings in the matter! She was in the Noda—the girl who had stepped out of his life never to enter it again, so he had feared in his lonely ponderings. He was in the mood of a real man at last! He was resolved to take no more of Echford Flagg's contumely. He was heartsick at the thought of starting north and leaving her in the tavern, to be the object of attentions such as that cheap drummer man bestowed when he passed them on the street. [121]

The plea of the lady of the tavern parlor had made merely a ripple in his resolves. He had not thought of her or her proposition during that busy day.

Now he was wondering whether the fight for Flagg—the struggle against Craig, even for vengeance, was worth while.

Lida was having no difficulty in locating the landlord. He stood just beyond the dining-room door and was proclaiming that he was the boss and was shaking his fist under the nose of a surly youth who had allowed several dishes to slide off a tray and smash on the floor.

"Do you want to hire a waitress from the city?" she demanded.

"You bet a tin dipper I do," snapped back Brophy.

"I'm ready to begin work at once. If you'll show me my room—"

"You go up one flight, by them stairs there, and you pick out the best room you can find—the one that suits you! That's how much I'm willing to cater to a city waitress. And you needn't worry about wages."

"I shall not worry, sir." She hurried up the stairs.

The hostler-waiter slammed down the tray with an ejaculation of thankfulness. Brophy picked up the tray and banged it over the youth's head. "You ain't done with the hash-wrassling till she has got her feet placed. Sweep up that litter, stand by to do the heavy lugging, and take your orders from her and cater to her—cater!"

[122]

Latisan, lingering on the porch, had hearkened and observed. He caught a glimpse of himself in the dingy glass of the door. He scrubbed his hand doubtfully over his beard. Then he turned and hurried away.

The single barber shop of Adonia was only a few yards from the door of the tavern. There was one chair in the corner of a pool room.

Latisan overtook a man in the doorway and yanked him back and entered ahead.

"I'm next!" shouted the supplanted individual.

"Yes, after me!" declared Latisan, grimly. He threw himself into the chair. "Shave and trim! Quick!"

The barber propped his hands on his hips. "What's the newfangled idea of shedding whiskers before the drive is down?"

"Shave!" roared Latisan. "And if you're more than five minutes on the job I'll carve my initials in you with your razor."

So constantly did he apostrophize the barber to hurry, wagging a restless jaw, that blood oozed from several nicks when the beard had been removed.

"I've got a pride in my profession, just the same as you have in your job," stormed the barber when Latisan refused to wait for treatment for the cuts. "And I don't propose to have you racing out onto the streets——"

But the drive master was away, obsessed by visions of that fresh drummer presuming further in his tactics with the new waitress. The barber, stung to defense of his art, grabbed a towel and a piece of alum and pursued Latisan along the highway and into the tavern office, cornered the raging drive master, and insisted on removing the evidences which publicly discredited good workmanship. The affair was in the nature of a small riot.

[123]

The guests who were at table in the dining room stared through the doorway with interest. The new waitress, already on her job, gave the affair her amused attention. Especially absorbed was the sullen youth who halted in the middle of the room, holding a loaded tray above his head. In his abstraction he allowed the tray to tip, and the dishes rained down over Crowley, who was seated directly under the edge of the tray.

Latisan strode in and took his seat at the small table with the city stranger while Brophy was mopping the guest off; the city chap had received his food on his head and in his lap.

The waitress came and stood demurely at one side, meeting the flaming gaze of the Vose-Mern man with a look that eloquently expressed her emotions. "Shall I repeat the order?"

"Don't be fresh!" snarled Crowley.

Latisan rapped his knuckles on the table warningly. "Be careful how you talk to this lady!"

"What have you got to say about it?" The stout chap started to rise.

But Latisan was up first. He leaned over and set his big hand, fingers outspread like stiff prongs, upon the man's head, and twisted the caput to and fro; then he drove the operative down with a thump in his chair. "This is what I've got to say! Remember that she is a lady, and treat her accordingly, or I'll twist off your head and take it downstreet and sell it to the bowling-alley man."

[124]

It was plain that the girl was finding a piquant relish in the affair.

From the moment when she came down the stairs and took the white apron which Brophy handed to her she had ceased to be the city-wearied girl. It was homely adventure, to be sure, but the very plainness of it, in the free-and-easy environment of the north woods, appealed to her sense of novelty. There was especial zest for her in this bullyragging of Crowley by the man who was to be victim of the machinations by the Vose-Mern agency. Her eyes revealed her thoughts. The city man opened his mouth. He promptly shut it and turned sideways in his chair, his back to Latisan.

Detective Crowley was enmeshed in a mystery which he could not solve just then. What was the confidential secretary doing up there?

The girl smiled down on her champion—an expansive, charming, warming smile. “I thank you! What will you have?”

She surveyed his face with concern; his countenance was working with emotion. In her new interest, she noted more particularly than in the New York cafeteria, that he apparently was, in spite of what Craig had said, a big, wholesome, naïve chap who confessed to her by his eyes, then and there, that he was honestly and respectfully surrendering his heart to her, short though the acquaintance had been, and she was thrilled by that knowledge. She was not responding to this new appeal, she was sure, but she was gratified because the man was showing her by his eyes that he was her slave, not merely a presumptuous conquest of the moment, after the precipitate manner of more sophisticated males. [125]

She repeated her question.

It was evident enough what Latisan wanted at that moment, but he had not the courage to voice his wishes in regard to her; he had not enough self-possession left to state his actual desires as to food, even. There was one staple dish of the drive; he was heartily sick of that food, but he could not think of anything else right then.

“Bub—bub—beans!” he stuttered.

She hurried away.

When she returned with her tray she did not interrupt any conversation between the two men at the little table; the Vose-Mern man still had his back turned on Latisan; the drive master sat bolt upright in a prim attitude which suggested a sort of juvenile desire to mind his manners.

The girl’s eyes were still alight with the spirit of jest. She placed steak and potatoes and other edibles in front of Latisan. She gave the gentleman from the agency a big bowl of beans.

“I didn’t order those!”

“I’m sorry, sir. I must have got my orders mixed.”

“You have! You’ve given that”—he stopped short of applying any epithet to Latisan —“you’ve given him my order!” [126]

“Won’t you try our beans—just once? The cook tells me they were baked in the ground, woodman style.”

“Then give ’em to the woodsmen—it’s the kind of fodder that’s fit for ’em.”

Latisan leaned across the table and tugged Crowley’s sleeve. “Look me in the eye, my friend!” The man who was exhorted found the narrowed, hard eyes very effective in a monitory way. “I don’t care what you eat, as a general thing. But you have just slurred woodsmen and have stuck up your nose at the main grub stand-by of the drive. You’re going to eat those beans this lady has very kindly brought. If you don’t eat ’em, starting in mighty sudden, I’ll pick up that bowl and tip it over and crown you with it, beans and all. Because I’m speaking low isn’t any sign I don’t mean what I say!”

The beans were steaming under the stout man’s nose. He decided that the heat would be better in his stomach than on the top of his head; he had just had one meal served that way. He devoured the beans and marched out of the dining room, his way taking him past the sideboard where the new waitress was skillfully arranging glasses after methods entirely different from those of the sullen youth.

“Don’t jazz the game any more—not with *me*,” growled Crowley, fury in his manner. “And I want to see you in private.”

She stiffened, facing him. She knew that Latisan’s earnest eyes were on her. She assumed the demeanor of a girl who was resentfully able to take care of herself, playing a part for the benefit of the drive master. “Attend strictly to your end of the program, Crowley!” [127]

“What do you mean—my end?”

“Protecting me from insults by these rough woodsmen. I suppose you are doing the same for Miss Elsham.” Her irony was biting. He scowled and put his face close to hers.

“If you’re up here on the job—it’s not a lark. It’s a case of he-men in these parts. If you’re not careful you’ll start something you can’t stop.”

“Keep away from me. They’re watching us. You’re bungling your part wretchedly. Can’t you understand that I’m on the case, too?”

She had planned her action, forestalling possibilities as well as she was able. She was determined to be bold, trusting to events as they developed.

"You will kindly remember that I'm on this case along with you, and you can't make me jump through hoops!" Crowley, fresh from the city, narrow in his urban conceit, was seeing red because of a petty humiliation he had suffered in public.

Another man was seeing red for a different reason. Latisan strode across the room, nabbed Crowley by the ear, and led him into the tavern office, where the aching ear was twisted until the city man subsided into a chair.

The girl appraised at its full value the rancor that was developing in the Vose-Mern operative; his glaring eyes were accusing her.

But the adoring eyes of Latisan promised really more complicated trouble for her. [128]

It was borne in on her that there were dangerous possibilities in the frank atmosphere of the north woods. Lida had the poignant feeling of being very much alone just then—and she was afraid!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

 [129]

SUPPERS were always over with early in Adonia. The red west was banded with half on hour's April daylight when the new waitress finished her work. She hurried up to her room; she locked her door with the panic-stricken air of one who desires to shut out danger.

She was in no mood to question the worthiness of the impulse which had sent her into the north, but she was realizing in fuller measure the difficulties with which she must deal. In the dining room she had felt recklessly intrepid and the utter mystification of Buck Crowley had amused her. But she had had plenty of opportunity in her Vose-Mern work to know the nature of Crowley—he had the shell of an alligator and the scruples of a viper and would double-cross a twin brother if the project could help the fortunes of Buck himself.

Once more she admitted that she was afraid. It was if she had touched levers and had started machinery which she could not stop; she had launched two men at each other and had observed the first ominous clinches—and Crowley had warned her that she was in the region of "he-men." But Crowley was not of a sort to use the manly weapons of the frank fighters of the north.

With the sense of hiding away from impending trouble, sorry for her share in starting it, she sat by the window, put her forehead on her arms, wept weakly, and told herself that she was a very poor article of a heroine. [130]

However, the sunset soothed and invited her when she wiped her eyes. She beheld the honest outdoors of the forest country. She was hungry for those open places of earth. She knew that her resolution was ebbing the longer she hid herself in that hole of a room, like a terrified animal. She put on a hat and a wrap and started out.

She was perfectly well aware of the gantlet she must run.

Crowley was patrolling the porch; she issued from a side door of the tavern, but she was obliged to pass him in order to get into the street. His high sign to her was peremptory and unmistakable—Mr. Crowley had business with her! Right then, in spite of her planned intent to bluff out the situation just as long as she could at that distance from Mern, she was not in a state of mind to meet Crowley.

She heard steps behind her and was accosted, but her frown of apprehensiveness became a smile of welcome when she turned and beheld Latisan; the welcome was not so much from interest in Latisan as from the sense that she would have a respite from Crowley.

"If you're going to look the place over, won't you allow me to go along?" he pleaded. "I'll follow behind like a terrier, if you tell me to. I want to keep you from being bothered by anybody."

She showed concern and looked about her.

"Oh, by that cheap drummer, I mean. You needn't ever be afraid of woodsmen up here. I was watching him when you came out. If it wasn't for starting a lot of tattle I'd beat him up on the street." [131]

"Really, you'd better come along with me, Mr. Latisan, out of the reach of any such

temptation.”

“Perhaps you’d like to get a view of the falls from the best point,” he suggested, as they walked on.

When they turned into a path and disappeared from Crowley’s ken the latter buttoned his coat and started leisurely on their trail.

On the edge of the gorge there was a niche in the cliff, a natural seat padded with moss. Latisan led her to the spot. He did not indulge his longing to sit beside her; he stood at a little distance, respectfully, and allowed her to think her thoughts. Those thoughts and her memories were very busy just then; she was glad because the everlasting diapason of the falls made conversation difficult.

Until then, in her reflections, she had been considering Ward Latisan merely as her stricken grandfather’s staff of hope, an aid so essential that the Comas had determined to eliminate him. She surveyed him as he stood there in his own and fitting milieu and found him reassuringly stalwart as a dependable champion.

Alone with him, making estimate with her eyes and her understanding, she was conscious that her first surprise at sight of the real Latisan was giving way to deepening interest.

She reflected again on the character which had been given this man by Rufus Craig, and remembered more vividly what she had written about him for the guidance of the Vose-Mern agency. [132]

There must be something wrong in Craig’s estimate! She felt that she had an eye of her own for qualities in a man, and this man’s clean sincerity had impressed her in their first meeting in the New York cafeteria.

He turned from his survey of the waters and met her gaze. “I was pretty much flustered that day in New York, Miss Jones. I was more so to-day at the railroad station. I don’t know how to act with girls very well,” he confessed naïvely. “I want to say something right here and now. There are mean stories going the rounds about me up in this country. I’m afraid you’ll hear some of them. I don’t want you—I don’t want everybody to think I’m what they are trying to make out I am—they lied over Tomah way to hurt me in business. But perhaps you don’t care one way or the other,” he probed, wistfully.

He found encouragement in her expression and went on. “I was away at Tech, taking a special course, and they lied about me. I was trying to make something more of myself than just a lumberjack. And I thought there was a chance for me to help things on the Tomah after I learned something about engineering. I was doing my best, that’s all, and the liars saw their opening and took it. If you hear the stories I hope you won’t believe them.”

Hastily she looked away from his earnest and imploring eyes and gave her attention to the turbid freshet flood, shredded into a yellow and yeasty riot of waters. [133]

Her recollection of childhood became clearer now that she was back beside the cataract which was linked with all her early memories. He did not venture to disturb her with more talk.

She remained there until the chill from the air and the mist from the falling waters and the growing dusk warned her.

They were back at the edge of the village street before he spoke again. “The falls are pretty wild now; they’re beautiful in the summer when the water is low. When I was a boy I footed it over here from the Tomah a few times and sat in that niche and listened to the song the waters seemed to sing. It was worth the long hike. Being there just now brought back something I’d almost forgotten. One day the waters sung me to sleep and when I woke up there was a little girl dancing in front of me and pointing her finger, and I looked at myself and saw she had made a chain of daisies and hung it around my neck and had stuck clover blooms all over me. And when she saw that I was awake she scampered off with some other children. Queer how the funny little thoughts like that pop up in a person’s mind!”

Fresh from the scene, softened by her ponderings, Lida felt the surge of an impulse to tell him that the same memory had come to her while she sat in the niche. She was the child who had made the daisy chain—who had been bolder than the other children in approaching the sleeping stranger. And she was not ready to agree with him that the memory was “queer.” She wished she could confess her identity to him right then, because the confession would enable her to bring up a topic which had been interesting her very much—how personalities, meeting as strangers, often prompt each other through subtle psychic qualities of past association; there were instances in the books she had read where persons claimed to have recognized each other from past incarnations; but Lida did not believe that stuff, she had told herself. As to the mutual remembrance of the daisy chain—that was different—it seemed quite natural. She could remember just how comically that boy’s nose twitched when [134]

she was waking him up with a buttercup blossom.

Latisan was conscious of a queer unwillingness to have her leave him. He wondered what excuse he could offer to prolong the companionship of the evening. He wanted to link up her affairs with his in some way, if he could—that there might be something in common between them. To solicit her aid—her counsel; it is the first hankering of a man in his striving toward a woman's favor.

In this case, the drive master, desperately casting about for an excuse, was guilty of something like an enormity in venturesomeness. His own business was calling him to the big house on the ledges; in his new state of softened spirit he was dreading any run-in with Echford Flagg. Perhaps gossip had already carried to Flagg the reason why the drive master had not hastened to report about the dynamite victory. To exhibit the actual reason for the delay, in her own winning person, seemed a very proper thing to do according to Latisan's clouded judgment of the moment. [135]

"Let me tell you!" he urged. "I've got to run up to Flagg's on business. You'll have something to talk to him about—those friends—"

"No, no!" She hurried on toward the tavern.

He ventured to clasp her arm, detaining her. "He's a poor, sick old man. A little talk with you will do him good."

Her memory was vivid. "But you told me in New York that he won't have a woman near his house."

"He's different nowadays," persisted Latisan. "He's sick and it will be a treat for him to have a girl say some kind words. I want him to meet you—"

But she shook off his hand and resolutely kept on her way. "I must go in. I'm tired after my long journey—and my work." There were loafers in front of the tavern. "I'm very much obliged to you, Mr. Latisan," she called so that all could hear, "for your kindness in showing me the way to the falls. Good night!" She disappeared.

There was nothing for Latisan to do but to brave the old tiger of the big house alone. Outside of his desire to keep her with him as long as possible, he had wanted her to go along into the presence of Flagg as a guaranty of the peace; he did not believe that Flagg would launch invective in the hearing of the girl; furthermore, Latisan was conscious of a proud anxiety to exhibit her.

Flagg tipped the shade of the lamp so that Latisan's face was illuminated when the drive master was in the room. [136]

"Shaved!" snorted the tyrant. "All duded up and beaung around a table girl. I know all about it. Latisan, you—"

"Just a moment, Mr. Flagg!"

"Shaved, right in the start of the driving season! Shut up! I can see what's happening. I heard you had brought the dynamite. But somebody else told me. Yes, told me other news! I can't depend on you any longer to bring me reports. But you're planting something worse than dynamite under yourself. Parading a girl and keeping me waiting and—"

"Let me warn you, sir. Only my pride in doing a job I have set out to do is keeping me on with you. If you insult that young lady by another word I'll quit you cold, here and now!"

There was a moment of silence.

Rickety Dick, sitting on his stool with a cat in his arms, wriggled as uneasily as did the cat, who had been alarmed by the high voices.

"Talk about dynamite being dangerous!" muttered Flagg. "There's something else—"

But when he looked into Latisan's countenance he lowered the shade of the lamp and did not state what the something else was.

"If you know about the dynamite, sir, there's no need of my saying anything. It's on its way north. I shall start for headwaters at daybreak. I'll be down to report as soon as possible."

"When you get up on the drive, you stay there, Latisan." [137]

"It's my pledged word that I must report to you in person. You insisted on it. I don't propose to give you any chance for come-backs. I shall report, Mr. Flagg."

He walked out.

Soon he heard the pattering of feet behind him on the ledges and he was hailed cautiously by the quavering voice of old Dick.

"Who is she, Mr. Latisan? Who is that girl?" panted Dick; "I saw her when she walked with you. I was side of the road."

"And ran and tattled to Flagg, eh?"

"No—no, sir! It was old Dempsey who came and gossiped. But what's her name?"

"Patsy Jones."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure because she told me so," retorted the drive master. "Her word goes with me."

"But—but——"

"But what?" Latisan's manner was ominous.

"Of course she knows who she is," faltered old Dick. "And my eyesight ain't clear—and it was a long time ago—and my memory ain't good, of course, and——"

"And your wits don't seem to be of the best, either," snapped the young man. "You and Flagg better keep your tongues off that young lady. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Latisan. Yes, sir!"

Latisan stepped back and took hold of Dick by the sleeve of the ragged jacket. "Who did you think she was?" [138]

"I guess I didn't really think—I only dreamed," was the old man's stammering reply. "If you say she's Patsy Jones that's enough for me."

"She says that she is—and that makes it so." Latisan strode on his way.

Rickety Dick lifted his arms, then he lowered them without his "Praise the Lord!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

[139]

CROWLEY, shrouded in the evening gloom, tapped on the parlor window the signal tattoo agreed upon between himself and Miss Elsham. The light in the parlor went out promptly and she came and replied to Crowley under the edge of the lifted sash. She had been apprised by her associate of the advent of Miss Kennard on the scene; Crowley had hastened to slip a note under her door.

"You saw 'em start for a walk, did you? Well, you saw me follow 'em, then. Chased 'em to the edge of the falls and hid."

"What sort of talk is she giving him?"

"Talk! I couldn't hear. I don't like water, anyway. I like it less when it bangs down over rocks and stops me from hearing what I want to hear."

"What does she tell you?"

"She has only shot a few words at me like beans out of an air gun. Claims she's here on the case."

"Do you believe that?"

"I don't dare to tell her that I don't believe it—considering the way she stands in with Mern. It may be his afterthought—he's a bird that flies funny sometimes, you know."

"Leave her to me; I'll dredge her to-morrow."

"That'll be good dope; she'll have to bring in your meals as soon as you give orders to Brophy."

"They'll have to be snappy orders to make him stop bringing 'em himself," said Miss Elsham. "The old fool stood around while I was eating supper and told me how much money he has saved and how lonesome he is since his wife died. I have told him to send Latisan to me this evening on a matter of business, no matter how late Latisan comes in. He's too jealous to give the word, I do believe." [140]

"I can't understand the hang of it—her grabbing him so quick," lamented Crowley. "It's a devil of a note when we have to take time off the main job to detect out a mystery right in our own concern! What are you going to say about her when you

write up your report to-night?"

He was referring to the inviolable rule of the Vose-Mern office that a daily report must be made by each operative.

"Nothing, Buck. Let's tread easy. We may seem to be trying to tell Mern his business. She's here and he must be perfectly well aware that she's here. Don't you write anything in your report. Leave her to me."

"All right! You handle it."

Then Crowley departed and sat down in his room and put into his report a full statement about Miss Kennard's arrival and actions and his own activity in regard to her. Crowley had elaborate ideas about the art of double-crossing everybody, even his associates in the agency. He figured that it could not hurt anything to give Mern a full report on all matters; and if there was anything peculiar in Kennard's presence there, Crowley's assiduity would contrast to his credit and shame Elsham's negligence. He had frequently made good hits by cajoling fellow operatives to suppress certain matters which he had then reported to his advantage with Mern. And Elsham, in this case, was claiming to be in charge, making him only the watchdog of her safety. [141]

Crowley growled derogatory comments on her temptress qualities when he peered past the edge of his curtain in the morning and looked down on Latisan mounting into his jumper seat. The young man did not seem to be in an amiable or a confident state of mind, and his plain dolor comforted Crowley somewhat, even though Latisan was going back to the drive.

The drive master had not been able to see Miss Patsy Jones that morning, as he had hoped; he had no excuse to hang around the tavern till she did appear. Brophy served the breakfast; he declared that he was going to hang on to that table girl if good treatment could prevail, and he was never going to ask her to wait on early breakfasters.

Crowley got additional comfort out of Latisan's loud proclamation that he would be down in Adonia again very soon. The drive master seemed to be striving to draw somebody's attention to that fact. He cast looks behind him at the upper windows of the tavern when he drove away.

That day, according to the plans he had made in New York, Mr. Crowley took pains to give himself an occupation in Adonia; loafers who were not bashful were quizzing him about the nature of his business up there.

The barber had one corner of the village pool room; Crowley made a trade to occupy another corner. He opened up a case of cheap jewelry and traded it by day and raffled it evenings; he was not molested in his sporting propositions, as he called the procedure, after he had arranged a private talk with the deputy sheriff. Crowley, with his fancy waistcoat and his tip-tilted hat, fitted the rôle he was playing. He was right in the path of all the gossip that traveled to and fro; therefore, the rôle suited his needs. [142]

His nightly conferences with Miss Elsham at the parlor window were not pleasant; Miss Elsham was not in a state of mind which conduced to cordial relations.

She had not been able to "dredge" Miss Kennard. That young lady waited on Miss Elsham, but not with a tray. After a talk with Brophy, who agreed with her absolutely and placatingly, begging her to suit herself in all her acts provided she would stay on, Miss Kennard went into the parlor, closed the door carefully, and told Miss Elsham where that young woman got off as an exacting lady of leisure. "Mr. Mern would not allow it—one operative doing menial work for another. If you choose to come into the dining room, that's different."

Miss Kennard then turned and walked out. She refused to stay with Miss Elsham and have a talk. "We are ordered to be very careful up here," she reminded the operative. Miss Elsham was impressed. It was as if Mern were sending new cautions by this latest arrival.

Miss Kennard, in her dabbings in psychoanalysis, had secured some concrete aids for action in addition to the vague abstractions which had come into her mind when Latisan had so naively confessed on the cliff above the cataract. She understood fully the potency of a suggestion which left a lot to the imagination of the other party; only a bit of a suggestion is needed—and it must be left to itself, like yeast, to induce fermentation. For that reason Miss Kennard abruptly walked out and left Miss Elsham alone to reflect—not running away, but retiring with the air of one who had said a sufficient number of words to the wise. [143]

Miss Elsham, in her conference at the window with Crowley that evening, revealed how actively her batch of ponderings had been set to working by that bit of suggestion. Crowley, listening, wished privately that he could call back that report to Mern; Mern had repeatedly warned him to keep to his place as a strong-arm

operative, bluntly bearing down on the fact that Crowley's brains were not suited for the finer points of machination. According to Miss Elsham's figuring—and Crowley acknowledged her innate brightness—the plot had thickened and Kennard, known to all operatives as Mern's close confidant, was up there as chief performer.

Several days elapsed before Crowley—perspiring whenever his worries assailed him—got any word from Mern. The chief wrote guardedly, and Crowley read the letter over a dozen times without being exactly sure just what course he was to pursue. The truth was, Mr. Mern himself was doing so much guessing as to Miss Kennard that he was in no state of mind to give clean-cut commands. [144]

Crowley's letter was the first intimation to the chief of the whereabouts of his confidential secretary. She had not resigned, nor had she asked for a leave of absence, nor had she bothered to write or telephone; she did not show up at the office—that was all!

Lida, having discarded ethics, had decided to play her game from an ambush, just as the Vose-Mern agency did its business.

To give any information to the foes of Echford Flagg would be giving odds—and she was working single-handed and deserved odds for herself. She resolved to make her game as peculiar as possible—to keep all of them guessing—to oblige them to take the initiative against her if they should find out the secret of her strange actions. The element of time entered largely into her calculations: every day on which she stood between them and Ward Latisan—every day that he devoted to the drive—was a day to be charged to her side of the ledger; and there are not many days in the driving season when the waters *are* high and the river is rushing.

A keener mind than Crowley's would have detected in Mern's letter all the chief's inability to understand. What Crowley did get from the letter was the conviction that Miss Kennard was not to be molested at that time. Mern made that clear, though he was vague on other points. The chief was wondering whether excess of zeal might be the reason for Miss Kennard's amazing performance. He remembered certain hints which she had dropped as to her financial needs, and she had not seemed averse when he had told her on occasions that he thought of giving her a commission when the right kind of a case came along. To turn a trick for a rich corporation—working alone so that she might claim full credit—undoubtedly had appealed to her as her great opportunity, Mern reflected, and she had set off on her own hook, fearful that he would not alter the arrangements he had made. He was angry; he muttered oaths as he weighed the situation. But he did not put any of his anger into his letter to Crowley. Miss Kennard knew too much about the general inner workings of the agency! In this new case there was specifically a five-thousand-dollar net fee in case Latisan could be eliminated and his crew left to the mercies of Comas bluster and cash. Miss Kennard, if unduly molested, could say two words in the north country and put that contingent fee into limbo. [145]

Therefore, Chief Mern was treading softly at first.

But from the letter which treated the general situation so gingerly the strong-arm operative extracted one solid and convincing command. He was to watch Miss Kennard. The command seemed entirely natural. Had he not been sent up there to watch—or watch over—no matter which—Miss Elsham? His instructions in regard to Miss Kennard seemed to make her a particularly valuable person in the Vose-Mern plans. He was not to allow anything to interfere with his watching of Miss Kennard, not even for the sake of Miss Elsham. He was to observe every movement, catch every word, if possible, mark every detail of Miss Kennard's operations.

Crowley did not show the letter to Miss Elsham, nor did he speak of it. He would mortally offend her by revealing his double-crossing tactics; as a woman she would be more offended by being relegated to the background in favor of the newcomer. [146]

Crowley found his espionage an easy job at first. All he had to report to Mern for three or four days was that "Patsy Jones" did her work in the hotel and remained in her room till after dark—and then went out and strolled aimlessly. She would not talk with Crowley when he grasped at opportunities to speak to her on her walks. She reminded him that fellow operatives must be careful; furthermore, scandal might oblige her to abandon her job; he would be responsible if he insisted on dogging her about the village.

However, Crowley was able, a few days later, to slip her a letter from Mern; the chief had inclosed it in a missive containing further instructions to the operative to make sure of every move of Lida. The inclosed letter was addressed to "Patsy Jones."

Lida read it when she was back in her room. She noted with satisfaction that Chief Mern was still guessing and that his detective mind was unable to solve the mystery except on the ground that she was so loyal to the agency and so ambitious for herself that she had tackled the job as a speculation. He chided her because she had not reported her intention. He asked for a full statement.

She hid the letter carefully in her bureau. Having put it away for further reference in case she did make up her mind to answer the questions when forced to do so, she delayed replying. She did not want to lie needlessly to Mern—she was willing to let him do imagining, too, seeing how well it was working, to all appearances, in the cases of Elsham and Crowley. [147]

She had her own reasons for keeping withindoors in the daytime. The matter of Rickety Dick was worrying her. He had seen her as a girl of sixteen, worn with her vigils beside a sick mother; the light through the area windows had been dim, and he had stumbled against chairs in the room as if his vision were poor.

However, she discovered at the outset of her stay in Adonia that she had become the object of old Dick's intent regard whenever he found opportunity. He often trudged past the tavern on his errands; he dragged slow steps and squinted and peered. Once she caught him peeping at her through the open door of the dining room. She had feared some such closer inspection and had drawn back her hair and twisted its waviness into an unsightly pug; the moment she saw him she slipped into her mouth a piece of spruce gum which an admiring woodsman had presented, and then she chewed vigorously and slatted herself about in a tough manner. He sighed and went away muttering.

He ventured another and a last sortie, as if he wanted to make an end of his doubts. He also made a sensation.

Rickety Dick came to take dinner at the tavern!

He was in his best rig, with which he was accustomed to outfit himself for the funerals of his old friends. There was a faded tail coat which flapped against baggy gray trousers. A celluloid collar on a flannel shirt propped up his wrinkled chin. [148]

Martin Brophy stared at old Dick and then cast a look up at the office clock, whose hands, like Dick's in the moment of mental stress, were upraised on the stroke of twelve.

"Flagg dead?" inquired Brophy, unable otherwise to account for Dick's absence from the big house at the dinner hour.

"No! Toothache! Can't eat to-day. He let me off to go to a burying."

"Whose?"

Old Dick shook his head and passed on into the dining room, peering hard into the face of the waitress as he plodded toward her. "Burying!" he muttered. "May as well make sure it's dead—and put it away."

Lida met him as she was meeting her other problems up there—boldly.

She leaned over him when he was seated and recited the daily bill of fare. He did not take his eyes off her face, now close to his.

"Lida Kennard," he whispered, hoarsely, panting, pulling the hard collar away from his throat with trembling fingers, "why ain't ye home with your poor old grandfather, where ye belong? Lida Kennard, why ain't ye home?"

Her eyes did not waver. Brophy had followed, to be better informed as to the funeral, and stood in the doorway.

"Who's the nut?" inquired Patsy Jones, acridly, turning her gaze to the landlord. "He's calling me names." Her hard tones made the old man wince.

"He's all right—safe—only a little crazier than usual," returned Brophy. "If you want to eat, Dick, go ahead and eat—but don't bother Miss Jones. I don't allow anybody to bother her. And where's that funeral, I ask you again?" [149]

"Here!" said the old man, rapping his knuckles on his breast. "It's buried. I guess I am crazy. Oh yes, I'll admit it. I see things that ain't so."

"Well, go ahead and eat," commanded Brophy.

"I don't want to eat—I can't, now." He pushed back his chair and rose.

"What names did he call you?" demanded the landlord, truculently. "I won't have your feelings hurt, you know!"

"Oh, only made some funny noises," retorted Miss Jones, flippantly. "Let him go. I don't mind."

Rickety Dick plodded out as he had plodded in; he was shaking his head, dismissing all his hopes and his dreams.

Miss Jones went to another guest. "The world is full of 'em," she said. "We have lamb, beef, and pork."

Brophy retired, entertaining no further curiosity.

The surge of homesickness that swept through the girl choked her—its spray blurred her eyes as she gazed after old Dick, pitying his bent shoulders under the sun-faded coat. But even in her sorrow, because she had been obliged to deny his wistful plaint so heartlessly, she was conscious of relief. She had been afraid of his recognition of her; after this she would be more free to come and go.

That evening at supper there was a guest who troubled her thoughts more than had Rickety Dick, but in another way. Ward Latisan was down again from the drive, still adoring her frankly and unabashed with his eyes, following all her movements; it was plain that he had taken counsel with himself while he had been away from her and that his love had been made acute by separation. She was of a mind to hide away from him in her room after her work was done. But there was the cultivation of his friendship to consider! She must keep up that friendship in order to be able to influence him. [150]

Timorously, wondering what was to come from the coil of events as she saw them shaping in that region of barehanded conflict, she put on her hat and went forth. Latisan stepped off the porch and joined her, plainly no longer concerned with what the gossipers of Adonia might say or think.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

 [151]

AS on a previous occasion, when the gloom of the night had settled, they were again at the side of the village street, at the mouth of the path by which they had returned from the cliff above the falls.

She had sought the falls that evening because the din of the waters would keep him from talking too much. She was afraid of the light in his eyes and of the repressed feeling in his tones. She knew that she must repulse him if he wooed. Her emotions were mixed, but she was sure there was no love in her heart—all her thoughts were concerned with her quest. If love should by any possibility develop in her and she should allow him to see it, what would become of his man's appetite for fight and danger? She felt obliged to view surrender to him in that light. On the other hand, she could not afford to offend him deeply by allowing matters to come to a climax between them right then; the climax must disclose her lack of affection. She had been estimating that hale man of the woods—she was certain that what she felt toward him was only friendly respect for his character, and she could not lie to him or fawn falsely for her purposes.

"I must go up now and face the usual music," he said, sourly. "I'm getting to be afraid of myself with Flagg."

"I've heard he's afflicted with the toothache to-day. You must make all allowances," she entreated, with a dash of jest in her earnestness. [152]

"Then I especially need a protector. I'm going to ask you again to go along with me. Really, you're needed if I'm expected to stay on my job. Why," he went on, jest mingling with seriousness in his own case, "if the Flagg drive comes down all right through my efforts, you can take the credit of the victory because you were present to-night and smoothed things; he'll just have to be decent, with a strange young lady in the room."

She was not ready with peremptory refusal, as she had been on the other occasion; she had met the bugbear of Rickety Dick and had prevailed over the old man's suspicions. As Latisan averred, her presence might help matters; she would entertain strange and acute regrets if her absence should allow the split that Latisan seemed to apprehend.

He timidly put his hand on her arm. "Please!"

"I'll be intruding on a business talk. I may make him all the more touchy." She was hesitating, weighing the hazards of each plan—to go or to stay away.

"There's no private business to be talked. I'm simply going to tell him that I have blown the ice and have the logs in the river and I want to have his orders about how many splash dams I can blow up if I need to do it for a head o' water to beat the Three C's drive to Skulltree. Really, he needs to talk with somebody who is gentle," he went on, and she responded to the touch on her arm and walked slowly with him up the hill. "He sits there day by day and reads the tooth-for-tooth part of the Old Testament, and it keeps hardening his heart. I've thought of a plan. Suppose you get [153]

friendly with him! You can take some soothing books up to him in your off hours and read aloud. Let's try to make a different man of Eck Flagg, you and I."

So, over the ledges where her childish feet had stumbled, Lida Kennard, trembling, anxious, yearning for her kin, went again to the door of the big mansion on the hill.

Latisan's words had opened a vista of hope to her; she might be able, after all, to render the service to which old Dick had exhorted her, hiding her identity behind a woman's desire to cheer an invalid.

It was the same square, bleak house of her early memories, now dark except for a dim glow through two dingy windows in the lower part; the yee-yawed curtains were eloquent evidence of the housekeeping methods.

"He won't have any women around, as I told you." Latisan was not tactful in his excuse for the slack aspect of the house.

"I'm afraid it isn't best for me to go in," she said, making a final stand.

"If you go with me you're all right," declared the drive boss, with pride of power where the Flagg interests were concerned. "It'll do him good to be jumped out of himself—to see a young lady from the city."

Latisan did not knock; he walked in, escorting the girl.

In the middle of the sitting room, in a wheel chair that was draped with a moosehide tanned with the hair on it, she beheld an old man with a fleece of white mane and beard. A shaded oil lamp shed a circle of radiance on a big book which lay on his knees. The girl noted that the book was the Bible. Outside that circle of radiance the room was in darkness and the old man heard footsteps without being able to see who had entered; in the shadows was old Dick on his stool. [154]

"That you, Latisan?" demanded the master.

"Yes, sir!" Ward was about to say more, introducing the girl, but Flagg broke in, paying no attention to what his drive master might have on his mind.

"Here's the stuff for real men in this book! You ought to take time to read it. I'm sorry I didn't read it regular when I was going about on two legs." He pounded his hand on the opened pages. "The parsons are now preaching too much New Testament stuff. When my folks dragged me to the meetinghouse in the pod-auger days we got Old Testament—red hot. I've been hoping I remembered it right—I've been looking it up. Listen!"

"If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is thine soul, entice thee secretly, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers; thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him; but thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shalt be first upon him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people. And thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die.'" [155]

Again the old man beat his hand upon the book. "There are the orders for you, Latisan!"

"I don't know as I just get you, sir!"

"You don't expect to find the Three C's mentioned by name in Holy Writ, do you? But the case is covered. They're asking you and me to serve other gods. They're asking us to go into their combine. If we do so it means that the sawmills on this river will be closed and the homes deserted. They're taking all the timber down to the paper mills. To hell with their paper! The folks need lumber for houses. The Three C's shan't control the market and boost prices so that folks can't buy. Latisan! I tell you again, you've got your orders, backed by the Scripture. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth! Families or corporations, it's all the same! Why don't you say something?"

"I'm waiting to introduce a young lady, sir. This is Miss Jones who has just come to town."

Flagg tipped the shade of the lamp and deflected the light upon the couple. He bawled an ugly oath. "Clean shaved, again! Making a dude of yourself! Saggagging with a girl?"

Latisan stepped forward and broke in on the tirade. "I'll have to ask you to trig that kind of talk, Mr. Flagg. Miss Jones has come here to cheer you up."

"When I want any girl to come here and cheer me up I'll drop her a line and give her thirty days' notice."

The caller who had been snubbed so bluntly turned on her heel. She pleaded, faintly, "I'm sorry, sir. I'll leave you and Mr. Latisan to talk over your business." [156]

"I can't blame you for going," said Latisan. He followed her, and to her profound amazement she discovered that a woodsman could be as temperamental as a prima donna. "I'm going, too, Mr. Flagg," he called over his shoulder. "I'm going for good and all where you're concerned. I'm done with you. I gave you your fair warning. Send another man north to the drive."

"Just one minute, there, Latisan!" called the master, harshly. "Unless you're afraid to stay here that length of time or can't spare the minute away from your wench!"

The drive master stopped at the door and spun around on his heel.

There had been but one flash of the light's rays on Lida—the old man had immediately allowed the shade to drop; standing just beyond the doorway in the hall, she was safely in the shadows.

"If you expect to hear me whinny like a sick horse you're mistaken," went on Flagg, with the staccato of ire. "Now I know what you're worth. You have appraised yourself. A girl's grin has bought you. I don't know what sort she is, nor care I. But unless she's a fool she can see what you're worth, too. Go along, now!"

There was compunction in Latisan, and he realized it. But there was that untamed spirit of old John, as well, and it made for rancor and rebellion.

In that room at the moment old John's spirit was veritably present in the grandson, reviving the ancient north-country duello of unconquered wills with old Echford in the flesh—and a Latisan had never lowered the crest before a Flagg. [157]

"It's a cheap hired man you want!" Compromise was offered no opportunity by young Latisan's manner and tone. "Hire one—of your picking! And a devilish fine boss that kind will make for you!"

"I'll hire nobody," roared Flagg. "I'll ride to the head of the drive in this chair. Even with both sides of me paralyzed I'll be worth more than you are, you lallygagging, love-cracked loon! Get out of here!"

When the two were outside in the night the girl faced Latisan. "I insist on going alone, sir. You have no right to leave a helpless man as you're doing. I cannot believe that you mean what you said just now!"

"I'm through! I have let him curse me out all along and I took it whence it came. But this time it's different."

"Please go back to him."

"I will not. I'm done!"

The grim thought came to her that she had ineluctably become a valuable operative in the interests of the Vose-Mern agency. According to appearances the work was finished. However, she promptly blazed into indignation which rang true. "I'm only a stranger to that poor old man. He did not understand. I had no right to rush in on him as I did."

"I had the right to invite you."

"I won't have it on my conscience that I have been a party to this break between you two. If it were not so dreadful it would be silly, sir."

"I have the right to be silly about my own business, if you're bound to call it silly, what I have done." [158]

"Go back, I tell you!"

"I will not!"

"You shall not walk away with me."

"I invited you to come up here. I shall see you to the door of that tavern. You may never speak to me again, but you won't be able to say about me that I deserted you in the dark night."

"Will you come back here after you have escorted me to the tavern?"

"No! It's settled into a stand-off between Flagg and me."

"Don't you want to please me?"

"Yes, even to lying down here in the mud and letting you walk on me," he declared, his fervor breaking from the repression he had been maintaining with difficulty. "And it's because he has insulted somebody that I feel like that toward—that's why I'm done with him. I'm not putting it very smoothly. But it's in here!" He pounded his fist on his breast.

"Mr. Latisan, this is folly. I'm only a waitress."

"I'm thanking God that you are and that you aren't too high above me, as I was afraid you were when I met you in New York. You're down where I can talk to you."

She started to walk away, but he leaped and seized both her arms. "This is going mighty fast," he gasped. "I never talked to a girl in this way in all my life. I'll probably never dare to talk to you if I wait for daylight to-morrow—I'll be too scared of my thoughts overnight."

She did not try to twist herself free from his grasp; she was more self-possessed than he was—he was trembling in all his frame. [159]

"It's like dynamite," he stammered. "I reckon it was in me all the time! The first flash of your eyes lighted the fuse! I've blown up." He pulled her close to him, flung his arms about her, and kissed her. But immediately he loosed her and stepped back. "I didn't intend to do that! My feelings got away from me."

"And now may I go along?" she inquired, coldly, after he had remained silent for a time.

"I'm sorry I have made you angry. I don't know how to go at a thing like this one I'm tackling," he said contritely. "But I feel that talking out straight and man fashion is the only way. Will you marry me?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

He did not attempt to stay her when she walked on. He trod humbly by her side.

"I was afraid you wouldn't. But I couldn't keep back the asking any more than I can push back that flood you can hear down in the gorge. It just had to pour along, that asking!"

"Mr. Latisan, you astonish me. You desert your employer on account of a mere whim—"

"Don't you call my standing up for you any whim, if you please!" The change in his tone from humility to stern and masterful command caused her to catch her breath. She was not accustomed to dominance by men.

"At any rate, sir, you have proposed marriage to a stranger, a mere come-by-chance into this place, not knowing who or what I am. I have a right to be astonished." [160]

"Probably! But you aren't any more so than I was in New York when I realized what had happened to me."

"So, now you can forget all about me and go back to your work on the drive!"

"You have said I did not know much about you. It's plain you don't know me! I have told Eck Flagg I am done. And I am! You don't understand. I'm a Latisan and—" he faltered then; it sounded like boyish boasting and he was a bit ashamed.

"Somehow that helpless old man has stirred all my sympathy. Why won't you do as I ask?"

"Because a girl who throws a man down as you have hasn't any right to ask him to do this or that."

They were near the tavern before either spoke again.

"I'm not saying that I'm not sorry for Eck Flagg," the drive master stated. "I don't want you to leave me to-night with the idea that I'm a quitter or a coward or a sneak about what's my duty. I'll be honest with you. You think I'm a fool because I've fallen in love with you so suddenly. A man who has tussled with drives and log jams for as many years as I have needs to think quickly, make up his mind about what it's right to do, and then stick to it. I'm not going to sacrifice myself for Flagg—a man with the hard heart that's in him." He caught his breath and plunged on: "You say to-night that you won't marry me. I'm going to stay close by and see if you won't change your mind. A roaring fire is in me right now!" His demeanor terrified her. The primitive man was blazing. "I don't dare to take the chances on what would be in me if I should go back to the drive and leave you here to be smirked at by every cheap man who comes along. I have dreamed too much about you!" He was wooing with the avatar of old John. "By the gods! you're my girl! I'm going to have you! I'll stay on that job!" [161]

"I shall leave this place to-morrow. It will be very—well, very unwise for you to annoy me."

"I'm going to follow you."

"Mr. Latisan, I have listened to you; you shall listen to me!" She spoke sharply. Now she displayed the equipoise of one who had learned much from self-reliant contact with men. "I'll not argue with you about what you call love. But there's something which love must have, and that's self-respect. If your folly on account of

me takes you away from your honest duty you'll despise me when you come to yourself. You have been honest with me. I'll be honest with you. I like you. I can see that you're a big, true man—much different from most of the men I have met before this. But I shall lose all my good opinion of you if you desert your job. And, as I have said, you'll hate me if I allow you to do so. Can we afford to take chances?"

While he pondered she made hurried mental account of stock in her own case.

She was not admitting that she felt any especial consideration for this man as a lover; she was protecting her grandfather and striving for her own peace of mind as a payer of a debt of honor. He followed her when she walked on toward the tavern. [162]

"May I ask what you mean by taking chances? Chances on being something more to each other than we are now?" he asked, wistfully.

"I think we have gone quite far enough for one evening, sir."

He pulled off his cap. "Before I go to sleep I shall say my little prayer. I shall ask that you won't be thinking I have gone too far. I'm sure it won't be a prayer to the God of the Old Testament, such as Eck Flagg was reading about. I'll whisper up to Mother Mary. She understands women. I don't."

He bowed in silence when she gave him a hasty "good night!"

Latisan whirled suddenly after the girl closed the door behind her—came about on his heels so quickly that he nearly bumped into the assiduous operative Crowley, who had been taking desperate chances that evening.

But Latisan's gaze was directed downward in deep thought as he walked slowly away, and he did not perceive the eavesdropper.

Mr. Crowley had heard aplenty, so he informed himself; he had followed them all the way from the big house down to the tavern, treading close behind, depending on their absorption in each other, his shoes in his hand, not minding the ledges and the mud; and he was in his mental stocking feet, too, treading on the bedrock of the obvious, as he figured on the proposition.

He had been told many times, Mr. Crowley had, that he possessed a single-track mind and was not fitted to deal with the subtleties of criminal investigation and had not the expansive wit to comprehend the roundabout ways of steering victims to their doom. But Mr. Crowley was indubitably fitted by training to write a handbook on the art of double-crossing—and he reckoned he knew an out-and-out job of that sort after what he had heard that evening. For his own peace of mind, and to save himself from going crazy by reason of any more puzzlement over Miss Kennard's alleged mysterious methods in her work, he kept insisting to himself that she was merely double-crossing the Vose-Mern agency in the good old-fashioned way. Not his the task to wonder why! [163]

He rushed up to his room and started in on his report. It had stuck in Crowley's crop—seemed humiliating—to be made a subaltern in the case of women operatives. He believed that at last he was in right and proper on the grand opportunity of his career; he would come down from the bush with the bacon; Elsham had fallen down and Kennard was double-crossing—and Crowley, good old reliable Crowley, would show Chief Mern where the credit should go! He set his little, cheap typewriter on his sturdy knees and pecked away stolidly with his forefingers.

Latisan remained outdoors a long time, for the night matched the gloom of his thoughts. And once more, in spite of himself, his dark ponderings concerned themselves with suspicions as to what and who this girl really was.

In his early deference to her he had been ready and willing to believe all she said about herself, and his suspicion had seemed to be extinguished; he realized that it merely had been smoldering. Why would not a waitress marry him, one of the Latisans of the Tomah? Was he what old Flagg had so inelegantly stated—a sapgag where a girl was concerned? He began to distrust his strength as a man; he had wasted a day in New York; he was ready to give up his man's job on the Noda because he could not get his thoughts away from her and on his work. His last stay at headwaters had been hours of torture. He had gone to sleep dreaming of the girl instead of putting his attention on the problems of the morrow—and the details of the drive that spring needed all sorts of judgment and foresight. [164]

While he was in that state of mind, trying to excuse defection, he told himself, as he trudged to and fro, that he was not a fit man for Flagg. Nevertheless he cursed himself for being so weak. He had read stories of woman's subjugation of the famous and the strong and had wondered what sort of lunacy had overtaken such men. Here he was making an invalid's tantrums an excuse to give up his work and dangle at the skirts of an unknown girl; and he knew it was because of the mystery of her real identity and because his jealousy was afire on account of an uncertainty which was now aggravated by her refusal to marry him.

Latisan had not been in the village ten minutes that afternoon before Gossip Dempsey had giggled and told him he'd better keep sharp watch on his girl, because the jewelry man was everlastingly after her like a puppy chasing the butcher's cart; the simile was not nice, but Latisan was impressed by its suggestion of assiduity.

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In the tumult of his thought, grudgingly conscious that he was ashamed of the real reason for giving up his work, Latisan evasively decided that the thing was now up to Echford Flagg. He had warned Flagg man fashion. He had given his word to Flagg as to what would happen if Flagg persisted in treating him like a lackey. Flagg had persisted. Latisan had kept his word. He could not retreat from that stand; he could not crawl back to Flagg and still maintain the self-respect that a drive master must have in the fight that was ahead.

Therefore, Latisan decided to stay in Adonia and let Flagg make overtures; for their future relations the drive master would be able to lay down some rules to govern Flagg's language and conduct. Under that decision persisted the nagging consciousness that he wanted to be with the girl instead of on the drive and he was more and more ashamed of the new weakness in his character. And he was also ashamed of the feeling that he wanted to find out more about her. In the past his manliness had despised prying and peering. He had been able to bluster loyally to old Dick; he was more truthful to himself. What was she, anyway? He would not admit that he had been so completely tipped upside down in all his hale resolves, aims, and objects by a mere nonentity who looked no higher than a job as waitress at Brophy's tavern.

Then he went into the tavern out of the darkness and blinked at the landlord, who called him to the desk and gave a letter into his hands. It was sealed, but there was no stamp on it.

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"Ordered by Mrs. Everett to hand it to you," reported Brophy, sourly. "She wanted to see you last time you were down, but it slipped my mind to tell you."

Latisan read the note. The lady of the parlor entreated him to come to her on a matter of business, no matter how late the hour might be. He tore up the paper on his way to the fireplace and tossed the bits on the embers.

"Same room for me?" he asked Brophy.

"Yes, but Mrs. Everett said for me——"

"Damn Mrs. Everett! I'm going to bed."

It consoled him a little, as he walked upstairs, to reflect that he was not dominated by all the women in the world, even if he was in the way of making himself a fool over one.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

[167]

LATISAN, going to sleep, hoped that he would awake with a saner viewpoint.

He did admit to himself in the morning that if Echford Flagg should show the right spirit of compromise the thing could be patched up on terms which would allow the drive master to be his own man instead of being a spanked youngster.

The girl seized an opportunity to speak to him when she brought his breakfast. "Things look better this morning—I'm sure they do. Tell me. I worried half the night. I must not be the cause of trouble."

"Yes, they look better."

"And you're starting back to-day for the drive?" Her voice was low but eager. "Tell me that you are!"

His smouldering suspicion! Red tongues of fire darted up from it!

"I'm afraid you won't be able to get rid of me to-day. Business is keeping me here."

Her entreating smile faded; she backed way from him as if she had received a rude thrust, and then she went about her work.

There was a real sensation in the tavern that morning! The exclusive star boarder of the parlor came into the public room to eat her breakfast. Her charms were enhanced by a becoming morning wrap, and, following out her liberal code governing the relations of sex in modern days, she seated herself at Latisan's table,

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greeting him with a mingling of bright good humor and gentle rebuke.

"Give me a good reason why you have not been the advising friend you promised to be, and I may not be too angry, Mr. Latisan."

"I—I thought I'd wait till this morning—"

"Thank you! Then I'm welcome at your table."

She lowered her voice after that. She was engrossed with ordinary topics whenever the waitress's duties brought Lida to the table. If there was to be rivalry between the operatives of Vose-Mern, Miss Elsham decided that her tactics with the Flagg drive master should not be known. She did the talking and Latisan gave the appearance of being an earnest listener. At a matter of fact, he played up strongly his affectation of devoted interest. Ingenuous amateur that he was in the subtleties of love, he was trying out a method which he had heard commended; he was wondering how much an aroused jealousy might accomplish in the case of Miss Patsy Jones.

He cast side glances and saw that she seemed to be disturbed. He bestowed on Mrs. Everett more profound attention. He even allowed himself to say when the waitress was within earshot, "I think I'll know by to-morrow whether I'm to keep on at the head of the drive. If I don't and if matters allow, I'll be glad to take charge of your trip into the north country."

Latisan, boyishly crude in his methods, felt that Miss Jones would have an interpretation of her own for "matters" and would do some earnest thinking before she turned him over to the companionship of a rich young widow, even in the humble rôle of a chief guide. [169]

In spite of Brophy's sign, "No Smoking in This Dining Room"—a restriction intended for woodsmen—Miss Elsham lighted a cigarette in her satisfaction; her failure to interest the man of the woods even to the extent of a second interview had been worrying the seductress de luxe of the Vose-Mern establishment after her unbroken successes with the men of the city.

She went out of the room chatting with Latisan, and found an opportunity to sweep Miss Kennard with a patronizing glance.

Latisan spent the forenoon on the tavern porch, smoking his pipe and waiting—even hoping—for a message from Echford Flagg. Rickety Dick passed the place several times on his usual errands. Flagg, therefore, would be informed that the drive master was loafing in the village. But old Dick did not bring any word from the big house to Latisan.

To be sure, the split of the evening before had seemed discouragingly final. But after the girl's rebuke and appeal Ward was ashamed of the persisting stubbornness which was making him an idler in that exacting period when the thunderous Noda waters were sounding a call to duty. He did not want her to think of him as vindictive in his spirit, and still less did he desire her to consider him petty in his motives and notions.

On the other hand, the proposition was strictly a man-to-man affair, and Echford Flagg had made relations unendurable.

Ward wished devoutly that he could clear his thoughts; they were muddled. Back of the inertia which was hiding him in Adonia there seemed to be reasons other than the new animosity toward his employer. Really, he confessed to himself, he would like to go to Flagg and win to a manlike and mutual understanding which would serve both of them. But he muttered when he looked up at the big house, and he kept on waiting for the master to offer an opening. [170]

He confessed that his was a childish attitude toward an employer. Had he allowed his infatuation to twist him into this being who was putting the burden of an offer of compromise upon a poor old stricken man who ought to be protected from his own intolerance?

However, the drive master was aware of a certain satisfaction in being on hand to watch and weigh affairs in Adonia that day.

The raffle man, as the villagers called Crowley, seemed to have a great deal on his mind, Latisan reflected. Crowley made several trips to the telegraph office at the railroad station.

At dinner Miss Jones averted her eyes from Latisan and there was no talk between them. Latisan tried to comfort himself, by the thought that jealousy was operating. He saw her go out in the afternoon for a walk, but he did not offer to accompany her. His naïve conviction was that his indifference and the threat of interest in Mrs. Everett would suffice to bring Miss Patsy Jones down from her coquette's pedestal.

He was tempted to leap up and follow when he saw Crowley trailing after the waitress; but Crowley went only a little distance, and then he came back and went [171]

into the tavern and upstairs.

Again in midafternoon old Dick passed, but he brought no word to the waiting drive master.

This insulting indifference, as Latisan considered it, indicated that Echford Flagg was no longer depending on Ward as champion. There had been no misunderstanding of language. Latisan had quit—and Flagg was contented to let him stay quit.

The young man felt more acutely cheap and small. He had been setting himself up as the one man who could drive down the Flagg logs. The fact that he could not bring himself to break away instanter and go north to his duty—without orders from Flagg and without considering further his entanglement with a girl—was a fact that steadily lessened his self-esteem. He had been able to go straightforwardly in all matters till then; this new inability to handle complex affairs and to untangle the situation made him distrust himself and wonder whether he was much of a man, anyway!

Then came night—and he went to his room to brood.

At supper the girl of his thoughts had been conspicuously rude in the manner with which she banged down dishes in front of him.

Lida had been doing some pondering of her own. She would not admit that she had been piqued by his attentions to Elsham and by his partial promise to that complacent young lady. But she was finding him to be very much of a child, she told herself. He needed to be protected from himself at that juncture. And he needed to be convinced that he was wasting his time just then by staying away from duty and playing the lover. Lida's first thought was that if he found no profit in lovemaking he would go back to his work in spite of what he had told her. She could not bring herself to believe that a man like Latisan would succumb to Elsham's wiles. [172]

In that mood, both as protectress and as staunch believer in his uprightness, she found that her interest in him was becoming more vivid than she had realized. Her warming heart sent a flush into her cheeks when she remembered the passionate embrace. She noted that flush when she looked into her mirror. She was making herself ready for slumber.

"Don't be a fool!" she warned the reflection in the mirror.

Having clarified the situation to that extent in her thoughts before going to sleep, she awoke and began the new day with better confidence. The spirit of the Open Places certainly did make folks honest, she told herself! She felt that the morning must have brought common sense to Latisan, as it had to her.

From her window she saw him walking to and fro in front of the tavern. The early dawn was flushing the east. His being abroad at that hour suggested that he was going back to his work instead of playing the idling lover. She decided to be frank with him; she dressed in haste, hurried down and faced him, and told him how glad she was that he had come into his right senses; she had determined that her best course was to take his reformed mental state for granted.

"Yes, I'm sensible enough to quit being a boss bulldog for a man like Eck Flagg." He was sorry after he said it. But there was no word from Flagg—and her insistence, as if she wanted to be rid of him, rasped his raw temper. [173]

"But you're going back to the drive!" she gasped.

"I am not."

"Don't you value your reputation among men?"

"I do!"

"They'll say you're a quitter." She spoke boldly and sharply.

"Let me tell *you* something! When you told me that you wouldn't marry me I came nigh quitting where you're concerned. But I am back in my right senses, as you say! You're mine! I have told you so. I tell you again this morning. It's something of a fix you've got yourself into, eh?"

She grew pale and her wide eyes were filled with startled protest; he was placid enough, but his calmness made the thing more grim and threatening when she reflected on the suggestiveness of that word "fix." She was unable to endure his scrutiny. He did not try to restrain her when she turned away, hastening into the tavern.

Brophy came into the dining room when he heard her setting the tables. "Well, by swanny! You're up without being called! You ain't much like the others I've had here!"

He was silent for some time, and when she turned she found him surveying her with curious intentness. "It ain't none of my business, of course, but I hope you ain't of a marrying notion, just yet awhile."

"That remark seems a little uncalled for, Mr. Brophy."

"I'm speaking out because Ward Latisan doesn't seem to be the flirting kind, miss. You can't fool with him." [174]

"I thank you. I shall avoid Mr. Latisan from now on. I have thoughtlessly taken walks with him."

"If it's such a thing as you're intending to get married I'd rather lose you to Latisan than to anybody else in this region. He's solid goods, miss! Solid!"

She was seeking confirmation to strengthen her resolves. "I hear that his employer is an invalid. I suppose that makes Mr. Latisan pretty nigh indispensable, doesn't it?"

"There'll be no Flagg drive down this spring without Ward on the job—I'll say that much," declared Brophy, with vigor. "I can't afford to make any loud talk about the Three C's, miss," he went on, lowering his voice cautiously, "because I cater to all comers. But I don't know another boss driver who couldn't be scared off or bought off at the present time, considering the hold the big corporation has got on things up this way. They're bound to monopolize the river—the Three C's gang. But they can't freeze out the independents this year if Ward Latisan stays on the job for Eck Flagg. The death clinch comes this season!"

"Where's your law up this way, Mr. Brophy?" she demanded.

"I guess neither side dares to call on the law right now. Law might tie up everything. Logs have got to come along with the spring driving pitch, and high water won't wait till lawyers get done arguing."

He took down a gong and pounded on it with a padded mallet while he marched through the office to the porch and back again. It was the breakfast call. [175]

"I'll say about Eck Flagg," he stated, when he hung the gong back on its hook, "that he ain't so much to blame for his sour temper as some folks are bound to have it. Old Job of the Bible had nothing on Eck for troubles. No matter what he has done, Eck has been a square fighter. Probably you ain't interested, even to the extent of a hoot, in gossip about the neighbors. But Eck had a bad one put over on him years ago. He hasn't been right since that time. Square dealing is his religion. But to get his worst trimming right in his own family, it was awful. Son-in-law done it. But I reckon I'd better hang up on that subject, miss. Here comes Latisan for breakfast."

The landlord plodded out.

This man who seated himself, waiting to be served by her, who was determined to possess her, had been unwittingly alienated by her from the duty which was owed to that helpless grandfather in his extremity.

The reminder which Brophy had tossed at her carelessly had served to rouse her to desperation. She clung to a service table to keep from falling. She staggered when she started to cross the room to Latisan; her hands and feet were prickling as the blood resumed its course in her veins.

"You're sick," he suggested, solicitously.

She shook her head. She turned her face from him, afraid of his questioning gaze. "Give your order, please!"

"Bring anything."

She started away, but turned and hurried back to his table, her face hard with resolution. She feared that the resolution would be weakened by delay; in a few moments others would come into the room. [176]

"I have changed my mind about that offer of marriage. This morning I say, 'Yes!'"

He gaped at her and started to rise.

"Don't leave that chair!" she commanded, her low tones tense. "There are men in the office looking this way. I'll marry you when the Flagg drive is down, with you at the head of it, doing your duty. You may think that over while I'm in the kitchen."

When she returned with food, Latisan, flushed, eager, only partially assured, looked her in the eye, challenging her candor. "That's straight talk, is it?"

"It is!"

"I thank God! But why—right here in the open—where I can't—"

"I'll answer no questions."

"I'd like to know why you picked out this place to tell me. I can't be shut away from all the glory in the grandest moment of my life! I want to get up and yell for joy. I want to take you in my arms."

"I'll not allow that. Furthermore, you are to leave for the drive immediately after you have eaten your breakfast." Her manner cowed him.

"Very well!" he returned, meekly. "When I looked into your eyes I knew that your word to me was good!"

She was finding the fixity of his gaze disconcerting and leaned above the table, arranging the dishes which contained his food. She was grateful for the protection the public room was affording; she would not have been able to declare herself in the privacy which love, in most circumstances, demands. [177]

"Who are you?" he asked, in a half whisper, taking advantage of her nearness. "You are more than you seem to be. You are, I say! You are not silly and selfish like most girls in a time like this. You are able to make me do anything you ask. I'll go north and fight because you want me to. But an ordinary girl wouldn't take a big view of things, as you do."

"Yes—for the sake of having a man be what he ought to be."

He wagged his head doubtfully. "But if you'll tell me the honest truth about—"

"Hush! Here comes a man."

It was Crowley. He had looked from his chamber window and had seen the two in conversation in front of the tavern. He was strictly on the job that day; he had dressed in such a hurry that he was tying his necktie as he entered the room. He sat down at a table and glared grimly at Latisan and the girl; provided with ammunition that fortified his courage, Crowley had resolved to make his bigness in the matter, unafraid.

His appearance at that moment and the manner of his espionage and the memory of what had been said concerning his pursuit of the girl stirred Latisan to the depths. His emotions had been in a tumult ever since the girl had declared her promise. He was in no mood to reason calmly. He could not control himself. He purposed to go to what he thought was his duty as her accepted champion. Therefore, he leaped from his chair, put his arm about her waist, and pulled her across the room, in spite of her resistance. [178]

"Listen to me, you sneak!" he adjured Crowley. "This young lady and I are engaged to be married."

"Hush!" she cried, in mingled fright and fury. "You promised—It isn't—"

"I made no promise except to go north because you have asked me to go. I'm going back to my job, and I'll have the Flagg logs down if I have to smash the bottom out of the river," he boasted, in his new pride. "Crowley—as I believe your name is—you have heard me announce the engagement. If you give this young lady another twisted look or crooked word while I'm away, may God have mercy on your soul!"

He was talking to the one man who ought to hear that news, so the lover felt, but his voice was raised in his emotion and Brophy and the loungers in the office heard, too.

Latisan kissed her once, swiftly and rapturously.

According to the code of social procedure in Adonia, as the office onlookers viewed the matter of congratulation, the occasion called for three cheers; they were proposed and given and even Brophy joined, but with sour grace.

She had endeavored ineffectually to check Latisan's outburst, understanding fully the interlocking perils involved in the promulgation to Crowley that the drive master was going back to his work. It had become her own personal, vital affair, this thing! She was far from admitting even then that love was urging her to the promise she had made so precipitately. The wild spirit of sacrifice had surged in her. She was able to pay—to redeem! It was all for the sake of the family! But this love-cracked idiot, babbling his triumph, had thrown wide the gate of caution—had exposed all to the enemy; she feared Crowley in his surly, new mood! [179]

Poor Ward turned to her a radiant, humid stare of devotion; she responded by flashing fury at him from her eyes. Her cheeks were crimson. "Haven't you any wit in you?" she raged, holding her tones in leash with effort, her convulsed face close to his amazed countenance.

"It was to put you right—" he stammered.

"It has made everything all wrong!"

Men had come into the room. She hurried away from the dumfounded lover.

While she went about her work, sedulously keeping her gaze from Latisan, she heard the men jocosely canvassing the matter. They called to the drive master, giving him clumsy congratulation. There were timber cruisers who were going into the north country; they declared with hilarity that they would spread the news. They ate and went stamping away, news bureaus afoot.

She marched to the pathetic incarnation of doubt and dolor after a time; he was lingering at table in a condition that was near to stupefaction.

"Why aren't you on your way?" she demanded, with ireful impatience.

"You'll have to tell me what the matter is with you!"

"I'll tell you nothing—not now! But you have something to tell Mr. Flagg, haven't you?" [180]

"You're right! I'll go and tell him that I'm starting for the drive. If I have to smash the hinges off the door of Tophet I'll put our logs——"

"That's it!" she cried, eagerly. "Our logs! We'll call them our logs. Don't mind because I seemed strange a little while ago. You'll understand, some day. But now hurry! Hurry!" She forced herself to smile. She was eagerly in earnest, almost hysterical. She spoke his name, though with effort. "Remember, Ward! Our logs! Bring them through!"

He leaped out of his chair. The other breakfasters were gone. She stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek.

Immediately after Latisan had left on his way to assure Echford Flagg, the girl was reminded of her putative Vose-Mern affiliations. Crowley lounged back into the room, taking advantage of the fact that she was alone. "Put me wise as to why you're playing this shot with the reverse English."

"Hands off, Crowley! You're only a watchdog, paid to guard me."

"I don't propose to have our folks double-crossed. You have started that drive boss back onto his job, and you and he announce an engagement this morning! You're cagy or crazy! I won't have anything put over! If you're straight, come through to me and I'll back you. Otherwise——" He tossed his hands in an eloquent gesture.

"I'll wire to have you pulled down to the city."

"I have done some wiring ahead of you. It's up to our folks to find out what's the big idea."

"Crowley, won't you leave it all to me?" she pleaded, fighting to the last ditch for her secret and for time. "Can't you see that I'm placing a double-crosser in the enemy's camp?" [181]

He looked at her hard and long and his lips curled into a sardonic grin. "You're a good one. I'll admit that. But you can't stand there and give me the straight eye and make me believe you have made over Latisan to that extent. I've got him sized. It can't be done!"

Crowley was right—she could not meet his sophisticated gaze.

"What do you expect me to do?" she asked, lamely.

"Keep him off the drive. If he starts to leave this village to-day I'm going to grab in."

She knew Crowley's obstinacy in his single-track methods. There was no telling what he would undertake nor what damage might be wrought by his interference. She tried to force from him his intentions; he paid no heed to her appeals or her threats.

She was fighting for her own with all the wit and power that were in her; she was standing in the path by which the enemies must advance, resolved to battle as long as her strength might last, serving as best she could to distract attention from the main fight to herself, willing to sacrifice herself utterly.

Crowley walked with a bit of a swagger from the room, lighted a cigarette in the office, pattered for a few moments with some old newspapers on a table, and then went out of doors and strolled along the road in the direction of the big house on the hill. She observed his course from a side window. She felt the impulse to run after him and beat her fists against that broad and stubborn back. [182]

She saw Latisan come striding down from the Flagg mansion, determination in his manner.

The two men met. They halted.

Her apprehension became agony, but she did not dare to interfere between them.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

[183]

CROWLEY, standing in front of Latisan, twisted his countenance into an expression of deprecatory, appealing remorse.

"I have taken the liberty of apologizing to the young lady, sir! Now that I know how matters stand, I want to beg your pardon very humbly. I haven't meant anything wrong, but a man of my style gets cheeky without realizing it."

Latisan had come off well in his interview with Echford Flagg. The old man seemed to be in a chastened mood. When he had been informed of the part the girl was playing, the master had admitted that the right kind of a woman can influence a man to his own good.

Therefore, when the drive master strode down the hill, the radiance of his expansive joy had cleared out all the shadows. He was willing to meet a penitent halfway. He put out his hand frankly. Crowley held to the hand for a moment and put his other palm upon Latisan's shoulder. "Congratulations! I know my place, now that it has become a man-to-man matter between us. But before—well, I'll tell you, Mr. Latisan, I had met Miss Jones in New York in a sort of a business way and I was probably a little fresh in trying to keep up the acquaintance."

Latisan had extricated his hand, intending to hurry on about his affairs. But here was a person who seemed to be in a way to tell him something more definite about one who was baffling his wild anxiety to fathom her real identity. However, Latisan did not dare to ask questions. His own pride and the spirit of protecting her reasons for reticence, if she had any, fettered his tongue; he was ashamed to admit to this man, whom he had so recently hated, that the real character of a fiancée was a closed book.

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"Honestly, she ought to have told you that she knew me," complained Crowley. "It would have saved all that trouble between you and me." He rubbed his ear reminiscently. "But perhaps she did," he pursued, affecting to misinterpret the hardness which had come into Latisan's face. "But how she could say anything against me, as far as she and I are concerned, I can't understand."

"She has not mentioned you to me," returned Latisan, curtly.

"That's queer, too," said Crowley, wrinkling his brow, his demeanor adding to the young man's conviction that the whole situation was decidedly queer. Once more the smoldering embers were showing red flames! "Mr. Latisan, get me right, now! I don't propose to discuss the young lady, seeing what she is to you. But perhaps you'll allow me to refer back to what you said to me, personally, in the tavern a little while ago. We can make that our own business, can't we?"

Crowley accepted a stiff nod as his answer and went on. "You told me that you are going back to the drive because the young lady has insisted on your doing so. That right?"

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"It is. But I fail to see how you can make it any part of your business and mine."

"It happens to belong in my business." He put his hand to his breast pocket as if to reassure himself. He proceeded with more confidence. "Are you afraid of the truth, Mr. Latisan—scared to meet it face to face in a showdown?"

"I'm in the habit of going after the truth, no matter where it hides itself."

"Then I guess you'd better come along with me. I've got to the point where I've got to have the truth, too, or else fetch up in a crazy house."

Crowley's determination was set definitely on his mind's single track. If a man had an urgent reason for doing a certain thing and the compelling reason were removed, he might naturally be expected to do something else, Crowley figured.

If Latisan proposed to go back to work because his love and allegiance caused him to obey a girl's commands, he would do the opposite of what she asked if his love and confidence were destroyed. It seemed to be a case of two and two making four, as Crowley viewed the thing. He was done with tangled subtleties.

He put his hand again on his breast pocket as he walked with the drive master down the hill. There was a letter in that pocket; Crowley had purloined it from the girl's bureau that day when he had so quickly returned from following her. And he also had a telegram in that pocket; the wire had come along that morning, addressed to Miss Patsy Jones, in his care.

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The job, as Crowley understood orders, was to keep Latisan off the river that

season. Crowley saw a way of doing that job and of getting the credit for the performance.

The girl, staring through the window with strained attention, noting every detail of the meeting, seeing the appearance of amity and of understanding, beholding Crowley put his hand on Latisan's shoulder in the pose of friendly adviser, suspected the worst; she was stricken with anguished certainty when Latisan strode toward the tavern; according to her belief, two men were now arrayed against her. The drive master's haste indicated that she had been betrayed by the sullen botcher of methods.

In that room she felt like a creature that had been run to cover—cornered. She wanted to escape into the open. There was honesty outside, anyway, under the sky, at the edge of the forest, where the thunder of the great falls made human voices and mortal affairs so petty by contrast.

She ran through the tavern office and faced Latisan in the yard; there were curious spectators on the porch, the loungers of the hamlet, but she paid no attention to them; she was searching the countenance of Latisan, avidly anxious, fearfully uncertain regarding what mischief had been wrought in him.

He smiled tenderly, flourishing a salute. "All serene in the big house!"

The white was succeeded by a flush in her cheeks. She looked up into his honest eyes and was thrilled by an emotion that was new to her. It was impossible not to answer back to that earnest affection he was expressing. Gratitude glowed in her— and gratitude is a sister of love!

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"I beg your pardon," put in Crowley, "But can't the three of us step inside and have a little private talk?"

He made a gesture to indicate the gallery of listeners on the tavern porch.

Once that morning Lida had found protection by handling an important crisis in a public place. She was having no time just then to think clearly. She was feeling sure of Latisan, after his look into her eyes. She mustered a smile and shook her head when the drive master mutely referred the matter to her, raising his eyebrows inquiringly.

"You'd better," warned Crowley, bristling.

The girl felt that she had no option except to keep on in the bold course she had marked for herself. She could not conceive that the operative would prejudice the Vose-Mern proposition in public. "I cannot understand what private matters we three have in common, sir. I have no desire to listen. Mr. Latisan has no time, I'm sure. He is leaving for the north country."

"That's true," agreed Latisan, under the spell of her gaze, won by her, loyal in all his fiber, determined to exclude all others in the world from the partnership of two. He had put aside his anxiety to know what she had been in the city, as Crowley knew her; that quest seemed to be disloyalty to her. "I'm starting mighty sudden! Sorry, sir! Let Brophy put your business with us in his refrigerator till the drive is down."

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Careless of the onlookers, the girl patted his cheek, encouraging his stand. "Till our drive is down. Remember, it's ours!" she whispered.

"Harness in my horses," Latisan called to Brophy's nephew in the door of the tavern stable.

She was human; she was a girl; Latisan's manner assured her that she had won her battle with Crowley, whatever might have been the methods by which he had tried to prevail over the drive master. She could not resist the impulse to give the Vose-Mern operative a challenging look of triumph that was lighted by the joy of her victory.

Crowley's slow mind speeded up on its one track; he opened the throttle, smash or no smash! He marched up to Latisan and displayed a badge, dredging it from his trousers pocket. "That's what I am, mister, an operative for a detective agency. So is she!"

"I am not," she declared defiantly.

"Maybe not, after your flop in this case. But you were when you struck this place, if your word means anything!"

"You're a liar," shouted Latisan. He doubled his fist and drew it back; the girl seized the hand and unclasped the knotted grip and braided her fingers with his.

"I don't blame you, Latisan. It's natural for you to feel that way toward me right now," agreed Crowley. "She has slipped the cross-tag onto you. But you're no fool. I don't ask you to take my word. Go down to that railroad station and wire to an address I'll give you in New York. Ask her if she dares to have you do it."

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There was no longer a smolder in Latisan—it was all a red flame!

He had not realized till then how penetratingly deep had been his conviction that this girl was something other than she assumed to be.

Crowley pulled a letter from his pocket, flapped it open, and shoved it under Latisan's nose.

There was no further attempt to deal behind doors with the affair. It was in Crowley's mind, then, that spreading the situation wide open before the gaping throng, which was increasing, crowding about in a narrowing circle, would assist his plan to make intolerable Latisan's stay in that region.

"Look at the letterhead—Vose-Mern Agency! Look and you'll see that it's addressed to Miss Patsy Jones, Adonia. Take it and read it! It's orders to her from the chief!"

Latisan was plainly in no state of mind to read; he crumpled the letter in his hand and stuffed the paper into his trousers pocket.

"Here's a telegram," continued the operative. "It's for her to go back to New York. It hasn't been enough for her to double-cross you; she's doing the same thing to the folks who have hired her. Nice kind of dame, eh? I don't know just what her game is, friend! But I'm coming across to you and tell you that the big idea is to keep you off the drive this season. Good money has been put up to turn the trick."

In the midst of the whirling torches which made up his thoughts just then, Latisan was not able to give sane consideration to her zeal in urging him to duty; he was conscious only of the revelation of her character. Out of the city had come some kind of a design to undo him! [190]

The village was still agog with the news of his engagement; the news bureaus on legs had gone north to tattle the thing among all the camps; and she was a detective sent to beguile him! The faces of the bystanders were creasing into grins.

"Ask her!" urged Crowley, relentlessly. "Or ask New York."

Postponement of the truth was futile; denial was dangerous; a confession forced by an appeal to New York would discredit her motives; she had not formally severed her connection with the agency. She determined to meet this man of the woods on his own plane of honesty.

"Come with me where we can talk privately," she urged; her demeanor told Latisan that she was not able to back the defiant stand he had taken with Crowley a moment before.

"It's too late now," he objected, getting his emotions partly under control. "The thing has been advertised too much to have any privacy about it now. When they are left to guess things in this section the guessing is awful! I'm never afraid to face men with the truth. He has said you came here as a detective. Those men standing around heard him. What have you to say?"

"Won't you let me talk to you alone?"

"If I'm to stand up here before men after this, the facts will have to come out later; they may as well come out now." [191]

He spoke mildly, but his manner afforded her no opportunity for further appeal; he was a man of the square edge and he was acting according to the code of the Open Places. She put away womanly weakness as best she was able and continued with him on his own ground.

"There is a plot to keep you away from your duty on the drive this season. You know as well as I do what interests furnished the money for such a purpose."

"And you know about it, do you, because you are one of the detective gang?"

"I have worked for the Vose-Mern agency."

She could not deny the evidence of that letter which he had shoved deep down into his pocket. He had reminded her of it by whacking his hand against his thigh.

"So that's what you are!" Again he was losing control of himself.

Men in the crowd snickered. They were perceiving much humor in the situation.

"I can explain later." She, too, was breaking down under the strain. She whimpered, pleading with him. "After you have brought down the drive I can explain and——"

"Now! It must be now! I can't bring down any drive till you do explain."

She did not understand.

But he knew all too bitterly under what a sword of Damocles he was standing. [192]

Ridicule was ready to slay him! The Big Laugh was already gurgling deep in the throats of all the folks. The news of his engagement had gone ahead of him to the north country; the Big Laugh would roar along in the wake of that news.

"The truth! It must come out now!" he shouted. "All the truth—the whole truth about yourself!"

"I can't tell you!" wailed Lida Kennard, turning her back fearsomely on the big house on the ledges.

"You've got a mouthful of truth out of me. Can't you see how it is?" growled Crowley.

"So that's what you are, is it?" Latisan dwelt on the subject, twisting the handle that Crowley had given him.

"Mr. Latisan, listen to me! I implore you to forget me—what I am! Go to your work."

"My work has nothing to do with this matter between you and me. So that's what you are!" he repeated, insistent on his one idea, looking her up and down. "A detective sneak!"

"I am done with the work. I am a human being, at any rate, and you promised me—"

He sliced his hand through the air. "That's all off! You lied to me. It must have been a lie, seeing what you are. But I believed, and I stood up and took you for mine. The word has gone out. Every man on the Noda will know about it. I had no rights over your life till you met me. But when a woman lies to a man to make him do this or that she is laughing at him behind his back. You have played me for a poor fool in the tall timber. That's the word that's starting now." [193]

"If you have found out how worthless I am," she sobbed, "you can go on with your work and be a real man."

He loosed the leash on himself. He mocked her with bitter irony, his face working hideously. "'Go on with your work!' Don't you have any idea what men are up these woods? Who'll take orders from me after this? They'll hoot me off the river! I'm done. You have put me down and under!"

More than the spirit of sacrifice was actuating her then. Her impulses were inextricably mingled, but they all tended to one end, to save him from error. His scorn had touched her heart; meeting him on his own plane—on the level of honesty—woman with man, she was conscious of bitter despair because he was leaving her life. She was fighting for her own—for the old man in the big house, for the new love that was springing up out of her sympathy for this champion from whom, without realizing the peril of her procedure, she had filched the weapons of his manhood at the moment when he needed them most.

"The heart has gone out of me! You have taken it out!" he cried.

"I swear before our God that I'll be straight with you from now on. Won't it put heart in you if I'm your wife, standing by you through everything?" She took a long breath. Her desperation drove her to the limits of appeal. "I love you! I know it. I must have known it when I urged you on to your duty. I'm willing to say it here before all. Take me, and let's fight together." [194]

In her hysterical fear lest she was losing all, she took no thought of her pride; she was making passionate, primitive appeal to the chosen mate.

But she did not understand how absolutely hopeless was the wreck of this man's fortunes, as Latisan viewed the situation. Ridicule, the taunt that he had been fooled by a girl from the city, was waiting for him all along the river. Echford Flagg would be the first to deny the worth of a man who had received the Big Laugh. No man on the Noda had ever incurred mock to such a degree. And he had vaunted his engagement to her!

She went toward him, her hands outstretched; he had been backing away from her.

"Look out!" he warned. "I never struck a woman!" He spread his big hand. All the fury of his forebears was rioting in him.

He was not swayed by rage, merely; there would have been something petty in ordinary human resentment at that moment. There was another quality that was devilishly and subtly complex in the sudden mania which obsessed him. He had seen woodsmen leaping and shouting in the ecstasy of drunkenness; liquor seemed to affect the men of the woods in that way—to accentuate their sense of wild liberty. Latisan had been obliged to pitch in and quell riots where woodsmen had heaped their clothes and were making a bonfire of the garments they needed for decency's sake. And a mere liquid had been able to put them into that temper!

But this that was sweeping through all his being was liquid fire!

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He had never been else than a spectator of what alcohol would do to a man; he had never tasted the stuff.

Here he was, all of a sudden, drunk with something else—he knew that he was drunk—and he let himself go! He leaped up and tossed his arms above his head. By action alone a woodsman expressed his feelings, he told himself, and he was only a woodsman; the hellions of the world were not allowing him to make anything else of himself! The north country was closed to him; his power as a boss was gone. Look at those grinning faces around him!

Then he yelled shrilly. Many who stood around understood what that whoop meant, though it had not been heard for a long time on the Noda. It was “the Latisan lallyloo”! It had echoed among the hills in the old days when John Latisan was down from the river and had grabbed a bottle from the hand of the first bootlegger who offered his wares.

The grandson, then and there, was veritably drunk with the frenzy of despair!

Yanking his arms free, he dragged off his belted jacket and flung it on the ground; on the jacket, with a pile-driver sweep of his arm, he drove down his cap.

“Lie there, drive master!” he shouted.

The down train of the narrow-gauge was dragging out of the station; a succession of shrill whistle toots, several minutes before, had warned prospective passengers.

Latisan ran down the middle of the road and leaped aboard the slowly moving train when it crossed the highway. Standing on the platform of the passenger car, he shook his fists at assembled Adonia and yelled again.

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Brophy, from the tavern porch, looked hard at the girl and started down the steps, making his way toward the jacket and cap which Latisan had thrown away.

She ran and picked them up and hugged them in her arms with defiant proprietorship.

“How come?” sneered Brophy. “Latest bulletin seemed to be that the engagement was broke!” He was suddenly hostile.

She turned from the landlord and faced Crowley. The operative was triumphant. “It’s understood that I get the credit for this job,” he informed her, *sotto voce*. His air suggested that he was convinced that the destiny of the Flagg drive had been settled.

All about her were implacable faces. The grins were gone. There was no misunderstanding the sentiments which those men entertained toward a woman who had wrought the undoing of a square man. She presented completely then the pathetic spectacle of a baited, cowering, wild creature at bay. She was bitterly alone among them. Even Crowley of the city was against her. In her agony of loneliness the thought of her kin in the big house on the hill came to her mind. But to her, in spite of her passionate efforts to aid, must be ascribed the defection of Latisan—the breaking of her grandfather’s last prop. She had intensified in woeful degree the fault of her father; she had compassed the ruin of the old man at a time when he was unable to restore his fortunes by his own effort. The doors of the house on the hill were barred by the iron of unforgiveness and by these new fires of her fault, involuntary though that fault was.

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Brophy stood before her. “I reckon you ain’t going to be very popular hereabout as a hash-slinger, Miss Whatever-your-name is.” He snapped his fingers and stretched his hand to command the transfer of the jacket and cap. “I’ll take ‘em and put ‘em in Ward’s room.”

But she clung to what she had retrieved as if she felt that she held a hostage of fortune. Brophy refrained from laying violent hands on the articles, and to save his face and create a diversion he turned on Crowley.

“Let’s see! You have bragged about being a detective! We don’t stand for your kind or tricks in this neck o’ woods.”

There was the menace of growls in the crowd. The mob spirit was stirring. A man said something about a rail and tar and feathers.

“I’ll argue with the boys and try to give you a fair start,” stated the landlord. “But you’d better pack up in a hurry. You can’t wait for to-morrow’s train under my roof. I’ll furnish you a livery hitch to the junction. Take the woman with you.”

It was an ugly crowd; the landlord was obliged to push back men when Crowley followed Lida into the tavern.

Miss Elsham was just inside the door, where she had posted herself as a spectator and listener. “There’s no telling what they’ll do; they’re bound to find out that I’m an

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operative," she quavered. "You must take me with you, Buck."

He had been appointed her guardian and he could not refuse. But he glowered at Lida, white and trembling.

Brophy came in after a struggle at the door; he slammed the portal and bolted it.

"They're usually pretty genteel up here where wimmen are concerned," he told Lida, "but they're laying it all to you. They'll let you go, Crowley, if you'll go in a hurry. Are you one of 'em, too?" he bluntly asked Miss Elsham, ready to suspect all strangers.

She nodded. "I'm going with Crowley."

"Understanding that you give me full credit," her associate told her, his lips close to her ear.

"I ain't sure but what I'd better hide you till night," the landlord informed Lida. "As I said, they're naturally genteel, but——" He hesitated when he heard the growing grumble of voices.

"I've got trouble enough in getting away without taking you on for an extra load," was Crowley's rough repudiation of Lida. "You have double-crossed——"

"I'll accept your opinion as an expert in that line," she said, lashing her courage back to meet the situation. "I am not asking any favors from Vose-Mern or their operatives. Nor from you," she informed the landlord.

She settled Ward's cap and jacket more securely in the clutch of her arms. "Unbar and open the door, if you please, Mr. Brophy." [199]

He demurred.

"It's the door of a public inn. You must open it."

He obeyed, standing ready to repel intruders.

She walked straight out and through the crowd of hostile natives, who parted to allow her to pass; her chin was up and her eyes were level in meeting the gaze of any man who stared at her.

She had made up her mind where she was going, and the thought of that intended destination put some of the spirit of old Echford Flagg in her.

When she was free from the crowd she began to run; instinct of the homing sort impelled her to hasten. She had not settled in her mind what she would say or do when she got there, but there seemed to be no other place in all the world for her right then except the big house on the ledges.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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LIDA did not wait to be admitted to her grandfather's house in the conventional manner; she did not dare to test her new resolution by a pause on the steps, and she was afraid that Rickety Dick would enforce the Flagg injunction against a woman.

Gasping for breath after her run across the ledges, she flung herself into the presence of her grandfather.

Dick was holding a flaming splint of wood to the bowl of Flagg's pipe. Startled, he dropped the splint, and the fire burned out unheeded on the bare floor.

She held on to the cap and the jacket and with her free hand she beat upon her breast and tried to pour out a confession of her part in the mischief which had been done. She could not tell Flagg who she was; she was telling him what she was. She made herself a part of the Vose-Mern conspiracy; that seemed to be the best way. She did not try to make herself better than her associates; she admitted that she was an operative; in no other way could she account for her presence in the north country; and the old man's keen eyes warned her that a less plausible statement would endanger her secret. Therefore, she arraigned herself bitterly as the cause of Latisan's undoing, and to explain her new attitude she pleaded love and resulting repentance. There seemed to be no other way of giving Flagg a good reason why she was interested in speeding the fortunes of Latisan and the Flagg drive. [201]

She began to babble rather incoherently. His silence troubled her. His gaze was

intent.

After a time, allowing her to talk on, he ordered Dick to bring more fire for the pipe, and then he puffed and listened a little longer.

At last he jabbed his pipe stem toward the door, and Dick obeyed the silent command and left the room.

"Now, my girl, hold up a moment and get your breath. Sit down!" She obeyed.

"I see that you're hanging on to Latisan's cap and jacket. Did he pull himself out of the jacket whilst you were clinging to his collar?" In spite of the seriousness of the news which she had brought to him, there was a touch of dry humor in his tone. "He must have had a pretty desperate change of heart to run away from such a girl, after what he told me of his feelings this morning."

He talked on, allowing her to recover. "Your words have been tumbling along like logs coming down the Hulling Machine Falls, but I reckon I understand that a detective agency sent you up here to Delilah my Samson. I've just been reading about that case in the Old Testament. And you're sorry, eh? It's a start in the right direction—being sorry. He told me this morning that he was going back to the drive in spite of me—he said it was because you had torched him on to do so. I'll admit I haven't got over being thankful to you for that help. And now it's all tipped upside down, eh? I'm not surprised. It's the Latisan nature to blow up! I knew his grandfather well—and I remember! We seem to have made a bad mess of it, you and I. I'll own to it that I haven't been careful in the management of my tongue where he's concerned. If I had, all the girls this side o' Tophet couldn't have made him jump his job in this style. You see, I'm willing to admit my mistake, and that makes me feel kinder toward you, now that you admit yours." [202]

Her courage was coming back to her. Only a veritable frenzy of despair had forced her into the presence of that old man who had declared his unalterable hostility to her and hers. She found him singularly and surprisingly mild in this crisis. Wreathed in the tobacco smoke, his countenance was full of sympathy. It was an amazing alteration in Echford Flagg, so those who knew him would have stated, had they been there to behold.

"I suppose you have to slap on a lot of deceit in that detective business."

"I'm done with deceit. I've left that work forever."

"So I reckoned whilst I looked at you and heard you talk. I've got quite an eye for a change of heart in persons. I hate to see young folks in trouble. 'Most always I'm pretty hard on people. I've grown to be that way. Had good reasons! But you seem to have caught me to-day in a different frame of mind. I didn't get a good look at you last evening. I've just been telling myself that you remind me very much of somebody I used to know. There was a time," he went on, wrinkling his forehead, "when I would have ordered you out of this house, simply on your looks. But to-day, somehow, I like to keep my eyes on you. Old age has a lot of whims, you know." [203]

She did not venture to speak. Tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"It's too bad, sis! Too bad! 'Tis a tough thing to work out, this Latisan matter. You have started the old John devil a-roaring in him! And I reckon that now you're falling in love with the fool, even if you did come up-country to do something mean to him!"

She nodded; her emotions were too deeply stirred to permit evasion or more deceit.

"I have to depend on hired help, sis. And the trouble with any other drive master than Latisan is that the opposition crowd can hire away what Latisan wouldn't sell—I'll say that for the boy! It's a matter of principle with him—this fight for the independents."

"But your men will keep on working, won't they, sir?"

"They'll work—yes! But they won't fight without Latisan to lead 'em. That's why the Three C's folks are so hot on the trail of one man. They're going to trig my drive at the Skulltree dam unless we are through ahead of 'em. Conservation of water, that's what they will call it when they make their play for a court order," he snarled. "But it's only devilish theft of the rights I hold in common—and that's where lawyers have their chance to argue, when rights are common." He found himself becoming garrulous in his emotion. He frowned. "But why talk such matters to you; you can't understand!" [204]

"No," she admitted, sadly. "I haven't any knowledge about drives. I can only understand that through me a great mischief has been done."

"Well, it might have been worse for young Latisan if they hadn't got rid of him by this underhand way. Now that he has quit and has gone larruping off on his own hook, you may as well get what comfort out of it you can," he said, trying to

ameliorate her distress. "There's no telling what they might have been savage enough to do to him if he had stayed to make the fight as he intended to make it."

"Do you give up the fight?"

With the left hand he lifted his helpless right arm across his knees. "It's a two-fisted proposition this year. I guess I'm licked. They'll buy in my logs at what price they have a mind to pay and will turn 'em into paper. The sawmills will have to shut down, and the chap who wants to build a home will keep on cussing the price of lumber. I have made a good try of it, sis, but the big combinations are bound to have their way in the end."

"It isn't right for anybody to have his own way without giving the other man a square deal," she cried, adding, with bitterness, "though I'm the last person entitled to preach on that subject."

"It's all in the way of progress, so the syndicate fellows tell us," he remarked, dryly. "Maybe they know. Whilst they're grabbing in all the money, they may be getting control of all the brains, too."

She flung up her arms and accused herself, passionately: "I have been a fool. I'd give my very heart to make matters right again!" [205]

"I think so," he admitted. "I reckon you're in earnest."

Again his fixed, appraising stare was disturbing her.

"About Mr. Latisan——" she hurried on. "I can't believe that he'll stay away long."

"I guess you know as little about the ways of men up here as you know about the drives, my girl. There's plenty of iron in their natures, but there isn't much brass in their cheeks. He's done—he can't face the Big Laugh. He's seen what it has done to others. But you city folks don't understand woods ways and notions!"

She set her firm teeth over her lower lip to control its quivering. Then she ventured. It was a resolve born out of her desperate desire to redeem, if she were able. There was one thing she could do—it seemed a natural thing to do, in that extremity.

"I have something to ask of you. Please don't be angry! I'm trying to square myself!"

"Go ahead! I'm ready now to be pretty easy natured when somebody is really in earnest about helping me."

"Give me your permission to go north and explain to your men why Mr. Latisan isn't on the drive! I'll tell them everything. I'll open my soul to those men. They'll understand."

"It's not a girl's job," he declared, sternly.

"I have been trained in a hard school, sir. I have been forced to study men and to deal with men. I have been sorry because I have been obliged to do the things I have done. But my knowledge of men may help your affairs. I am glad I have been through my trials. Let me go north to your crews! I beg it of you!" [206]

"I don't want to have you messing into any such business. There's something about you—something that makes me want to put a safeguard over you, sis, instead of sending you into danger."

"You'll make the danger worse for me if you don't give me that permission—a word from you to them that I'm your agent." She arose, flaming with her resolution. "I am going anyway, sir! You can't stop me from going where I will in the woods."

"You're right!" he admitted, sadly. "I'm so old and helpless that I can't even boss a girl."

She stood in front of him and put Latisan's cap on her head; she pulled on the belted jacket. "They'll know this jacket and cap! I'll tell the story! Do you think it is folly? No! I can see in your face that you know what those men will do!"

"Yes, I do know! I have been a woodsman in my time, too! After they have listened to you they'll hammer hell out of anything that gets in front of 'em."

His face lighted up. He beamed on her. "I told you that old age has its whims. A minute ago a whim made me want to keep you away from trouble. Now, by the gods! the same whim makes me want to send you north. You will stand for Eck Flagg, saying what he'd like to say to his men! The right spirit is in you! I ain't afraid that you won't make good!"

He pointed to an object on the wall of the room. It was a stout staff of ash tipped with a steel nose and provided with a hook of steel; it was the Flagg cant dog. The ash staff was banded with faded red stripes and there was a queer figure carved on [207]

the wood.

"Lift it down and bring it here and lay it across my knees," he commanded.

She ran and brought it.

"They know that stick along the Noda waters," he told her, caressing the staff with his hale hand. "I carried it at the head of the drive for many a year, my girl. You won't need letters of introduction if you go north with that stick in your hand. I would never give it into the hands of a man. It has propped the edge of my shelter tent, to keep the spring snow off my face when I caught a few winks of sleep; that steel dog has rattled nigh my ear when I couldn't afford to sleep and kept walking. Tell 'em your story, with that stick in your hand when you tell it! Take it and stand up in front of me!"

Her face was white; she trembled when she lifted the staff from his knees.

An old man's whim! The girl believed that she understood better than he the instinct which was prompting him to deliver over the scepter which he had treasured for so long.

And some sort of instinct, trickling in the blood from that riverman forebear, prompted her strike a pose, which brought a yelp of admiration from the old man. She had set the steel nose close to her right foot and propped the staff, with right arm fully extended, swinging the stick with a man-fashion sweep.

"Sis, where did ye learn the twist of the Flagg wrist when ye set that staff?" It was a compliment rather than a question, and the girl did not reply. She was not able to speak; a sob was choking her. Her grip on that badge of the family authority thrilled her; here was the last of her kin; he was intrusting to her, as his sole dependence, the mission of saving his pride and his fortunes. Her tear-wet eyes pledged him her devoted loyalty. [208]

"God bless you!" he said.

"And may God help me," she added fervently. Impulse was irresistible. She succumbed. She dropped the staff and ran to the old man and threw her arms convulsively about his neck and kissed him.

"I'm sorry," she faltered, stepping back. "I'm afraid I startled you."

"No," he told her, after a moment of reflection, "I guess I rather expected you'd do that before you went away. Some more of that whim, maybe! When do you think of leaving?"

"I'd like to go at once. I cannot stay any longer in this village."

"You'd best get to my drivers as soon as the Three C's slander does."

He shouted at a door and old Dick appeared.

"Move spry now!" commanded the master. "Have Jeff hitch the big bays into the jumper. And Jeff will be able to tend and do for me whilst you're away. For here's the job I'm sending you on. Take this young woman north to the drive. She's tending to some business for me. See to it that she's taken good care of. And bring her back when she feels that she's ready to come." [209]

"Am I to come here—back to your house to-to——" she faltered.

"To report? Of course you are!" He was suddenly curt and cold after his softness of the moment before. He looked as if he were impatient for her to be gone.

"Have Dick stop at the tavern for your belongings."

"There's only a small bag, sir."

"If you're short of clothes—well, I advise you to wear Latisan's cap and jacket. They'll keep you warm—and they'll keep you—reminded!" He put much meaning in his emphasis of the last word.

She bowed her head humbly; the clutch at her throat would not permit her to reply to him. Then, bearing with her the Flagg scepter, she went out to where the horses were being put to the jumper.

When he was alone the old man laid his hand on the Bible at his side. For a long time he gazed straight ahead, deep in his ponderings. Then he opened the volume and leaved the pages until he came to the family register, midway in the book. After the New England custom, there were inscribed in faded ink the names of the Flaggs who had been born, the names of those who had died, the records of the marriages. Echford Flagg's father had begun the register; the son had continued it. Across the marriage record of Alfred Kennard and Sylvia Flagg were rude penstrokes. On the page of births was the name of Lida Kennard, and he slowly ran his finger under it. When he gazed down at the floor again in meditation he met the stare of the cat that [210]

Rickety Dick loved and petted.

The cat was bestowing no friendly look on Flagg. He had often cuffed her whenever she ventured to leap into his lap. He had repulsed the cat as he repelled human beings who had sought to make up to him. Now he called to her softly, inviting her with his hand. She backed away with apprehensive haste.

"I'm starting late, pussy," he muttered. "And I was never much of a hand at coaxing anybody to come to me. But I wish you'd hop up here on my knee. Come, kitty! Please come!"

It was a long time before he was able to gain her confidence. He heard the big bays go trampling away down the ledges. At last the cat came cautiously, climbing up his leg, and sat on his knees and stared up at his face in a questioning way.

"She's too much like her mother for me not to know her—like her mother looked when she went away," he informed the cat. "I reckon I'm a whole lot different right now than I ever was before. I'm old and sick—and I'm different. I don't blame you for looking hard at me, kitty. I'm so lonesome that I'm glad to have a cat to talk to. She's got her mother's looks—and the Flagg grit. She wants to do it her own way—like I'd want to do it my way, without being bothered. And I'm letting her do it. It wouldn't be a square deal if I didn't let her. And she'll do it! It's in her! She's trying to pay back. It's the style of the Flaggs. She didn't come up here to smash me or Latisan. I didn't believe what she said—a Flagg knows when another Flagg is lying. She came to help—and she'll do it yet! She's Lida, kitty, Lida!" His tone caressed the name. His hand caressed the written name. [211]

Then he turned the pages slowly, going forward in the volume—to the New Testament.

And after a time he found words which fitted his new mood and he read aloud to his feline auditor.

"Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another—"

Jeff, the servitor, hearing the mumble of the old man's voice, tiptoed to the door and peeped in. He goggled at the tableau and listened to the words. He was in the state of mind of that oft-quoted doubter who spat on the giraffe's hoof and remarked to the bystanders, "Hell! There ain't no such animile!"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BROPHY was distinctly inhospitable when Lida walked into the tavern.

She curtly stated her errand as she passed him on her way to the stairs, and when she returned with her bag he allowed her to leave without opening his mouth. She took the money he offered and put it in her pocket without counting it.

The men who were about the place were silent, too. The fact that Flagg was sending her away in his own hitch stirred their curiosity and had considerable to do with keeping their rude tongues off a person who had evidently come to an understanding with the master of the big house.

"Where are ye headed, Dick?" asked a bystander while the girl was in the tavern.

"Up and down," stated the old man, cryptically.

"Well, if you want to overtake them chums of hers you'll have to lay on the braid pretty smart! If they kept on going at the rate they started off they're halfway to the junction by now."

When the girl was in her seat Dick sent the bays along at a sharp clip down the highway by which Crowley and his companion had departed.

Lida had conferred with Dick on the way down from the big house and had decided on a bit of guile to divert the attention of the gossips of Adonia from her real objective. According to all appearances she was in full flight toward the city, or else was chasing up Ward Latisan; the cynics, after that affair in the street when she had pleaded with the young man, opined that she was brazen enough to do almost anything that a girl should not. [213]

Brophy watched her out of sight.

"If it ain't one thing it's another with these table girls," was his sour comment. "I don't know what I'm liable to draw next; the Queen of Sheby, maybe!"

When a hill shut off the view from Adonia the bays swung into a side lane which connected with the tote road leading north along the Noda waters.

A girl who wore for her armor Latisan's jacket and his cap, and carried as credentials the woods baton of the last of the independent timber barons of the Noda, was hastening on her mission with the same sort of fervent zeal that made Joan of Arc a conqueror.

Family fealty, the eager desire to right in some measure the wrong done by her father, anxious determination to repair her own fault—all these were animating impulses in this Joan of the Northland. But now especially was she aware that she was seeking by service to absolve herself in the estimation of a poor chap whose love for her had made him forget his duty.

There was no talk between the girl and her charioteer. She had plenty of thought to occupy her, and he drove on with his gaze straight between the ears of the nigh horse.

The road was crooked; when she glanced behind, the woods seemed to be shutting doors on her, closing out the world with which she had been familiar; and ahead, as the road turned, she was looking into vistas which led to the unknown—to a duty of tremendous import—to a task which seemed too great for a girl to accomplish. One knowledge comforted her—it was a knowledge which came from her childhood memories—she could trust those rough men of the woods to treat a girl with respect if she deserved it; but would she be able to convince them that the girl who wrought such mischief to Ward Latisan deserved respect? They might, as her grandfather said, ridicule a man who had been fooled by a girl, if that man appeared to them and tried to make good his authority; but there would be no laugh in the north country behind Latisan's back, now that he had fled desperately from the wreck of his prospects.

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She perceived only silent rebuke, even resentment, in Dick's countenance when she stole glances at the hard profile above the old man's knitted scarf. It was plain that he did not relish his job. She wondered whether he believed that her errand was useless. When, after a time, she tried to draw some opinion out of him he gave her no replies that aided her.

She felt acutely that she needed sympathy—something for her encouragement. The old man's taciturnity hinted that he could be trusted with a secret so far as outsiders were concerned; as to Flagg, she was not sure of Dick's reliability in keeping anything away from a master to whom he was devoted. But if the old man were kept away from Adonia—

"Do I understand that you're to stay north until I'm ready to go back?"

"I've got to. It's orders."

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She was choking with the desire to tell him who she was. The lie which she had told him in the tavern was a rankling memory—he had been such a pitiful figure that day.

Again she looked behind. There were many miles between her and Adonia, and the doors of the woods kept closing.

"I need all your help in this thing. I must have a faithful friend. It is the one great effort of my life. You can understand so well! I—I *am* Lida Kennard!"

Rickety Dick threw up his arms. The reins fell from his hands. "Praise the Lord!" he yelled. The discarded reins slapped the big bays, the shout in that silence caused them to leap wildly. The tote road was rough and rocky and the equipage was light. Almost instantly the horses tore the tongue from the jumper, which was triggered by a boulder. The animals crashed around in a circle through the underbrush, leaped into the tote road, and went galloping back toward Adonia, seeking their stalls and safety.

Dick rose from where he had fallen and rushed to the girl, who was clinging to the seat of the jumper. He took her in his arms, comforting her as he would have soothed a child. He wept frankly and babbled incoherently. A part of his emotion was concern for her, but more especially was it joy because she had discovered herself to him.

"It was in me—the hope that it was you. But I buried it; I buried it," he sobbed.

For some moments he was too much absorbed to note the plight in which they had been left. Then his laments were so violent that the girl was obliged to soothe him in her turn.

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"But when those horses rush into the yard! Think of it! He'll cal'late we're killed. Him penned there in his chair with worry tearing at him! I must get the word to him." In his frantic care for the master's peace of mind he ran away down the road,

forgetting that he was abandoning the girl.

But in a few moments he came running back to her. "That's the way it always is with me! Him first! But after this it's you—and I was leaving you here in the lurch. But I don't know what to do!" He looked at her, then at the broken jumper; he gazed to the north and he stared to the south; in that emergency, his emotions stressed by what she had told him, he was as helpless as a child.

Her own concern just then was for her grandfather as well as for herself. Those runaway horses appearing in the yard would rouse his bitter fear; they would also start a hue and cry which would follow her into the north country.

"You must go back, at once!" she urged Dick. "Follow as fast as you can. The horses will quiet down; they'll walk. You may overtake them. You must try."

"But you!" he mourned.

She lifted the cant dog from the floor of the jumper. "I shall keep on toward the drive—somehow—some way. This will protect me; I'm sure of it."

He puckered his face and shook his head and expressed his fears and his doubts.

"Then I'm showing more faith than you in what this stands for," she said, rebukingly. "I believe in it. I trust to it. Haven't you the same kind of loyalty where my grandfather is concerned—after all your years with him?" [217]

She had appealed to zealous, unquestioning devotion, and it replied to her. "I reckon you're right. It wouldn't be showing proper respect if I didn't meet you halfway in the thing." He reached out his hand and patted the staff. "I'm only a poor old bent stick beside that one. I even let the horses run away. Yes, they have run away—and now it's all the long miles to the drive! How'll ye ever get there, Miss Lida?"

"By starting!" she returned, crisply, with something of Flagg's manner.

"There are tote teams going north. Anybody'll be glad to give you a lift. There are bateaus above here, ferrying supplies up the broad water, and you may see a canoeman——" He was wistfully grabbing at hopes.

"I'm not afraid," she assured him bravely.

He helped her with advice while he busied himself by hooking the handle of her bag over the staff; she carried it across her shoulder and had something cheerful to say about poverty making light luggage.

In that fashion she fared toward the north, after she had forced a pledge from the old man that he would keep her secret until her work was done; she was guilelessly unaware that Flagg's perspicacity had penetrated her secret.

Dick plodded toward the south.

There, in the midst of the forest, dwarfed by the big trees, they seemed to be weak reeds for the support of the Flagg fortunes. [218]

Before a bend of the road shut them from sight of each other they turned and waved a farewell which renewed the pledge.

CHAPTER TWENTY

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FOR a time Lida felt unutterably and miserably lonely and helpless. She had stepped out of everything that was familiar in the way of human contact and environment; she was facing the new, the untried, something that was not a woman's job, as her grandfather had declared.

But it was a job for that one of the Flaggs who still had the grit and the strength to perform it!

With that thought came her reaction. She began to realize that as long as Dick had been her companion, her guardian, she had not been conscious of the real exaltation of determination which now glowed in her. She felt courage born of sacred zeal. She was alone, but no longer did that thought trouble her. Because she was alone it was up to her! She walked on with a steadier stride. If she appeared at the drive under the convoy of old Dick she was only a girl sent to whine a confession of fault and to wheedle men to help her repair it. Would it not be well to take those men fully into her confidence? She was resolved to tell them that she loved Ward Latisan; she was

admitting this truth to herself and she was in a mood to tell all the truth to honest men who would be able to understand. She was going north to inspire faith and courage and loyalty. Would not the known granddaughter of Echford Flagg be able to exert that compelling moral influence over the crew? Those men were primitive enough to understand the urge of honest love of woman for a man; and there was the spirit of chivalrous romance in the north country. She knew it.

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Her heart was bolder as she walked on, but her feet ached and the rough road wearied her. She met no human being; she sat for a time on a wayside boulder, hoping that some straggling tote team would come up from the south and overtake her.

The road snaked along in the Noda Valley, and from time to time she was close to the turbid flood which swept down ice cakes and flotsam. From her boulder she could see a broad and calm stretch—a deadwater of which she did not know the name.

Then, close to the shore where she waited, came a canoe headed upriver. Two men were in it, paddling sturdily, taking advantage of eddies and backwash. Fresh from the city as she was, she felt a thrill of sudden terror; the men were Indians and wore the full regalia of tribal dress.

As a child she had seen and remembered well the Tarratines of the region; they had been dressed like other woodsmen. These Indians with feathers and beads put a strange fear into her in that solitude. She slid from the rock and crouched behind it. She grasped the staff of the cant dog more firmly; it was her only weapon of defense. But when her fingers felt the depressions of the totem mark she turned from terror to hope. Latisan, at their first meeting, had referred to the status of Echford Flagg among the Tarratines. Courage was back in her again, along with her new hope. She leaped to her feet and called to the Indians and flourished a salute. They hesitated a moment, then drove their craft to the shore a pebble toss away from her.

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She did not speak to them—she held the staff so that the emblem was shown to them. They disembarked, approached slowly, peered at the totem, and saluted with upraised palms.

“I have the right to carry it,” she told them. “It is Echford Flagg’s. He gave it into my hands. He said it is known along the river and will help me. I want to go north to his drive. He has sent me. It is on his business!”

She received no immediate encouragement from their manner; they looked at each other and turned their gaze again to her.

“Frank Orono,” said one, patting his hand on his beaded breast. “Him brother, Louis Orono.”

“The drive is up there. If you’re going only a little way in that direction won’t you take me along in your canoe?” she pleaded, confessing, “I’m so tired. There was an accident to the team—I’ve had to walk.”

“You see!” said Frank Orono, stroking his hand over the feathers of his headdress. “Big time for tribe. All dressed up. Him, me, we go to Olamon Island. Governor live there—Chief Susep Nicola. His girl she marry to-night. Big time!” He grinned. That evidence of human feeling in the countenance which had been so impassive heartened the girl.

“And if I can get as far as Olamon with you—”

They ducked their heads in permission.

“Maybe Chief Susep send you on. Chief he much like him!” Frank Orono pointed to the staff. “Chief cut in totem sign, his own hands. You come. Be all right.”

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They spread a blanket for her in the middle of the canoe and paddled on.

It was then past midafternoon of her crowded day.

When at last they swung around a wooded point and beheld the Indian village of Olamon the dusk was deepening. Many lights twinkled and a huge bonfire waved flaming tongues.

“Big time!” chuckled Frank Orono. “Pretty girl—nice feller she marry. Chief be glad to see you—you tell him!”

Those who were gathered at the pull-out place surveyed her with curiosity. The bonfire lighted the scene and many were able to see the totem mark on the staff of the cant dog. Those saluted her respectfully and passed the word to others, who came crowding about.

Therefore, when the brothers Orono escorted her into the presence of Sachem Nicola, Lida entertained the confidence of one who was among friends. The chief—or rather, the elected governor of the tribe—dwelt in a modest cottage, and with him

was the priest who had come for the wedding ceremony. It was the priest who displayed the liveliest interest in the girl and he promptly began to seek the reason that had brought her north with that emblem of authority. He questioned her with kindness, but with much vigor.

But Susep Nicola asked no questions. He seemed to accept her presence as a quite natural thing. A Tarratine never puts a question to a guest; the guest may explain or state his business in his own good time. The sachem set a chair for her and relieved her of the staff and her bag. He put his finger on the emblem and smiled. There was inquiry in his eyes whether she knew and understood. She bowed her head. [223]

As best she could she parried the questions of the inquisitive priest without making it appear that she was trying to hide anything. "It's an errand, and Mr. Flagg was kind enough to loan the staff as my token in these parts. You know he is ill and cannot go about any more. He must leave certain things to others."

"Well," admitted the priest, plainly struggling with a hankering to ask her bluntly what service a girl could perform for Flagg on the drive, "the ladies in these days are into all the affairs of men as well as on the juries, so we must consider it as quite natural that you have been sent up here by Mr. Flagg. At any rate, we should be grateful that you are here," he declared, gallantly.

"It's on account of the accident to my team that I'm forced to intrude at a time like this," she apologized to Nicola. He was an old man, gaunt and bowed, and his festal trappings seemed rather incongruous decorations.

"But you bring my brother's staff, and it makes you welcome for yourself and stands for him because he cannot come."

He called, and a woman appeared. He gave directions, and the woman offered to conduct Lida to a room in the cottage.

"You are honored guest," said the governor. "In an hour the wedding takes place in the church, and then the wedding supper!" [224]

"To which I beg permission to escort you," said the priest, bowing low as Lida went from the room.

She laid off her woods panoply of cap and jacket and made herself fit for the festival to such an extent as her scanty wardrobe would permit.

Before the wedding procession started for the church she was presented to the bride, Nicola's youngest daughter. The woman who had shown Lida to her room had gossiped a bit. The bride was the fruit of the governor's second marriage and had inherited her French Canadian mother's beauty. And the groom was a French Canadian, a strapping chap, a riverman of repute.

Lida was told that the men of the river, the jacks of the driving crews far and near, were making much of the wedding on account of their liking for Felix Lapierre. She had looked from her window and had seen bateaus come sweeping down, loaded with shouting men, the oars flashing in the light of torches set in the bows of the big boats. She felt more confident in regard to the morrow; those bateaus would be going back to the north and she had determined to make her plea for passage. In her anxiety the halt for the night was irksome. But she concealed her feelings and took her place in the procession, a post of honor that was deferentially assigned to her by the chief.

The flares of moving torches lighted all and the smoke from them wavered above the plumes of the festal costumes and spread the illumination among the swaying boughs of the spruces and the pines. [225]

An Indian brass band of pretensions rather more than modest led the way toward the church. The rear guard was made of rivermen who marched in ragged formation, scuffling, elbowing one another, shouting jokes, making merry after their manner. Their boots, spurred with drivers' spikes, crunched into the hard earth and occasionally struck fire from an outcropping of ledge. They pulled off those boots at the door of the church and went into the place, tiptoeing in their stocking feet.

So Alice and Felix were joined in marriage.

Lida sat beside the girl's mother during the ceremony.

The tears that are shed by womankind at weddings form a baptism for sentiments which cannot be easily translated into exact understanding. It had begun to seem very far away in time and space, that tragedy of the morning in Adonia, that wreck of a man's love, and the blasting of what Lida had admitted to herself was her own fond hope. Now, in this scene, hearing the words which gave lovers the sacred right to face the world hand in hand, her own grievous case came back to her in poignant clearness. She wept frankly; there had been honest tears in the mother's eyes. The two looked at each other and then the mother's hand slid into the girl's and mutely

expressed for the stranger what could not be put into words. There were no questions and no replies—the situation required none.

For the more casual guests, the rivermen and others, the supper was spread out of doors near the water. It was a simple feast which had been cooked over coals in the open. [226]

The sachem's party ate in a large room; by day it served the women of the tribe as a workshop. The walls were gay with the handicraft which had been hung up to clear a space for the tables. There were braided or woven baskets of all sizes and every hue; there were beaded skins and frippery of feathered gewgaws and moccasins and miniature canoes and plaques of birch, hand carved. And subordinating all else, even the scents and savors of the food, was the perfume of the sweet grass.

Outdoors, in a circle of torches, the band played merry airs.

"You should not be sad, mam'selle," reproved Father Leroque, who had constituted himself Lida's squire at supper. "This is a very merry occasion."

"I feel all the more as if I were intruding—bringing my troubles here."

The chatter of many voices made a shield for conversation between the two. The priest hesitated for some time; then he made sure that nobody was listening and leaned closer to her.

"I beg your pardon, mam'selle, if I seem presumptuous in touching on a matter regarding which you have not given me your confidence. I may be allowed to mention a bit of news. It came to me just before we sat down to supper. News travels fast in this region, you may know. From mouth to mouth it flies. Bateaus have come up the river, and the men of those bateaus have listened to timber cruisers and have heard from the drivers of tote teams who have come scattering through the woods below. There is the news of an engagement. I trust I may be allowed to speak of the news to you because it is my thought that you are the young lady concerned." [227]

She was not able to reply.

"And there is more news," he persisted. "Pardon me if I mention that, too. It is my province to console those who are in trouble, as best I may. Perhaps there is some way in which I can help you. I think highly of young Latisan. I know him because my duties have taken me into the Tomah region. There has been trouble between you and him—a misunderstanding. Is there any way in which I can be a mediator—as his friend?"

"He has gone away," she choked. "I don't know where he is. It was my fault. If I could have explained, it might have helped, but he would not wait to hear me through."

The priest's gentleness had conquered her resolution to keep her secret till she reached the men of the Flagg drive. He perceived her bitter need of sympathy.

"I respect confidences, even those given me outside the pale of my church's confessional. Young Latisan is like his grandfather—tinder for a stray spark. If I know your fault—if I can tell him, when I see him, what you would have liked to tell him—"

Hurriedly, in low tones, stammering in her eagerness, she did reveal who she was, what she had tried to do, and what she hoped to be able to do.

He was instantly alive to her cause with all the sympathy that was in him—an especially sincere sympathy because as a missionary priest he was close to the hearts of all the folk of the north country, probing their affairs with an innocent but vivid interest and striving always to aid with earnest zeal. [228]

Though Lida had parried his questions at first, protecting her secret, she was now grateful because he had persisted; his manner and his nature removed him from the ranks of mere busybodies. A comforting sense arose from having confided in him.

"In the Tomah I will find young Latisan; I am on my way across the mountains, mam'selle. He must be awake and himself by now; he must have gone home. When I tell him the truth he will lift all the trouble from your shoulders. But till he comes you must be brave. And who knows? You may be able to smooth the path! If you plead your grandfather's cause up here, I believe even the great Comas company will listen and be kind. There are many outside this door who have come down from the drives to have a bit of fun at the wedding. There must be Flagg men. I will find out."

"Let me go with you," she urged, anxiously.

He demurred.

"But I'll not speak to them. If I can see them—only a few of them—the real men of our drive—I believe I shall find courage to go on."

She prevailed, though he was doubtful and warned her that the babbling of the new gossip might be embarrassing.

And so it proved as Father Leroque feared; men perceived only the beguilement of Ward Latisan and had heard only the sordid side of the happenings in Adonia; the girl was glad because she was hid in the gloom outside the circle of light that was the nimbus of the bonfire. They were laughing as they discussed a matter which had eclipsed the interest in the wedding. Her cheeks were hot and she was scarcely restrained by the priest's monitory palm on her shoulder. [229]

Men were feasting and gossiping; they were herded around the fire, squatting Turk fashion, steaming pannikins on the ground by their sides, heaped plates on their knees.

"Fifteen of us," stated a man, answering a question. "And prob'ly more to follow. Ben Kyle has gone up there in a hurry, grudge and all, and is hiring for the Comas. If there ain't going to be any fight we may as well work for the Three C's."

"Stay here!" commanded Father Leroque, patting the girl's arm. "Stay where they can't see you." He stepped forward into the firelight. "Do I understand that the Flagg crew is breaking up?"

"Fifteen of us in this bunch," restated the man, rapping his pannikin to dislodge the tea leaves and holding it out for more of the beverage. "Wedding brought us down—the news we hear is going to keep us going. Flagg is done."

"Yes, if his men desert him. You mustn't do it; it isn't square."

The priest found it easy to locate the recreants among the other rivermen; they shifted their eyes under his rebuking gaze. "Go back to your work. Another will come in young Latisan's place."

"All respect to you, Father! But we can't do it," said the spokesman. "We're Latisan's men. The rest of the gang will laugh us out of the crew if we go back." [230]

"I'll have Latisan himself on the job inside of a few days, my men," declared the priest, stoutly.

He had promised to them another who would take the drive master's place; now he promised Latisan. The men were merely puzzled; they were not convinced.

"Will you go back?"

"We can't go back." It was said with conviction, and a mumble of voices indorsed him. "Still, all respect to you, Father! But Latisan won't fit any longer even if he does go back. He has let himself be goofered."

Father Leroque had set up his temporary altar in many a lumber camp; he knew woodsmen; therefore, he knew that argument with those men would be idle.

"You have heard," he said to Lida when the two walked away deeper into the shadows. "I'm sorry. But so the matter stands."

"But if I go now and talk to them—confess to them——"

"They are Latisan's own men, and the story is fresh, and their resentment is hot. You will not prevail, mam'selle. And if you fail to-night with those men you risk failing with all. You must go on to the drive—talk to the others who are still loyal. I fear much, I must warn you, but I will not try to keep you from what seems to be your duty. It would be too great unhappiness for you if you should go back now, feeling that you had not done your best." [231]

The bandsmen had eaten of the wedding feast and were again valorously making gay music outside the workshop building from whose windows poured light and laughter.

"I can't go back in there—I can't!" sobbed Lida. "Right now I want to hide away."

With gentle understanding the priest escorted her to the door of the sachem's cottage. "I will pray for you, that the morning may bring good courage again. I will talk with you then—in the morning."

She stammered broken words of gratitude and escaped to the covert of the little room.

Father Leroque went back to the wedding party and called the governor out into the night. For a long time the two conferred, walking to and fro under the big pines.

SUNRISE was crystal clear, with frosty crispness, for April in the northern latitudes flirts long with Winter on his way to everlasting snows. Lida saw the sun come quivering over the big trees and sat by her window, continuing the doleful ponderings which had made the night black and dismal. There was no cheer for her in the morning radiance; as she faced what was ahead of her, new fear grew in her; faith in herself was waning after the defection of Latisan's men. Would Echford Flagg's own crew stand by a stricken master or hearken to the appeal of Flagg's kin?

The rivermen guests had departed; there were no bateaus on the shore; faint smoke came wreathing from the black embers of the feast fire.

Early as it was, there was the stir of life in the other rooms of the cottage, and she ventured forth timidly into the presence of the governor's family. The little mirror in her room had revealed to her the pallor of her face and the mournful anxiety in her eyes.

There was no talk at breakfast; the family copied the manner of the governor, who had greeted Lida with a single word, gestured her to her chair, and now ate in silence. All his festal trappings had been laid aside; he was a grave, wrinkled man in the ordinary attire of a woodsman. In her new humility Lida wondered how she would summon courage to ask for canoemen to take her north. The impulse to keep on toward the drive was no longer so keen and courageous and absorbing, she realized. She had dreamed vividly when she stood in the presence of Echford Flagg; but she had begun to face practicality, and the difficulties frightened her.

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Before the breakfast was finished, Father Leroque came in; he had lodged in the quarters provided for his visits, a small room in the vestry.

The sisters who taught the boys and girls of the community had brought his food. But he sat at the elbow of the governor's wife and drank the coffee that she poured for him. He was cheery, vivacious, and he smiled consolingly on Lida, who was not able to return his morning optimism. His arrival broke the fetters of silence, and even Susep Nicola joined in the chatter which the priest kept stirring.

Lida kept her gaze on the floor and saw the broad shaft of sunlight shift slowly and relentlessly, marking the passage of precious time.

"I must go," she said, suddenly, looking into the countenance of Nicola.

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I ought to have been on my way before."

"It's for you to say when you go; you are welcome here," he returned. "I have waited for you to say." It was according to his code of hospitality—the guest must indicate desire. He rose. His wife brought to Lida the jacket and the cap. But the chief picked up the Flagg cant dog and carried it when he led the way to the door.

Father Leroque seemed to understand what was in Lida's mind just then. "You are worried about how you are to travel, is it not so? You do not need to ask, mam'selle!" He bowed her to the door.

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In front of the sachem's house hung a broad disk of tanned moosehide in a frame. Nicola pounded on the makeshift gong with a mallet. Men assembled quickly in front of him, coming as if they had expected the summons.

"You know. I have told you," said the chief. He stroked his hand over the totem mark on the cant dog handle. "You know how our brother has been the good friend of the Tarratines on this river."

One step in advance of the others of the throng stood Felix Lapierre, the bridegroom.

"How many?" asked the chief.

"Twenty," said Felix. "And all very much happy to do the good service."

The priest smiled into the amazed eyes of the girl. "For your conveyance? Ah no, mam'selle. For your good help on the drive. They are rivermen—the best. Felix Lapierre leads them and you shall see for yourself what a king of the white water he is. He will be your right-hand man on the drive. It is all very fine, eh, mam'selle?"

She was staring from face to face, overwhelmed. She could not reply.

"We talk it over—him and me—last night," said Nicola, indicating the priest by a respectful bow. "It's for my brother, and the blood of my brother." He bowed to her.

"And all so very happy," repeated Felix. His black eyes sparkled and he flung up his hands in the gay spirit of emprise. "You must not care because some have run

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away. They would not be good in a crew if they feel that way now. We feel good. We shall work for you; we are your men."

The big matter, this astounding making good of her forces, this rallying of volunteers in such chivalrous and unquestioning fashion—she found herself unable to handle the situation in her thoughts or treat it with spoken words just then. But the other—the human thing—

"It's—it's the honeymoon," she stammered. "It will be taking you away from your wife."

"She's my girl," put in Nicola. "She tells him to go."

Father Leroque perceived Lida's distressful inability to pull herself together at that moment, and he employed his ready tact, giving her time for thought. "It's quite a natural thing, this taking away of the new bridegroom for the service of the Flaggs," he declared with a chuckle. "There's even a song—I think it was written by Poet O'Gorman. Do you know it, Felix? I can see by your grin that you do. Very well. Let's have it. As I remember it, it states the case according to the Flagg methods."

Lapierre pulled off his cap; his eyes were alight with merriment; he sang gayly:

The night that I was married—the night that I was wed—
Up there came old Echford Flagg and rapped on my bed head.
Said he, "Arise, young married man, and come along with me,
Where the waters of the Noda they do roar along so free."

"You see!" suggested the priest, archly, smiling, palms spread. "When Flagg calls, the honeymoon must wait. It promises good adventure, and Felix would be sorry if he were not in it." [236]

Cap in hand, Lapierre swept his arm in a broad gesture of respectful devotion. It was a touch of gallantry which raised the affair above the prosaic details of mere business and which made the relations closer than those of employer and employed.

In Lida gratitude was succeeding amazement, and the glow of that gratitude was warming her courage into life again. When she had stepped from Nicola's door a few moments before she felt bitterly alone and helpless and she had no eye for the glory of the day. Suddenly the sunshine seemed transcendently cheery. All the aspects of the case were changed. Now she could go on to the drive as one of the Flaggs should go—with loyal men at her back to replace those who had deserted. She could hearten a broken crew with men, not merely with a strange girl's plaintive story and appeal.

"We're ready, mam'selle," said Felix.

The women of the community were gathered in front of the sachem's house.

Lapierre went smiling to his bride and put his arm about her; but when he started to draw her toward Lida the latter anticipated the coming by running to meet them. She took the little bride in her arms.

The priest, Felix, and the governor swapped looks and nods which indorsed an understanding that was wordless between the young women.

When Lida turned from the governor's daughter she saw the governor himself coming toward her. He held out the cant dog; it lay across his palms and he tendered it respectfully. [237]

She winked the mist of tears from her eyes and struggled with a hysterical desire to babble many words.

"Hush!" warned the priest. "We all know!"

There, in a golden silence, she realized how cheap and base was the clinking metal of speech that had been the currency of herself and others in the crowded town.

The river, slowed by the deadwater, was mute, though its foam streaks showed where it had crashed through the gorges above. A few chickadees chirruped bravely. There were no other sounds while the girl took the Flagg scepter in her own hands.

She walked with Felix to the shore, where the flotilla of canoes lay upturned at the pull-out place. Again the Oronos were assigned to her, and she was comforted much because they no longer seemed like strangers.

"Au revoir!" called Father Leroque when the canoes were afloat on the brown flood. "I'm making haste to the Tomah, mam'selle, to keep my promise!"

He had already accomplished so much for her! In her new thanksgiving spirit she was finding it easy to believe that he could bring about what her self-acknowledged love for Lisan so earnestly desired.

In single file, holding close to the shore, the canoes went toward the north. There was no talk between those who paddled; against the brown shore the canoes were

merely moving smudges.

Rufus Craig, coming down the middle of the deadwater in one of the great bateaus of the Comas company, paid no attention to the smudges. The bateau rode high and rapidly on the flood that moved down the channel. Craig was writing in his notebook and four oarsmen were obeying his command to dip deep and pull strong. [238]

Craig had met Ben Kyle by appointment at the foot of the Oxbow portage and he had found Kyle to be particularly malevolent and entirely willing—and Kyle had gone north to the Flagg drive in the pay of the Three C's.

It had been a profitable interview, as Director Craig viewed it.

Now he was chasing along the trail of rumor to Adonia; the rumor was encouraging. If Latisan really had been pried out of the section, Craig saw an opportunity to run back to New York to make a private settlement with Mern and enjoy a little relaxation before the pressing matters of the drive in full swing claimed all his attention. Right then, according to all appearances, the Comas business up-country was doing very well in the hands of the understrapper bosses. Therefore, Director Craig smiled over the pages of his notebook.

The brown smudges in single file went on and on. Noon at the foot of the portage at Oxbow! Lida sniffed the wood smoke of the cook fire and ate her lunch and drank her tea.

Up the narrow trail of the gorge she followed at the rear of her men; the canoes, upturned on their shoulders, glistened in the sparkling sunshine. She was bringing real aid in a time of stress, as one of the Flaggs should! More and more that consciousness heartened her. [239]

Quiet water at the put-in, then rapids where the canoes were poled, the irons clinking on the rocks over which the turbid waters rolled; more calm stretches where haste was made.

A night in the open at a camping site where a couch of boughs was piled for her under a deftly contrived shelter of braided branches of hemlocks.

And on in the first flush of the morning toward the drive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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BEN KYLE made "his bigness" when he went into Flagg's crew on his mission for Craig. He was not admitting to himself or anybody else that he was traitor. He blustered and bullyragged; he had been their boss and he had been fired without cause, he insisted. Even the loyal men did not presume to answer back; he had been too recently their master and the aura of authority still persisted. He came with a white-hot grudge and with rumors which he embroidered to suit his needs. Kyle had been far on the edge of affairs, and only the ripples of the Adonia events reached him. But his statement that Latisan had run away with a girl seemed to be certified by the drive master's continued absence. And there were those stories of Latisan's former weakness in the city; they had been sleeping; they were not dead.

Kyle was hiring for the Comas company—unabashed, blatantly. He strode from man to man, banging heavy palm on shoulders. "Come with the real folks. What's old Eck Flagg to-day? You might as well be hired by a bottle-sucking brat in a baby carriage. Where's Latisan? You tell me his men went downriver to meet him; they've kept on going. He has hid away, dancing his doxy on his knee. Where's your pay coming from when Eck Flagg goes broke?"

Kyle waded in the shallows where men were rolling logs, shouting to be heard above the roar of the waters. [241]

"We hired for a fight," said the men who hated the Comas. "But it doesn't look like one is going to be made."

"We've always stood behind Eck Flagg," said the old stand-bys of the crew. "But we ain't getting a square chance for honest work."

It was plain that the spirit was being beaten out of them under the hammer of Kyle's harangue—whether it was the adventurous spirit which craved fight or the honest spirit which had sent them north to the job.

When the night came down, after they had cleaned their pannikins of food, steaming hot, from the cook's kettles, while they smoked around the fire which drove

away the evening chill, Kyle paced to and fro among the groups, declaiming, detracting, and urging. He knew that he was prevailing, though slowly. Woodsmen in shifting their allegiance are not swayed by sudden impulse. His voice rang among the trees in the silence of the evening.

"Latisan is a sneak—Latisan is a runaway! Eck Flagg is next to a dead man!" Over and over he made those declarations, battering discouragement into their slow comprehension in order to win them to the Comas company. "And Latisan has thrown down real men for the sake of a girl! Do you want to get the Big Laugh when you show yourselves downriver?"

Voyagers who came from the southward, leaving their canoes below the falls, moved silently, after the fashion of the Tarratines. They halted on a shadowed slope within the range of Kyle's raucous voice, and Lida stepped forward to listen. The red flames lighted a circle among the trees, and she beheld the seated groups and saw the swaggering malcontent who paced to and fro. [242]

"I'm with the Three C's now, first, last, and all the time! Their money is waiting for you, men. Come, with the real folks, I tell you!"

And again, with even more fantastic trimmings, he set forth the story of Latisan's flight with a girl who had seduced him from his duty in the north.

Lida snatched the Flagg cant dog from the hands of Felix; he had been the bearer of her scepter. He blinked when he looked at her. The far-flung light of the camp fire, reflected in her eyes, had set veritable torches there. Her lips were apart and her white teeth were clenched and her face was ridged with resolution.

There was no mistaking the intention which righteous anger had stirred in her, but when she started down the slope Felix leaped and ventured to restrain her with a touch on her arm. "Is it well to let the Comas know that you are here or what you are going to do? Pardon, mam'selle, but think!"

"The lies! The lies!"

"Yes, mam'selle, but you can tell them the truth when he is not there to hear."

"But now he is there, and I cannot go to the men."

"In a little while you may go; he will not be there. And if he does not know what is going on up here, after his back is turned, maybe we shall have day after day to push our logs in ahead of all the others," explained the riverman. "They will be days worth much." Then with the imagery of his race he added, "Those days will be gold beads on our rosary, mam'selle!" He smiled into her eyes, from which the fires were departing. "Please wait here with the the others." [243]

He whispered to several of the Indians; when he sauntered down the slope the four summoned Tarratines stole to right and left, masking themselves in the shadows, flanking the champion who was going alone.

Most of the men of the crew recognized Felix Lapierre when he walked into the circle of light. They leaped up, surrounded him, their mouths full of hilarious congratulation, of excuses why they had not attended the wedding, of awkward jokes and questions. They could not understand why he had come north so soon. He shook his head, mildly refusing to satisfy their curiosity.

Kyle stood for a time; then he resumed his pacing. He no longer had listeners. Like children, the rivermen were wholly absorbed in a new toy—a bridegroom who had so suddenly deserted the handsomest girl between Adonia and The Forks.

"Oh, let him alone," advised Kyle, whetting his new grouch. "If they ain't running away *with* girls in this region, they're running away *from* 'em!"

Felix swung around and faced the speaker. "Do you speak of me?" he asked, quietly.

"Take it that way if you want to."

"Your tongue seems to be very busy, I have that to say to you. From up there on the hill I heard what you have to say about M'sieu Latisan, that he has run away with a girl." [244]

"And he has."

"You lie!"

That retort snapped the trigger on Kyle's inflamed temper. "You damnation squaw man!" he yelled, and drove a blow at the French Canadian; and Felix, following the fighting custom of his clan of the Laurentian Valley, ducked low, leaped high, and kicked Kyle under the hook of the jaw. It was the *coup à pied*. Kyle staggered and went down. When he struggled up and weakly attacked again, the antagonist met him face to face and smashed a stunning blow between Kyle's eyes; he fell and

remained on his back.

"One for me, and one for my wife he has insult'," cried Felix. He spun around, searching their faces. "Do any of you like to back him up?"

"Not on your life," said a spokesman. "He doesn't belong in this crew."

"I'm much obliged'," said Felix, politely. He whistled, and the four Indians rushed out from the shadows. "If he is not of the crew, then if he goes away it does not matter."

He commanded the Indians, and they lifted Kyle and started off with him.

"He'll not be hurt," Felix assured the men of the crew. "He'll go down the river where it's better for him."

Nobody offered protest. They were glad to be rid of that bellowing, insistent voice of the trouble-maker.

Their attention was wholly engaged with the involuntary departure of Kyle, and they did not observe Lapierre when he walked away; they turned to ask more questions, to be informed what this abduction signified, but Felix was nowhere to be seen. Men called but he did not reply. [245]

Babble of comment and argument! It was a picked fight—anybody could see that. Why should Lapierre come north in the Flagg interests? Lapierre had never worked in a Flagg crew. It was begun so suddenly and was ended so soon! A minute's flash of drama against the background of the night, into which they stared with searching eyes while they made clamor like quacking ducks that had been startled from sleep by a prowler! Curiosity was lashing them. They were wonted to their reckless adventure in the white water; it had become dull toil. This affair was something real in the way of excitement, with a mystery which tantalized them. Again they called into the night, seeking an explanation.

The prologue by which the Comas agent had been removed as tempter and tale-bearer had not been staged by Felix for calculated effect; he had thought only of getting Kyle out of the way. But never was an audience in more keenly receptive mood for a sequel than were those men who crowded closely in the patch of camp-fire radiance and asked questions of one another.

To them when they were in that mood came one who made the drama more poignant. They were hushed, they blinked uncertainly, they found it unreal, unbelievable.

For here was a girl, far north at the head of the drive in the season of the roaring waters. She came slowly from the night and stood at the edge of the circle of light. She was wearing Latisan's jacket and cap—there was no mistaking the colors, the checkings and the stripes; a drive master needs to signal his whereabouts to a crew just as a fire captain must make himself conspicuous by what he wears. [246]

They glanced at her garb, amazed by it. Then her face claimed all their attention, for she said to them, her voice steady, her eyes meeting theirs frankly, "I have overheard the talk a man has just made about a girl who coaxed Ward Latisan away from his work here. I am the girl."

It seemed as if men had been holding their breath since her appearance; in the profound silence the exhalations of that breath could be heard.

"But Ward Latisan did not run away with me from his duty. My being here answers that lie. And I have even a better answer—a reason why I would be the last one in the world to interfere willingly with his work this spring." She stepped close to them, nearer the fire, so that they could see what she held forth, tightly clutched in both hands. "This is Echford Flagg's cant dog—he told me it would be known by all his men. He gave it into my keeping for a sign that he has sent me north. And I have a right to carry it. I am Lida Kennard. I am Echford Flagg's granddaughter."

Behind her came crowding the Tarratines.

"Men have deserted from your crew. Here are others to take their places," she announced with pride.

She was dealing with men who were bashed by utter stupefaction; she noted it and her self-reliance grew steadier. She drove the point of the cant dog into the soft duff with a manner after the heart of Flagg himself. She spread her freed hands to them in appeal. "I have come here to tell you the truth." [247]

LATISAN had pitched the tune for that drive when he started it.

It was a tune in quick tempo, with the staccato clangor of the kettle drums of the dynamite when he burst the icy sheathing of the waters in order to dump the first logs in.

When he was on the job the directing wand of his pick pole kept everything jumping.

Even when he was away for a few days his men toiled with the spirit that he had left with them. They had adopted his cause and shared his righteous resentment against the tactics of the Three C's.

They were able to work on without his guidance, after a fashion, but for the fight that was ahead of them down the river they had depended on his captainship. Therefore, Kyle with his scandals and reports and his urging had been in a way to break down their morale. When they reflected, they realized it. And it had been a wicked thing to face—the prospect that they might quit! With Latisan of the Latisans present with them, pursuing an honest vengeance, there were lift and sweep and swing which made their toil an adventure rather than plain drudgery.

Then that day when rumor and Kyle and Latisan's protracted absence had nigh killed courage!

But then, the inspiring night which had brought the granddaughter of Echford Flagg with her story, her confession, her plea, and her still strong faith in the awakening of Ward Latisan when he was able to know the truth! She did not gloss her own involuntary fault; she was frank in the statement that she loved the man whom she had harmed by her mistake. She knew it was the truth; she took them into her confidence. Then there was more than mere courage in the men of the drive—they were sharers in the spirit of romance which put the dynamic zeal of fanatics behind those logs. The girl's cause was linked with Latisan's and was a compelling force.

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Like racing horses the Flagg timber rushed along, crowding the river from side to side.

The stream drives, breaking the bonds of the ice, had caught the top pitch of the floods and were hurled into the boiling rapids.

But there was more than the mere thrust of the roaring waters behind those tumbling logs.

The Flagg drive had a soul that year!

It was what the Comas corporation lacked.

Behind the Flagg logs were honest men, pityingly loyal—still to Latisan—and behind the toilers was a dominating spirit that was a combination of courage, wild enthusiasm, loyalty, and devotion in a campaign that now was entered upon with tempestuous fervor in the presence of Lida Kennard. When that fervor went smashing against the Three C's crowd the men who were animated only by a corporation's wages became cowards and stepped aside and gave the champions the right of way.

The slogan of Flagg men was, "Gangway for the girl!"

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They had taken up her cause; they had enrolled themselves with a perfect abandon of all considerations of self; for them, getting down that timber was merely a means to a much-desired end.

They were recklessly determined to help the girl make good! That was the urgent sentiment which their thoughts inscribed on the invisible oriflamme of the warfare that was waged for the new Joan along the waters of the Noda.

It was not especially because she was the granddaughter of Echford Flagg. His wages had never bought more than perfunctory service from crews. She was herself—and she had confessed her debts.

When she told them why she was wearing Latisan's cap and jacket, when she owned to her error and laid the blame on herself, when she pleaded with them to help her in undoing the bitter mischief, she won a devotion that questioned nothing.

"Men, he will come back. He will understand it all when he is himself again. And if you and I are able to show him that we have done his work well he will hold up his head once more as he has a right to do."

"God bless ye, girl, ye can't keep yourself apart from Latisan in this thing,"

declared an old man. "It's for the two o' ye that we do our work from now on! And it's for all of us, as well! For we'll ne'er draw happy breaths till we can stand by and see you meet him on the level—eye to eye—like one who has squared all accounts between you two! And the old grands'r, as well. What say, boys?"

But cheers could not serve their emotions then. They pulled off their caps and scrubbed their rough hands across their jackets and walked to her in single file and shook her hand in pregnant silence. [251]

And then the timber went through; the drive was beating all the past records.

When they needed water they took it. They blew their own dams and were very careless with dynamite when they came upon other dams of whose ownership they were not so sure.

"You see, miss, rights are well mixed up all through this region," said old Vittum, who had been spokesman for his fellows on her first meeting with them. He gave her a demure wink. "The main idea is, God is making this water run downhill just now, and it doesn't seem right for mortal man to stop it from running."

They "manned the river," as the drivers say. That meant overlapping crews, day and night.

No squad was out of sight of another; a yell above the roar of the flood or a cap brandished on the end of a pike pole summoned help to break a forming jam or to card logs off ledges or to dislodge "jillpokes" which had stabbed their ends into the soggy banks of the river. Men ate as they ran and they slept as they could. Some of them, snatching time to eat, sitting on the shore, went sound asleep after a few mouthfuls and slumbered with their faces in their plates till a companion kicked them back into wakefulness. They grinned and were up again!

As for Lida Kennard, she was treated with as much tender care as if she were a reigning princess on tour. She protested indignantly because they would not allow her to rough it along with them. They made soft beds of spruce tips at their camping sites and they gave her the post of honor in a big bateau. [252]

In the rush of affairs she did not pause to wonder whether she was offending any of the proprieties by staying on with the drive; she had become the Flagg spirit incarnate and was not troubling herself with petty matters.

Old Vittum and Felix were her advisers, and they prized her presence as an asset of inestimable value; she allowed them to think for her in that crisis.

"It's a tough life, miss, the best we can make it for you," admitted Vittum. "But if you can stick and hang till Skulltree is passed it means that the boys will keep the glory of doing in 'em!"

From rendering service according to her ability they could not prevent her, though the men protested. She helped the cooks. Hurrying here and there, following the scattered men of the crews, she tugged great cans of hot coffee. When the toilers saw her coming and heard her voice they took desperate chances on the white water, jousting with their pike poles like knights in a tourney.

She put into the hearts of the crew the passion of derring do!

The drive that spring was not a sordid task—it was high emprise, it was a joyous adventure!

Then the logs which had raced in the rapids came to the upper reaches of the slow deadwater of the flowage of the Skulltree dam; the flowage reached far back that year. [253]

At Skulltree was the crux of the situation, as Flagg had insisted, ragefully.

From the early days there had been a dam at that point; it was common property and conserved the water to be loosed to drive logs over the shallow rapids below.

The Three C's had spent more money on that dam, claiming that bigger drives needed extra water. The dam had been raised. The flowage vastly increased the extent of the deadwater, slowing the logs of the independents, whose towage methods were crude. The changes which had been made needed the sanction of impending legislation, required the authority of a charter for which application had been made. In the meantime the Three C's were holding the water and would be impounding logs; these logs were to be diverted through the new, artificial canal.

In asserting their rights the corporation folks were endangering the independent drives which were destined for the sawmills of the Noda.

Day by day, as the drive went on, the girl listened to the talk among her men until she understood, in some measure, the situation. All the reckless haste was made of no account unless their logs were to be permitted to pass the Skulltree dam.

Vittum explained to her that the law was still considering the question of "natural flowage." The dam had been changed from time to time in past years until the matter was in doubt.

"But the way the thing stands now there ain't much of that nat'ral flowage," he told her. "I claim that we have the right to go through, law or no law. Word was served early on Latisan that he must hold up at Skulltree this year and wait for the law."

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"Did he say what he proposed to do?" she asked.

"Yes, miss! I'll have to be excused from repeating what he said, in the way he said it, but the gist of it was that he was going through. He said he would use some kind of flowage, and hoped that when the lawyers got done talking in court it would be decided that the aforesaid nat'ral flowage was the kind that had been used by him."

She pulled off Ward's cap and turned it about in her hand, surveying it judiciously. "I can seem to see just how he looked when he said it."

"He said it loud, miss, because the man he was talking to was a good ways off. He was a sheriff. He couldn't get very nigh to Latisan. We was holding the man off with our pick poles because he was trying to serve a paper."

"An injunction?"

"I don't know," confessed the relator mildly. "Somehow, none of us seemed to be at all curious that day to find out what it was. Sheriff nailed it to a tree and then somebody touched a match to it. Latisan said he reckoned it must have been an invitation to Felix's wedding, but it was just as well that nobody ever read it, because the crew was too busy to go, anyway!"

"Are Comas men guarding Skulltree dam?"

"They sure are, miss!"

She and the old man were seated on the shore of the deadwater. The evening dusk was deepening.

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Near them the cook's fires were leaping against the sides of the blackened pots; in the pungent fragrance of the wood smoke which drifted past there were savory odors which were sent forth when the cook lifted off a cover to stir the stew. The peacefulness of the scene was profound; that peace, contrasted with the prospect of what confronted her men if Flagg's logs were to go through, stirred acute distress in the girl. Coming down through the riot of waters she had not had time to think. Their logs were ahead; the laggards of the corporation drive were following. She had wondered because even the cowards, as they had shown themselves to be, had not put more obstructions in the way. There had been abortive interference, but it was evident that the Three C's had been making the first skirmishes perfunctory affairs, depending on dealing the big blow at Skulltree.

In the Flagg crew it was a subject for frequent comment that Rufus Craig had not appeared in the north country to take command of his forces in those parlous times when the Three C's interests were threatened. In council Lida and her advisers began to wonder how much information regarding the Flagg operations had filtered to the outside or whether the defeated Comas bosses were not apprehensively withholding word to headquarters that they had been beaten in the race on the upper waters.

"Craig would be here before this if he knew what was going on," averred Vittum. "They're either ashamed or scared to send him word, and they think it can all be squared for 'em at Skulltree." He sighed and turned his eyes from her anxious stare.

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Near her were rivermen who were waiting for their suppers. She was aware of a very tender feeling toward those men who had been risking their lives in the rapids in order to indulge her in a hope which she had made known to them. She reflected on what the sarcastic Crowley had said when he told her that in that region she was among he-men. "If you're not careful, you'll start something you can't stop," he had threatened. Could she stop these men from going on to violent battle? Would she be honest with her grandfather and Latisan if she did try to prevent them from winning their fight? All past efforts would be thrown away if Skulltree dam were not won.

Out on the deadwater were several floating platforms; the men called them "headworks." On the platforms were capstans. The headworks were anchored far in advance of the drifting logs, around which were thrown pocket booms; men trod in weary procession, circling the capstans, pushing against long ashen bars, and the dripping tow warp hastened the drift of the logs.

As the men of the sea have a chantey when they heave at a capstan, so these men of the river had their chorus; it floated to her over the quiet flood.

Come, all, and ruffle the ledges! Come, all, and bust the jam!
And for aught o' the bluff of the Comas gang we don't give one good—

Hoot, toot and a hoorah!
We don't give a tinker's dam!

"That's exactly how they feel, miss," said the old man. "They're on their way. They can't be stopped." [257]

But the declaration depressed rather than cheered her. Those men had taken up her cause valiantly and with single-hearted purpose, and she was obliged to assume responsibility for what they had done and what they would do to force the situation at Skulltree. In the rush of the drive, with the logs running free, the river was open to all and Latisan's task was in the course of fulfillment and the Flagg fortunes were having fair opportunity in the competition. But now competition must become warfare, so it seemed. She shrank from that responsibility, but she could not evade it—could not command those devoted men to stop with the job half finished.

The priest's promise to find Latisan had been living with her, consoling the hours of her waiting. Her load had become so heavy that her yearning for Latisan's return had become desperate and anguished.

The slow drag of the logs in the deadwater gave her time for pondering and she was afraid of her thoughts.

She was not accusing Latisan of being an inexcusable recreant where duty was concerned; she was understanding in better fashion the men and the manners of the north country and she realized the full force of the reasons for his flight and why the situation had overwhelmed him. Her pity and remorse had been feeding her love.

But the priest had promised. Latisan must know. Why did he not come to her and lift the dreadful burden in her extremity?

Old Vittum, sitting on a bleached trunk among the dry kye stranded on the shore, plucked slowly the spills of a pine tassel, staring down between his knees. "You've seen how they have worked, miss, for every ounce that's in 'em. But I don't know how they'll fight if they don't have a real captain—a single head to plan—the right man to lead off. Latisan's that! Half of 'em came north because they figured on him. I've been hoping. But I'm sort of giving up." [258]

"I don't like to hear you say that," she cried. "As soon as he knows the truth he will come to us. Father Leroque promised to carry that truth to him."

"Providing the priest can find him in the Tomah country—yes, you have said that to me and I've been cal'ating to see Latisan come tearing around a bend in the river most any minute ever since you told me. But Miah Sprague, the fire warden, went through to-day. I've been hating to report to you, miss, for I'm knowing to it how you feel these days; your looks tell me, and I'm sorry. But Sprague has come from the Tomah and he tells me that Ward Latisan hasn't been home—hasn't been heard from. Nobody knows where he is. That is straight from Garry Latisan, because Garry is starting a hue and a cry and asked Miah to comb the north country for news."

She did not reply. She was not sure that there was a touch of rebuke in the old man's mournful tones, but she felt that any sort of reproach would be justified. She had never made a calm analysis of the affair between herself and Latisan, to determine what onus of the blame rested on her and how much was due to the plots and the falsehoods of Crowley. She clung to her sense of fault in order to spur herself to make good; that same sense, a heritage from a father, had served vicariously in rousing her spirit to battle for her grandfather. [259]

"I hope you're going to keep up your grit, miss," urged Vittum. "We'll do our best for you—but I ain't lotting much on Latisan's showing up again. It's too bad! It'll break his heart when he finds out at last what he has been left out of and what a chance he has missed."

Like many another, she had, at times, dreamed vividly of falling from great heights. That was her sensation then, awake, when she heard that Ward Latisan was not to be found. Despair left her numb and quivering. Till then she had not realized how greatly her hope and confidence in his final coming had counted with her. She had not dared to think that his anger would persist; it had seemed to be too violent to last. However, it was plain that rage had overmastered the love he had proclaimed. Lida was very much woman and felt the feminine conviction that a lover would be able to find her if his heart were set on the quest. There was only a flicker of a thought along that line; it was mere irritation that was immediately swept away by her pity for him. She was able to comprehend man's talk then—she knew what Vittum meant when he spoke of the chance that was missed—and she understood how Ward Latisan would mourn if he heard too late what the struggle that year on the Noda waters signified in the case of the girl for whom he had professed love.

She could not talk with the old man; she stumbled across the dry kye, threw herself on her couch of boughs, and pressed her palms over her ears to keep out the threat in the song of the men who toiled around and around the capstan post, drawing the Flagg logs in their slow, relentless passage to the scene of the promised conflict at [260]

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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“I’LL be cursed if I don’t think I ought to hire a real detective and put him onto the inside affairs in this office,” was Chief Mern’s ireful opinion after he had listened to Crowley and Miss Elsham when they reported in from the north country. They were voluble in their own behalf, but their talk was slippery, so the chief felt. They were also voluble in regard to Lida Kennard, but Mern found himself more than ever enmeshed in his guesswork about that mysterious young lady.

Crowley kept shifting off the topic onto his own prowess, patting himself on the breast and claiming all the credit for getting Latisan off his job.

Miss Elsham, on her part, kept lighting fresh cigarettes and was convincing on only one point: “No more wild men of the woods for me. Never again in the tall timber. I’ll do night and day shifts in the cafés if you ask me to. And I’ve got a knickerbocker suit that’s for sale!”

Mern had several interviews with the two, trying to understand.

When the blustering Crowley was present Miss Elsham allowed him to claim all the credit and made no protest.

Alone with Mern, she declared that Buck was a big bluff, but she was not especially clear in her reports on his methods.

“But what has become of Kennard?”

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“I don’t know. Lynched, maybe. They were threatening to do it to Buck and me before we got away.”

One thing seemed to be true—Mern had a wire from Brophy in reply to an inquiry: Ward Latisan had gone away and was staying away.

And Rufus Craig, arriving in the city, telephoned the same information to the chief and promised to call around and settle.

Crowley was informed of that confirmation, and grinned and again patted his breast and claimed the credit.

“All right,” allowed the chief, “you’re in for your slice of the fee. But if you’re lying about Kennard I’ll make you suffer for deserting her.”

“I stand by what I have said. She was double-crossing us.”

Later, Crowley began to inquire casually from time to time whether Miss Kennard had sent in any word. He was not good at concealing his thoughts, and he was manifestly worried by the prospect of possible developments, but Mern was not able to pin him down to anything specific. As a matter of fact, Crowley had not fathomed the mystery of Miss Kennard’s actions in Adonia and was not in a way to do so by any processes of his limited intelligence; he admitted as much to himself.

He was clumsy in his efforts to extract from the chief something in regard to the report which supposedly had been sent in by Miss Kennard, and Mern’s suspicions were stirred afresh. He gave Crowley no information on that point; one excellent reason why he did not do so was this: Miss Kennard had not sent in any report. Mern was still waiting to hear from her as to certain details; he wanted to talk with her. Crowley ventured to state that she had left Adonia, and he suggested that she was on the trail of Latisan. The operative, pressed for reasons why she was still pursuing Latisan, if the drive master had been separated from his job by Crowley, averred that, according to his best judgment, the girl had gone crazy. That statement did not satisfy Mern, but it enabled Crowley to avoid tripping too often over inconsistencies.

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Under those circumstances the uneasy feeling persisted in Chief Mern that the Latisan case was not finished, in spite of Craig’s compliments and Crowley’s boasts and Miss Elsham’s bland agreement as to facts as stated, though with avoidance of details.

Mern usually shut down the cover on a case as soon as the point had been won; he had found in too many instances that memory nagged; he had assured Craig that having to do what a detective chief was called on to do in his business had not given him the spirit of a buccaneer.

But in this case the lack of candor in his operatives disturbed him, though he did not presume to arraign them; he could not do that consistently; in the interests of his peace of mind he had always assured his workers that they need not trouble him with details after a job had been done.

Crowley, mystified, had said nothing about the amazing love affair. It occurred to him that the protestations of Miss Kennard might have been a part of her campaign of subtlety, interrupted by his smashing in; he was more than ever convinced that his was not the kind of mind that could deal with subtlety. [264]

Miss Elsham never mentioned Latisan's apparent infatuation; she had been sent north in the rôle of a charmer and did not propose to confess to Mern that she had failed utterly to interest the woodsman.

Undoubtedly the reticence of both of them was merciful; to heap this crowning burden upon Chief Mern's bewilderment in regard to the actions of a trusted employee would have disqualified him mentally for other cases which were coming along.

Crowley loafed diligently at the Vose-Mern offices when he was not out on duty; there was no knowing when he might be able to turn a trick for the good of the concern by being on hand, he told himself, and for one of his bovine nature all waiting around was easy and all stalls were alike.

Therefore, one day he was on hand to rush a quick tip to the chief. Crowley turned his back on a caller who entered the main office; the bulletin bearer hurried into Mern's presence.

"It's the big boy from the bush—Latisan!"

"Ugly?"

"I didn't wait to see."

"You have told me straight, have you, about his being a bad actor when he's riled?"

"That's the real dope on him, Chief. Don't let him in to see you—that's my advice."

Mern took a little time for thought, inspecting his operative narrowly.

"I ain't intending to butt in, you understand," apologized Crowley, reddening.

"I think that's good advice, speaking from the standpoint of prudence." [265]

"There's no good in hashing the thing over with him; he's off the job and I claim the credit and——"

"But from the standpoint of curiosity," broke in Mern, relentlessly, "I'll be almighty glad to have a talk with him. I'll probably get some facts now. Shut up! If you have come back and told me all the truth I wouldn't be taking a chance with this man. You're to blame! Remember that another time. Beat it!" He jabbed his thumb in the direction of a door which enabled clients to leave without going back through the main office.

"A man named Latisan," reported the door boy.

"Tell him to come in."

Crowley turned the knob of the catch lock and dodged out into the corridor.

Mern stood up to receive the caller.

He was not inspired by politeness. He was putting himself in an attitude of defense and was depending on the brawn of a man who had been a tough proposition when he swung his police club on a New York beat. He even moved a chair which might get underfoot in a rough-and-tumble. But his muscles relaxed when he looked at the man who entered.

Latisan was deprecatory, if his manners were revealing his feelings. He was apologetic in his mien before he spoke; he gave Mern the impression of a man whose spirit was broken and whose estimate of himself had gone far toward condemnation. And Mern read aright! The bitter dregs of days and nights of doleful meditation were in Latisan—the memory of aimless venturings into this or that corner where he could hide away, the latest memory of the stale little room in a cheap New York hotel persisting most vividly in his shamed thoughts because he had penned himself there day after day, trying to make up his mind to do this or that—and, especially at the nadir of what he felt was his utter degradation, had he dwelt on the plan of ending it all, and from time to time had turned on a gas jet and sniffed at the evil fumes, wondering of what sort would be death by that means. To think that he would descend to that depth of cowardice! Nevertheless, he was not especially surprised by this weakness, even while he hated himself for entertaining such a base resolve. One after the other, right and left, the blows in his business affairs had crashed down on [266]

him. He understood those attacks, and he was still able to fight on. But the enemy that had ambuscaded him behind the guise of the first honest love of his experience had killed faith and pride and every tender emotion that enables a man to fight the ordinary battles of life.

Therefore, he ventured into the presence of Mern with down-hunched shoulders under the sagging folds of a ready-made coat, bought from the pile in an up-country village.

"Well, what can I do for you, sir?" demanded Mern, relieved of apprehension, seeing his advantage and more coldly curt than usual in his dealings with men whom he could bully.

"I had this address," faltered Latisan; he pulled from his pocket a sheet of paper which had been crumpled into a mass and then folded back into its original creases. "I was thinking—I've been sort of planning—I thought I'd come around and ask you——" It was one of the things, this errand, for which he had been trying to summon resolution while he sat in the stuffy room, glancing up at the gas jet. [267]

Mern jerked away the paper, noting that its letterhead was his own. It was his epistle to one "Miss Patsy Jones, Adonia," demanding from her information as to just what she was doing as an operative for the Vose-Mern agency.

"It's about Miss Jones. I thought I'd step in——"

"Well?" demanded Mern when Latisan paused.

"That's her real name, is it? I know how detectives——"

"It's her real name," stated Mern, of a mind to protect her until he was convinced that she did not deserve protection by him.

"She works for you?"

"She does."

"Could I see her for a few minutes—for a few words——"

"I don't think so," hedged the chief. "Just why do you want to see Miss Jones?"

"I've been thinking matters over. I did a terrible thing when I was sort of out of my mind. She had something to say to me and I didn't wait to hear it. Perhaps I have made a mistake. Now I'd like to talk with her and find out about something."

"Just what?" probed Mern.

"I can't say right now. It's between us two, Miss Jones and myself—at least I thought it was. I'm going to have a talk with her before I tell anything to anybody else." He declared that stubbornly.

"How do I know what your scheme is? You're probably holding a grudge against one of my operatives. I can't turn her over to you to be harmed." [268]

Latisan straightened. "I shall not harm her by a word or a touch."

"I suppose you hold a grudge against this agency, don't you?"

"The Comas company—Craig, rather—hired you to do a thing, and it has been done. Craig is the one with a grudge; it's against me. I trigged him. I reckon he has a right to get even, as he looks at it, if his money can buy what you have to sell."

"We don't like to do some of the things that are put up to us, Latisan. But I may as well be out and open with you. Craig paid us a lot of money when we broke the strike for him. We have to consider business. That's why we went ahead and got you, as we did. If you had been able to turn around and get us, I would not have held any hard feelings. It's all in the game." There was no especial sympathy in Mern's tone; he was treating a victim with a patronizing air.

"I'm afraid I'm not up to tricks enough to play that game," retorted Latisan. "We'll have to let it stand as it is. I'm sort of trying to clear up my mind about the whole matter, so as to put it behind me. I don't want to feel that there's any mistake about Miss Jones. That's why I'd like to see her once more."

He was showing nervous anxiety.

It came to Mern that here was offered an opportunity to go even farther with Latisan than the contract had demanded. Now that the man had been pulled off the drive, a little shrewd maneuvering would hold him in New York, away from the Flagg interests, until the Comas folks could have their way. No doubt Craig would consider that the extra service was an acceptable bonus, over and above what the agency had done. [269]

"I'll tell you." Mern was affable. "Miss Jones is away on another case. She is likely

to report 'most any time. The best way for you is to drop in each day, say around three o'clock in the afternoon. I think she will be glad to explain anything you're now puzzled about. You still think, do you, you'd better not tell me?" The chief's curiosity, his desire to dig into the doings of his operatives, urged him to solicit Latisan again. "My advice——"

"I don't want it. I don't take any stock in a man who does the kind of work you're up to," declared Latisan, bluntly. "I don't take much stock in anybody, any more. I may be a fool for wanting to see that young lady again—but I'll call in to-morrow."

"About three!" Mern reminded him, having an object in setting that hour.

Latisan nodded and went away.

The chief called the Comas corporation offices and got Director Craig on the telephone. When Mern announced his identity, Craig evidently supposed that it was a matter of a dun and broke in, chuckling: "I'll bring the check in to-morrow. I'd have done so, anyway, for I plan to start north right away. What's the matter, Mern? Grabbing for the coin because you are afraid the job isn't going to stay put?"

"That isn't the idea at all. I simply want to show you something which will prove that the money has been well earned. I'll show you Latisan."

"I don't care to meet that gentleman right now. Oh no!"

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"I'll plant you where you won't be seen. You can view Exhibit A. I think I'll be able to promise that Latisan is going to stay here in New York. That ought to make you feel safer when you go back north into the jungle. No tiger behind a tree!"

"Say, I'll hand you that check like daddy giving a stick of candy to the baby!" said Craig with hearty emphasis. "I'll own up that I have been killing time here in the city, waiting to get a line on Latisan—where he is. I have found that he's a lunatic when he's ugly—and there's no telling how far a grudge will drive a man in the big woods. So he's here in town?"

"Yes, and I'm rigging hobbles to keep him here, I tell you. Come in at two forty-five. See the tame tiger!"

Then Mern called in Crowley, who was very ill at ease, but was obstinately and manifestly at bay. "Let's see. Didn't I understand you to say, Buck, that Miss Kennard had gone chasing Latisan?"

"That's the way I figured it."

"You're wrong. He's chasing her. That's why he came in here."

The chief had snarled, "You're wrong," in a peculiarly offensive tone. Mr. Crowley, after his proclaimed success in the Latisan case, had come up a number of notches in self-esteem and was inclined to dispute an allegation that he was wrong in that matter or in anything else. He was provoked into disclosures by sudden resentment. "She stood out there in the public street and said she was in love with him and would marry him after the drive was down, and she grabbed up his cap and coat when he ran away, and if it ain't natural to suppose that she was going to chase him up and hand 'em over, then what?"

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"Look here, Crowley, what kind of a yarn is this?"

"It's true."

"Why didn't you tell me before?"

"It didn't have anything to do with the case, as I was working it. It was a side issue!" Crowley raised his voice, insisting on his own prowess. "The idea was to get him off the job—and I did it. I claim——"

"You infernal, damnation lunkhead, get out of my office till I calm down," raged the chief.

He yelped at Crowley when the operative was at the door: "Go hunt up Elsham and bring her here. It looks to me as if Kennard was foxier than the dame I sent, and has turned the trick in her own way."

"I ain't afraid of questions," declared the operative. "They'll only bring out that I'm right when I claim the credit."

He hastened to shut the door behind him. Mern acted as if he were looking for a missile.

"But where is she? Why in the blue blazes doesn't she report in?" muttered the chief, worriment wrinkling his forehead. On the face of things, it seemed that, valuable as Miss Kennard had been as confidential secretary, she was still more valuable as a skillful operative—and Chief Mern was earnestly desirous of having her back on the job.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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CHIEF MERN'S interview with his two operatives the next forenoon did not yield the solid facts he was after. They disputed each other. Miss Elsham insisted that she had had Latisan on the run and claimed that his apparent involvement with Miss Kennard was merely a silly and fleeting flirtation with one whom he supposed was a table girl in a tavern.

"You gave me his character, all written out," insisted Miss Elsham. "He's that kind. He didn't dare to presume with me as he would with a girl in a dining room; but I was getting along all right till Crowley butted in." She turned spitefully on that monopolizer and meddler. "And now don't stand there and say again that you claim the credit. I'll slap your face!"

Miss Elsham lied so strenuously that she was convincing.

Crowley, trying hard to tell the truth for once, stammered and stumbled over the amazing details of the lovemaking between Latisan and Miss Kennard. The chief found the really veracious recital beyond belief.

"She wouldn't offer to marry him, standing there in public," stormed Mern. "I know Kennard. She isn't that sort. I'll go to the bottom of this thing, even if it means a trip for me to that God-forsaken tank town. I'd give a thousand dollars to see Lida Kennard walk in through that door. I was never so worried about anything in all my life," he lamented. "Crowley, you deserted the most valuable person I have ever had in my office—and God knows what has happened to her." He sent them away.

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"What does it get anybody to tell the truth?" grumbled Crowley.

"Nothing, when it sounds so ridiculous as the truth in this case," averred Miss Elsham. "Everybody seems to go crazy up in the tall timbers. Give me the tall buildings for mine after this."

In high good humor Rufus Craig appeared to Mern that afternoon a little before three o'clock. He sat down, pulled out the slide leaf of Mern's desk, and produced a check book. "No need my seeing Exhibit A before settling. Tell me the expense account. I'll include everything in one check."

With pen poised, waiting until the figures were brought in, the Comas man expressed his satisfaction. "There were three on the job, so I was told in Adonia when I came through. That's all right, Mern. I expected you to use your own judgment. I didn't have much time in Adonia—grabbed what information I could while waiting for the train to start—but it's a sure bet that Latisan is off for good. From what I heard it was your Miss Jones who really put it over—gave Latisan what they call up there the Big Laugh. Now who the blazes is this Miss Jones?"

"An operative of ours," the chief replied, with repression of enthusiasm decidedly in contrast with Craig's indorsement of her. Mern did not dare to be other than vague, leaving Lida Kennard's identity concealed until he could understand something about the inside affairs in his agency. The reflection that he was still in the dark—could not talk out to a client as a detective should—was stirring his sour indignation more and more.

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"I'd like to meet her," urged the director. "She must be a wonder. A great actress, I should judge, from what I was told in Adonia."

"She's having her vacation just now."

"Look here, Mern! I'm going to stick a couple of hundred more onto this check. Send it along to her and tell her to have an extra week or a new dress at my expense. I've made a side-line clean-up on the Tomah this season and money is easy with me." That was as explicit as Craig cared to be in regard to the deal with the Walpole heir. Still poising his pen, the director turned expectant gaze on the door when the knob was turned; a flurried, fat girl whose manner showed that she was new to the place had received Mern's orders about the figures; now she came bringing them.

Craig frowned while he wrote the check after the girl had retired.

He was a bit pettish when he snapped his check book shut. "Say, Mern, I always like to see that Kennard girl when I come into your office. I like her looks. I like the way she puts out her hand to a man."

"I'm sorry she isn't here. But she's—she's out—sick."

"Good gad! I hope it's nothing serious." Craig showed real concern.

"Oh no! Just a—a rather severe cold." The chief was having hard work to conceal his mental state—being obliged to lie that way, like a fool, in order to hide the mystery in his own office!

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"Give me her street number. I'll send up a bunch of flowers."

"She is out with some friends in the country to get clean air. I don't know the address."

Mern perceived that more questions were coming. Craig was frankly revealing his interest in Miss Kennard.

The chief pulled out his watch; he had a good excuse for changing an embarrassing subject. "Latisan is about due. Of course, you don't want to be seen. I'll post you in one of the side consulting rooms."

"It seems rather silly, this spying," remonstrated Craig. "I'm taking your word about Latisan. I'm getting ready to start north, and have a lot of matters to look after."

"Humor my notion," urged the chief. "He has been tamed down and I want you to see him. You'll understand why I believe I can keep him hanging around here till you have nailed things to the cross up-country."

Craig showed no alacrity, but he allowed Mern to lead him to a small room that was separated from the main office by a ground-glass partition; there was a peephole at one corner of a panel. The director promised to wait there until the interview with Latisan was over. The chief said he would make it short.

Latisan walked in exactly on the stroke of three; after he came up in the elevator he had waited in the corridor, humbly obedient to Mern's directions as to the hour.

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"Nothing doing in that matter to-day, Latisan," stated the chief, affecting to be busily engaged with papers on his desk. "Try me to-morrow, same time."

"Very well, sir," agreed the young man, somberly. In prospect, another twenty-four hours filled with lagging minutes! He had grown to know the hideous torture of such hours in the case of a man who before-time had found the days too short for his needs.

"By the way," said Mern, still hanging grimly to the desire to find out more about what the matter was with the office's internal affairs, "did anybody tell you that Miss Jones had returned to New York?"

"I wired to Brophy a few days ago. He said she had come back here, according to what he knew of her movements."

"You fell in love with her, didn't you?" The chief's tone was crisp with the vigor of third-degree abruptness.

"Yes," admitted Latisan, showing no resentment; he had promulgated that fact widely enough in the north.

"Just why did she urge you so strongly to go back to the drive?" The young man's meekness had drawn the overeager chief along to an incautious question.

"You ought to know better than I, sir. I take it that she was obeying your orders about how to work the trick on me, though it isn't clear in my mind as yet; but I'm not a detective."

"Did she promise to marry you as soon as the Flagg drive was down?" Still Mern was boldly taking advantage of the young man's docility.

"That's true. I must admit it because it was said in public."

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Mern scratched his ear. The thing was clearing somewhat in Crowley's direction; the blunderer had not lied on one point at least—the point that Mern found most blindly puzzling. What in the mischief had happened to the nature of Lida Kennard, as Mern knew that nature, so he thought!

"You remember Operative Crowley, do you?"

"Naturally."

"Are you holding an especial grudge against him?"

"I don't know why I should, sir. It's a dirty business he's in, but he gave me that letter which I turned over to you yesterday, and for some reason he exposed the trick that was being put upon me by the girl. If I can get at the bottom of the thing, for my own peace of mind, I'll be glad."

Chief Mern sympathized with that sentiment!

Then he took a little time for reflection. Perhaps a meeting between Latisan and

Crowley might strike a few sparks to illuminate a situation that was very much in the dark.

"If Crowley is around the office I'm going to ask him to step in here. The talk will be all friendly, I take it?"

"I have nothing against Crowley, as matters stand."

Latisan did not greet Crowley when the operative replied to the summons and walked into the private office; on the other hand, Latisan showed no animosity. He merely surveyed Crowley with an expression of mingled pity and wonderment, as if he were sorry for an able-bodied man who earned a living by the means which the operative employed.

Crowley, at first, was not as serene as the man whom he had injured.

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"Latisan tells me that he holds no grudge," stated Mern, encouragingly.

"I'm glad of that, Latisan. We have to play the game in this business. And I'm not laying it up against you, how you made a monkey of me in that dining room and nigh twisted my head off. Both of us know now who it was that rubbed our ears and sicked us at each other."

The victim of the operations nodded, no especial emotion visible in his countenance.

"Right here between us three I'll come out all frank and free," continued Crowley. "I'm making a claim to the chief in this thing, Latisan, and I believe you'll back me up. She jumped in on me and Elsham—one day later from the agency than we were—and she wouldn't talk to me, and I'll admit I didn't have her play sized from the start. But she wasn't the one that turned the trick." Mr. Crowley was venturing rather far with the victim, but he was encouraged by Latisan's continued mildness and by a firm determination to set himself right with Mern, who had been doubting his efficiency.

"As I have been looking at it, she was the one who did it," insisted the young man.

"Now see here! Wake up!" Crowley was blustering as he grew bolder. "You were letting the girl wind you around her finger. What woke you up? What made you sore on the whole proposition up there? It was my tip to you! You can't deny it."

"Yes, it might have been your tip," admitted Latisan, knotting his brows, staring at the floor, confused in his memories and puzzling over the mystery. "I had promised to bring down the logs because she asked me to keep on and do it."

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"There you have it!" indorsed Crowley, swinging his arm and flattening his thick palm in front of the chief. "I claim the credit."

Crowley had become defiantly intrepid, facing that manner of man who was so manifestly cowed and muddled. The operative was back in his encouraging environment of the city; he remembered the thrust of those prongs of fingers on his head when he was obliged to dissemble and was shamed in the north country. He was holding his grudge. And he was assiduously backing up the claims he had made to his chief. "The girl you're talking about had nothing to do with pulling you off the job. She was double-crossing our agency."

"Think so?" queried Latisan.

"I know it. But I don't know what fool notion got into her up there. I have told Mr. Mern all about it. I'm the boy who woke you up!"

"Do you agree, Latisan?" asked Mern, brusquely.

"I'm not thinking clearly, sir. But if this man is right, I ought to apologize to her."

"She is no longer employed by us, but we'll try to locate her." Mern was willing to come out in front of Crowley with that information; the situation did seem to have cleared up! "Hang around town. Come in again."

Latisan dragged himself up from his chair.

Then Crowley of the single-track mind—bull-headed blunderer—went on to his undoing. "I'm sorry it has come about that you've got to fire her, Chief. I know what a lot she was worth to you here, as long as she kept to her own job."

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"We'll let it rest," said Mern, warningly. He remembered that he had not posted Crowley on the fact that the sobriquet "Miss Patsy Jones" still hid the identity of the girl where Latisan was concerned.

"All right! That suits me, Chief, so long as I get the credit. I'll shut up, saying only that I'm sorry for Miss Lida Kennard."

Latisan had been moving slowly toward the door, aware that the conversation

between the two pertained to their own affairs and that he was excluded.

He halted and swung around when he heard the name of Lida Kennard. The torpor of idleness and woeful ponderings had numbed his wits. The name of Lida seemed to have been dragged into the affair by Crowley. Ward did not understand how she could be involved in the matter. He put that thought into a question which he stammered.

Mern, knowing nothing about his secretary's lineage, resenting her secrecy and methods which he had not been able to penetrate, was not in a mood to shield her any longer. "It's the same girl, Latisan. She called herself Jones up your way. Her right name is Lida Kennard."

Latisan blinked like one who had emerged from darkness into blazing light. He swayed slowly, breasting that deluge of the truth which suddenly swept through him.

He walked to the window, turning his back on them, and gazed squarely into the quivering sun that was westering between lofty buildings. His eyes were enduring the unveiled sun with more fortitude than his soul endured the truth which had just been unveiled. [281]

This—this was the heart of the mystery!

He was not meditating while he stood there; he was beholding!

He saw in the white light the spirit of her sacrifice—a sacrifice which embraced even her submission to him; in his desolate denial of any worthy attributes in himself he was not admitting that she loved him. He realized what she had sought to achieve in the north country, why she could not declare herself. And he had allowed a trick to make a fool of him, make him a traitor to her, send him off, sneaking in byways, idling in dark corners, in the time of her most desperate need!

Right then there was in him the awful conviction that he could not go and face her, wherever she was, so utterly a renegade had he shown himself.

He was taking all the blame on himself. He had run away from a laugh—a fool obsessed by a silly notion of the north country—in this new light it seemed silly. He had not waited like a man to hear the truth from her! He had betrayed all the cause; he could not go back to the drive.

He had listened to a lying sneak from a detective agency and had rebuffed, insulted, abused horribly Lida Kennard! Lida Kennard! The name seemed to be hammering at his eardrums. The granddaughter of Echford Flagg! A lone girl trying to save a cause! In her anguished desperation she had been willing to give herself in the way of sacrifice even to such a recreant as Ward Latisan must have appeared in his boyish and selfish resentment! Oh, the sun was cool in comparison with the fires which raged in him. [282]

The fatuous Crowley moved toward the window. "Well, what say, old boy?"

When the young man turned slowly the operative stuck out his hand. "I'm agreeing with you—no grudges! Let's shake!"

"Yes, you did it," said Latisan. He did not raise his voice. He was talking as much to himself as to Crowley. "A tip to me, you called it."

"We have to do those things to get quick results," Crowley agreed, patronizingly. "Give us your hand, boy!"

Crowley got what he asked for. He was not prepared for the amazing suddenness of the open-handed blow that fell on the side of his head and sent him staggering into a corner.

Mern grabbed up the telephone. Latisan leaped and tore the instrument from the chief's grasp, ripped it loose from its fastenings, and hurled it through the ground-glass door.

Mern was a big man; he had been invincible as a police officer. But when he leaped and struck at Latisan, the latter countered with his toil-hardened fist and knocked Mern down. Crowley had also served with the police. But he was no match for the berserker rage which had transformed the man from the woods. Latisan whirled again to Crowley, beat him to his knees, set his foot against the antagonist's breast and drove him violently backward, and he fell across Mern.

But Latisan was not through. Men who had viewed John Latisan in the old days when he came roaring down to town, had they been present in the Vose-Mern offices that day, would have recognized in the grandson the Latisan temperament operating in its old form and would not have been surprised. The avenger picked up Mern's desk chair. He swung it about him, smashing everything in the room which could be smashed. He flung away the fragments of the chair and rushed into the outer office. [283]

The fat girl was calling for central, for police.

"Hand it over!" he commanded. "And you'd all better step outside," he suggested, after he had torn loose the wires. "I'm using the office right now."

He picked up the chair from which she fled. It was heavy and he used it to smash other furniture. Then he began to beat out the glass which shut off the other private rooms which adjoined the main office. In that process he brought the terrified Craig into view. He dropped the chair, reached in, and dragged Craig over the sill of the compartment. "This has been coming to you on the Noda waters! I'm glad you're here now to get it!" He held the Three C's director helpless in utter dismay, at the full length of a left arm, and pummeled him senseless with a right fist. Then he dragged him to the door of the chief's office and flung him across the two men who were stirring.

"It's a fifty-fifty wreck—this office and me—pretty nigh total!"

He walked out. Youth, strength, and an incentive which did not animate the others, had enabled him to prevail.

Mern and Crowley struggled weakly from under the man who was pinning them down.

"I'll get word to the cops," stuttered Crowley, holding his hand to his battered and bleeding lips. [284]

"Wait till Craig comes to!" protested Mern. "He may want us to hush the thing. He has been hollering for soft pedal all the time. He seems bad! Get a doctor!"

The physician who came confirmed Mern's opinion as to the condition of the field director; Craig himself was querulously emphatic on the point when he had been brought to consciousness. But he insisted on postponing consideration of the proper action to take in Latisan's case until he had time to forget his aches and compose his thoughts.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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EARLY the next morning glaziers, carpenters, and telephone repair men monopolized the Vose-Mern offices to the exclusion of regular business. The chief had told his office force to stay away for the day.

He had found one chair that was whole, and he sat and watched the "after the storm" effect gradually disappear.

Mern's thoughts were as much in disorder as the interior he was surveying.

Instead of feeling lively enmity in the case of Latisan, he was admitting to himself that he rather admired the young wildcat from the woods. At any rate, Latisan had accepted at face value Mern's repeated dictum that if the other fellow could get Mern while Mern was set on getting the fellow, there would be no grudges. Latisan's come-back, the chief reflected, was crude work, but it was characteristically after the style of the men of the open; and the wreck of an office was less disastrous than the wreck of a man's prospects and his very soul. Mern was not a bit of a sentimentalist, but he could see the situation vaguely from Latisan's standpoint. And he realized that there was still something behind it all which he had not come at.

He was roused from his ponderings by the crunching of feet on broken glass, and looked up and beheld Latisan. Halted just inside the door of the main office was a policeman in uniform. And the officer, well known by Mern, caught the chief's eye and winked. [286]

Mern jumped to his feet; he was much astonished and glanced to see whether Latisan's fists were doubled.

"Good morning, sir!" said the caller, politely. "I have come around early to let you know that I'm not the kind of a man who does a thing and runs away from the responsibility of it."

With prolonged scrutiny—stares which crossed like fencing blades—the two principals mutely questioned each other. Latisan displayed the most composure. He had not the same reason as had Mern to be surprised; it was immediately made plain that Latisan had devoted some thought to preparations for the interview. He stepped closer. Even though his smile seemed to be meant as an assurance of amity, Mern flinched; he remembered that the woodsman had begun the battle the day before after a remark in a most placid tone.

Latisan tipped his head to indicate the waiting policeman. "I brought him along. I asked him to come up from the street. He doesn't know what for."

"Nor I, either!" blurted Mern.

"I thought you might want me arrested on sight, and I remember what I did to your telephones, and I figured I'd save you the trouble of sending out."

There was no mistaking the drive master's new mood. He was polite; he was contrite. The picturesque touch furnished by supplying a policeman suggested the Vose-Mern "anticipatory system" and appealed to the chief's grim sense of humor. Also, Mern was moved by that consciousness which warms real men, when it's a mutual acknowledgment, "He's a good sport." [287]

Mern waved his hand to the policeman, putting into that gesture a meaning which the officer understood; the officer started for the outer door.

"Just a second!" called Latisan. He pulled out a roll of money and gave the policeman a bill. "You can use that to pay your fare down in the elevator."

Latisan held the roll in sight until he and Mern were alone. "While the cash is out, I may as well inquire what the bill is."

"For what?"

"For this." The woodsman swung the hand which held the money, making a wide sweep to take in all the wreck.

"No bill, Latisan! You can't pay a cent. I think we'll call it natural wear and tear in the course of business."

The chief was sitting in the chair which had escaped damage. He insisted on the caller taking that chair; Mern sat on a carpenter's sawhorse.

"Perhaps I had you going yesterday, Chief Mern, but to-day it's you who have got me going!" admitted Latisan, frankly mystified by this forbearance.

"I'm only backing up the talk I have always made about giving the other fellow his innings if he wants to take 'em and has the grit to put it over. Look here, Latisan, two men are never really well acquainted till they've had a good run-in with their fists. You and I have been standing each other off on facts. Let's get down to cases. How did it happen that you fell for Lida Kennard so suddenly?" [288]

Ward flushed. It was a sacred subject, but he resolved to be frank with Mern, searching for the truth. "It was not sudden. I met her here in the city by accident months ago—and I must have fallen in love with her then. I've been admitting that I did, though I did not know her real name till yesterday. And I did not know she was a detective, set on my trail. And even now——"

"You don't believe it, eh? Let me say it to you, Latisan—and get me right! You're a square chap and I can afford to be square, now that the job is done and paid for. The girl never was an operative. She was my confidential secretary, and the best one I ever had. Working hard here to pay up the debts she had incurred on account of her mother. As clean as a whistle, Latisan! She never told me she was going north. That letter you brought is one I wrote after Crowley reported that she was there—and I wanted to know why she was there."

"I can tell you why. She is Echford Flagg's granddaughter."

Mern leaped up and kicked the carpenter's bench away from him. Latisan rose, too, as if prepared to resent any detracting speech.

"Don't trouble yourself," snapped Mern. "I'm not saying a word against her for what she was doing up there. I trained her myself in what she called the ethics of this business, and she had been practicing what I have preached. It's all right, Latisan." [289]

"The thing cleared itself up pretty quickly for me yesterday when I found out her name. But now that I know who she is I'm in hell. I ran away! I have left that drive——"

"Aw, to blazes with your drive!" yelled Mern, with scorn. "Only logs! But what I want to know is this, does the girl love you?"

"She told me so, but how can she have any affection for such a man as I have shown myself to be? I think she was sacrificing herself because she believed I was the one who could bring down the Flagg drive."

Mern surveyed him cynically. "Say, Latisan, I hope you're not the kind who would bite a gold coin stolen from a dead man's eye. You woods fellows have too much time for joint debates with your own selves. Go find that girl and square yourself. I want her to have what she wants, if she is in love with you. That's the kind of a friend I am to her. I can't tell you where she is. I haven't heard from her since she walked out of

this office. But let me say something to you! My kind of work has wised me up to what folks are likely to do! I'll bet a thousand dollars the girl hasn't run very far away from the north country, even if you did think it was too hot to hold you."

Latisan shook his head slowly. Confidence was still chilled in him; the memory of what had happened was a forbidding barrier; in her case, at the thought of thrusting himself back into her presence, he was as timid to an extreme as he had been fearless in his dealings with men in the Vose-Mern offices. [290]

While he was wrestling with his thoughts, delivery men were wrestling with furniture, bringing it in through the door from the corridor, blocking the passage.

Mern snapped his attention from Latisan, then he pushed the latter out of the range of vision from the corridor door.

Craig was out in the corridor, cursing the furniture and the men who were obstructing the doorway. Craig was in a hurry and in a state of mind; his language revealed his feelings.

"It won't do—it won't do!" insisted Mern when Latisan protested at being shoved behind the partition. "He mustn't see you. Hear him rave! I'm not staging another fight to-day. Stay in there! Crouch down! Keep out of sight."

When Craig won his way past the blocking furniture he stormed to Mern, stamping across the glass-strewn floor, shaking his fists and jabbering.

He was in a horrible state of rage. His face was so apoplectically purple that the bruises on his patched-up countenance were subdued somewhat by lack of contrast.

"Look at me! Called down to the home office just now, looking like this. Lying like blazes about an automobile accident! That's what your invitation to view the tame tiger has done for me. But that isn't what I'm here for, you damnation, four-flushing double-crosser." He continued to berate the chief.

"Say, you hold on there!" barked Mern, managing a few oaths of his own after struggling out of the amazement stirred by this ferocious attack. "If you're here to do business or to complain about the business that has been done, you'll have to be decent, or I'll run you out." Mern jutted his jaw and took two steps in Craig's direction—and Craig had suffered violence too recently to persist in inviting more. [291]

But he was still as acrimonious as he dared to be. Behind his rage there was the bitterness of a man who had been tricked out of money—betrayed shamefully—but Craig was so precipitate, breathless, violent, so provokingly vague with his tumbling words and his broken sentences, that Mern ceased to be angry in return and was merely bewildered.

The Comas field director shook under Mern's nose a sheet of paper. He kept referring to the writing on the paper and vouchsafed information that the writing was made up of notes of a long-distance conversation between the woods and the New York offices of the Comas company.

After a time Mern suggested with acerbity that Craig was incoherent.

"I don't doubt it. I feel that way," yelled Craig. "But this message has come over three or four hundred miles of wire—relayed, at that, and I think the man who started the word from a fire-outpost station wasn't entirely right in his head. There's no other way of accounting for the statement that Ward Latisan's cap and Eck Flagg's cant dog are bossing the Flagg drive."

"Don't get wrought up by crazy guff!"

"But here are some statements that I *am* wrought up over," declared the director, brandishing the paper. "I've got to believe 'em. They sound straight. Three of our new hold dams in streams that feed the Noda have been blown. The water has been used to sweep the Flagg logs in ahead of ours. The lip of the Tougas Lake has been blown, too, and if we lose that water it's apt to leave us high and dry; our Tougas operation is a long way in from the main river. They've shot blue blazes out of Carron Gorge and have taken the water along with 'em. Merry hell is to pay all up and down that river, Mern." [292]

The agency chief did not relish Craig's bellicose manner, nor the glare in his one eye that showed, nor the imputation of vindictive rebuke in his rasping tones.

"Craig, I never saw a log in a river. I know nothing about your drives. Why are you pitching into me?" [292]

"Why? Why? Because this message says that the girl you sent north—the girl who was paid by our money—this report says that she has gone up there and has put the very devil into Flagg's men; is making 'em do things that the worst pirates on the river never dared to do before. What kind of a she wildcat did you hand me, anyway? Mern, a thousand tons of liquid fire poured into the valley of the Noda couldn't hurt

us like that girl is hurting us. Who is she? What is she? Get your word to her! Call her off!"

That was no time for equivocation. Craig's frenzy demanded candor and threatened reprisal if the truth were not forthcoming. Mern told part of the truth. [293]

"She has called her own self off, Craig, so far as this agency is concerned. I have no further control over her actions."

Chief Mern was not conscious of any especial surprise after Craig had reported that section of his news which could be understood. The granddaughter of Flagg could not be expected to do other than she was doing. In his honest regard for the helper who had served him so long and efficiently, the chief was wondering whether he ought to reveal her identity to the Comas man, trying to estimate the danger of such a revelation. Craig was not stating that his news hinted who she was.

As to the details of the drive, he was more explicit. He raged on while Mern pondered. "The Flagg drive is a week ahead of time. It must be near Skulltree dam. I ought to have been up there and I don't understand why the infernal fools have been so slow in getting word to me."

He wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"Look here, Mern, I never ought to do another stroke of business with you, but I'm in too much of a hurry to go anywhere else."

The business instincts of the head of the agency were stirred; the Comas money had been good picking in the past. "I don't think I should be held responsible for an operative who has severed connections. Craig, you have probably made your own mistakes in depending on helpers."

"Don't you make any mistake this time, Mern! I want a dozen or fifteen men—gunmen. Can you furnish 'em?" [294]

"Sure thing! Within an hour."

"I have promised results to my folks this season. I've got to deliver. My job depends on it, after all the talk I've made at headquarters."

"Will your headquarters back up my operatives?"

"I'll do that! I'm playing this game on my own hook. There'll be no fight. The bluff will be enough, if I have the men. And if I have to—well, there's a fight between lumberjacks every season on that river, and there's a big wall of woods between Skulltree dam and New York, Mern! I'll take my chances up behind that wall. Get the men for me."

"When are you leaving?"

"One o'clock this afternoon—Grand Central."

"I'll deliver the men to you there."

Craig stamped away across the glass-littered floor and disappeared.

"Well," averred the chief when Latisan came out from behind the partition, "it looks as if somebody had been attending to your job for you, son! Also looks as if there might be considerable more doing right away!"

"So that's more of your devilish business, is it, sending gunmen to fight honest workers?" demanded the drive master, with venom.

"Business is still business with me in spite of the looks of this office," returned Mern, unruffled. "Latisan, you can't beef about not getting a square deal—and I've put you in the way of getting a tip. It looks to me——" [295]

"Just the same as it looks to me!" cried the young man. "We're fully agreed as to all the looks! Good day!"

He stood very straight and shot Mern through with a stare from hard gray eyes. There was no longer any of the faltering uncertainty that he had displayed. Grim determination radiated from him.

"Good day to you, also!" Mern called after Latisan when he strode toward the door, then adding suggestively. "If any mail happens to come here for you, I'm to forward it along to that Skulltree dam, so I take it!"

The irony did not provoke any retort from the drive master. He went away with a rush, but his demeanor showed that he was not running away from anything or anybody. He was hastening toward something.

L ATISAN was on that one o'clock train when it left Grand Central station.

From the gallery of the concourse he had seen Craig march to the gate and give a packet into the hands of one of a group of men waiting there. Then Craig had gone on quickly with the air of a cautious performer who did not care to be identified with the persons for whom he had provided transportation.

The drive master rode in a coach and felt safe from detection; he guessed that Craig would hide his battered face in the privacy of a drawing room. Latisan had trailed the operatives and saw them enter the smoking car.

In the late afternoon, at a stage in the journey, he crossed a city on the heels of the party and again was an unobtrusive passenger in a coach, avoiding the sleeping cars. He slept a bit, as best he could, but mostly he pondered, fiercely awake, bitterly resolute. He fought away his memory of the betrayal of a trust; he indulged in no fond hopes in regard to one whom he now knew as Lida Kennard. He was concentrating on his determination to go back to the drive, not as master, but as a volunteer who would carry his cant dog with the rest of them, as humble as the plainest toiler. He did not try at that time to plan a course of action to be followed after he was back on the Flagg drive. He was going, that was all!

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It was a hideous threat, the menace that Craig was conveying into the north country in the persons of those gunmen from the city! There had been plenty of fights over rights on the river, but they had always been clean fights, where muscles and fists counted for the victory.

Craig had claimed that the bluff of the guns would be sufficient. Latisan was not agreeing, and on that account he was finding the outlook a dark one.

The train on which he was riding was an express headed for Canada, and was due to pass the junction with the Adonia narrow-gauge at about two o'clock in the morning. There was no scheduled stop at the junction; the afternoon train connected and served the passengers from downcountry.

Latisan had bought a ticket to the nearest regular stopping place of the express. He began to wonder whether Craig, with the influence of the Comas to aid him and his fifteen fellow passengers in an argument, had been able to secure special favors.

To the conductor, plucking out the hat check before the regular stop the hither side of the junction, he said, "By any chance, does this train ever stop at the Adonia narrow-gauge station?"

"It happens that it stops to-night by special orders."

Latisan paid a cash fare and rode on.

The coach in which he sat was the last car on the train; the smoker and sleeping cars were ahead.

When the train made its unscheduled stop, Latisan stepped down and was immediately hidden in the darkness. He saw Craig and his crew on the station platform; the headlight of a narrow-gauge locomotive threw a radiance which revealed them. Therefore, it was plain, Craig had wired for a special on the Adonia line.

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Only one car was attached to the narrow-gauge engine; Latisan went as close as he dared. There was no room for concealment on that miniature train. It puffed away promptly, its big neighbor on the standard-gauge roared off into the night, and Latisan was left alone in the blackness before the dawn. And he felt peculiarly and helplessly alone! In spite of his best efforts to keep up his courage, the single-handed crusader was depressed by Craig's command of resources; there was a sort of insolent swagger in the Comas man's ability to have what he wanted.

Latisan knew fairly well the lay of the land at the junction, but he was obliged to light matches, one after the other, in order to find the lane which led to the stables of the mill company whose men had been drafted by him on one occasion to load his dynamite. The night was stiflingly black, there were no stars and not a light glimmered anywhere in the settlement.

He stumbled over the rough ground that had been rutted by the wheels of the jigger wagons. The muffled thud of the hoofs of dozing horses guided him in his search for the stables, and he found the door of the hostlers' quarters and pounded.

"You'll have to go see the super; I don't dare to let a hoss out of here without orders," said the man who listened to his request.

"Tell me where his house is, and lend me a lantern."

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The hostler yawned and mumbled and complained because he had been disturbed,

but he fumbled for the lantern, lighted it, and gave it to Latisan, along with directions how to find the super's home.

That minor magnate was hard to wake, but he appeared at an open upper window after a time and listened.

"We can't spare a horse in mud time, with the hauling as heavy as it is. Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Ward Latisan."

"Hold that lantern up side of your face and let me see!"

The young man obeyed meekly.

"Excuse me for doubting your word of mouth," said the super, after he had assured himself, "but we hardly expected to see you back in this region." It was drawled with dry sarcasm.

"I haven't the time to argue on that, sir. I have business north of here. I'll hire a horse or I'll buy a horse."

"And you heard what I said, that I can't spare one. By the way, Latisan, you may as well understand that I won't do business with you, anyway. You got me in wrong with my folks and with the Three C's, too, when you bribed my men to load that dynamite."

"I can't see why the Comas company——"

"I can. My folks can. If we get saw logs this year we've got to buy 'em through Rufus Craig. When you ran away and let Ech Flagg get dished——"

"His drive is coming through," insisted Latisan, desperately, breaking in on speech in his turn. [300]

"Where are you from, right now?" inquired the super.

"New York."

"And a devil of a lot you must have found out about the prospect of logs from the independents, Flagg or anybody else. Don't come up here and try to tell me my business; I've been here all the time. Good night!" He banged down the window.

And once more Ward was alone in the night, distracted and desolate. This testing of the estimation in which he was held in the north country after the debacle in Adonia made his despondency as black as the darkness which surrounded him.

He wanted to call to the super and ask if at least he could buy the lantern. He decided it would be better to borrow it.

He set away afoot by the road which led to Adonia. Farms were scattered along the highway and he stopped at the first house and banged on the door and entreated. At two houses he was turned away relentlessly. The third farmer was a wrinkled old chap who came down to the door, thumbing his suspenders over his shoulders.

"Ward Latisan, be ye?" He peered at the countenance lighted by the lantern. "Yes, I can see enough of old John in ye to prove what ye claim. I worked for old John when I was young and spry. And one time he speared his pick pole into the back of my coat and saved me from being carried down in the white water. And that's why ye can have a hoss to go where ye want to go, and ye can bring him back when you're done with him." [301]

Therefore, not by any merit of his own, Ward secured a mount and journeyed dismally toward the north. The farm horse was fat and stolid and plodded with slow pace; for saddle there was a folded blanket. With only the lantern to light the way, he did not dare to hurry the beast. It was not until wan, depressing light filtered from the east through the mists that he ventured to make a detour which would take him outside of Adonia. He realized that Craig would have arranged for tote teams to be waiting at Adonia, as he had had a special waiting at the junction, and was by that time far on his way toward Skulltree dam.

Latisan beat the flanks of the old horse with the extinguished lantern and made what speed he could along the blazed trail that would take him to the tote road of the Noda basin.

THE flare of the Flagg camp fires painted the mists luridly; the vapor rolled sluggishly through the tree tops and faded into the blackness of the night.

Lida was seated apart from the men of the crew, knowing that they mercifully wished to spare her from hearing the plans for the morrow.

The logs were down the deadwater to a point where the supremacy at Skulltree dam must be settled.

She could hear the mumble of the voices of those who were in conference around the fires.

Across a patch of radiance she beheld the swaggering promenade of one of the young cookees; he brandished a hatchet truculently. Old Vittum reached out and swept the weapon from the youngster's grasp.

Lida heard Vittum's rebuke, for it was voiced sharply. "None o' that! We don't fight that way. And I'm believing that there are still enough honest rivermen in the Comas crowd to make it a square fight, like we've always had on the Noda when a fight had to be!"

Unreconciled, all her woman's nature protesting, she had come to a settled realization that the fight must happen; Vittum was putting it in words. Now that the struggle was imminent—on the eve of it—she wanted to go down on her knees and beg them to give up the project; but she did not dare to weaken their determination or wound their pride. She crouched on her cot of spruce boughs in anguished misery. [303]

"Nobody has got to the point of using hatchets and guns on this river," corroborated a man on the other side of the fire from Vittum.

Other men pitched their voices higher then, giving up the cautious monotone of the preceding conference.

"Is any man afeard?" asked Vittum.

They assured him with confidence and gay courage that no man was afraid.

"I didn't hear any of you Injuns pipe up," said Vittum. "You ain't very strong on talk, anyway. But I'd kind of like to know how you feel in this matter. We all understood—all of us regulars—that we was coming up here to fight when it got to that point. You have grabbed in later and perhaps didn't understand it. We ain't asking you to do anything you don't want to do."

The Indians were silent. Even Felix Lapierre said nothing when Vittum questioned him with a glance. The French Canadian turned to Frank Orono, squatting within arm's reach, and patted him on the shoulder. It became plain that there was an understanding which did not require words.

Orono rose slowly; he grinned. From the breast of his leather jacket he brought forth a cow's horn and shook it over his head, and its contents rattled sharply. The other Indians leaped up. They were grinning, too.

Orono began a slow march around the camp fire, lifting his knees high, stepping slowly, beating the rattling horn into the palm of his hand. Behind him in single file, imitating his step, marched the other Indians. The smiles faded out of their countenances; their jaws were set, and deep in their throats they growled a weird singsong. [304]

"My Gawd!" yelped Vittum. "It's the old Tarratine war dance and it just fits my notions right now, and I'm in on it!"

He scrambled to his feet and fell into line at the rear of the Indians. Every man in the Flagg crew followed suit. They imitated the Indian singsong as best they were able, their voices constantly giving forth greater volume until they were yelling their defiance to the Three C's company and all its works.

The men far out on the deadwater, pushing against the bars of the capstan, heard the tumult on the shore and shouted the chorus of their challenging chantey.

Between Lida and the men who were circling the fire there was a veil of mist, and in the halation her champions loomed with heroic stature. She did not want them to suppose that she was indifferent; courage of her own leaped in her. The campaign which she had waged with them had given her an experience which had fortified the spirit of the Flaggs. She stepped forth from her little tent and walked down and stood in the edge of the light cast by the camp fire. They cheered her, and she put aside her qualms and her fears as best she was able.

When she was back in her tent she did not shield her ears from the challenging chantey, as she had done before, and she heard with fortitude the vociferous pledges of faith in the morrow. [305]

The dawn came so sullenly and so slowly that the day seemed merely a faded copy

of the night.

A heavy fog draped the mountains and was packed in stifling masses in the river valley.

Crews in shifts marched tirelessly around the capstans of the headworks. Their voices out in the white opaqueness sounded strangely under the sounding-board of the fog.

It was a brooding, ominous, baleful sort of a day, when shapes were distorted in the mists and all sounds were magnified in queer fashion and the echoes played pranks with distances and locations and directions.

Out of the murky blank came one who had gone a-scouting. He touched his cap to the girl and reported to her and to all who were in hearing.

"The Three C's chief pirate has got along. Craig is down at the dam. I was able to crawl up mighty close in the fog. I heard him. He's ugly!"

"I reckoned he would be a mite peevish as soon as the news of the social happenings along the river for the past few days got to him," said Vittum. "It's no surprise to me—been expecting him!"

"He's got a special edge on his temper—has been all bunged up by an auto accident, so I heard him giving out to the men he was talking to."

"And what's he saying of particular interest to us?"

"Says he's going to stick right at Skulltree and kill us off singly and in bunches, just as we happen to come along."

"News is news, and it's good or bad according to the way you look at it," declared the old man. "Does that fresh news scare anybody?" [306]

There was a vigorous chorus of denial; when one man averred that the statement only made the fight more worth while he was indorsed with great heartiness.

"All right!" agreed Vittum. "We'll consider that point settled." He drew a long breath; he inquired with anxious solicitude; "Did you overhear him saying anything about Latisan? He might have heard something, coming in fresh from outside."

The scout gave the girl a glance of apology; he was a tactless individual in shading facts. "Of course, all that Three C's bunch is liars, and Craig worst of all. But I did hear him say that Latisan is loafing in New York and is prob'ly in jail by this time."

The girl rose and walked away, and the fog shut her from their sight immediately. She heard the old man cursing the incautious scout. "Why the blazes didn't you smooth it? You've gone to work and hurt her feelings. She made her mistake, and she admits it. We all make our mistakes," said the rebuker. "But she's true blue! I ain't laying up anything against Latisan because he doesn't show up. It's because the girl is here that we are making men of ourselves right now. She's deserving of all we can give her. By gad! say I, she's going to make good with our help."

She was a considerable distance down the river path, but she heard that speech and the shout of the men indorsing the declaration.

Lida hastened as rapidly as she was able along the path that led to Skulltree; she had reconnoitered on the previous day—going as near the dam as she dared, trying to make the lay of the land suggest some method by which battle might be avoided. [307]

While she ran down the path that morning she was arriving at some definite conclusions. The news about Director Craig had put desperate courage into her. The upper and the nether millstones of men and events in the north country had begun their grim revolutions; she resolved to cast herself between those stones in an effort to save faithful men who were innocent of fault.

When the dull rumble of the sluiceway waters informed her that she was near the camp of the enemy she went more cautiously, and when she heard the voices of men she called, announcing that she desired to speak with Director Craig.

Somebody replied, after a pause which indicated that considerable amazement had been roused by a woman's voice.

"Come along, whoever you are! Mr. Craig is on the dam."

A man who kept jerking his head around to stare frankly at her led her along the string piece of the great structure.

Their meeting—she and the Comas director—was like a rencontre in the void of space; on the water side of the dam the mists matched the hue of the glassy surface and the blending masked the water; on the other side, the fog filled the deep gorge where the torrent of the sluiceway thundered.

She was obliged to go close to him in order to emerge from the vapor into his range of vision and to make her voice heard above the roar of the water. His one visible eye surveyed her with blank astonishment; near as she was to him, he did not recognize her at first in her rough garb of the woods.

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"Mr. Craig, I *was*"—she stressed the verb significantly—"an employee in the Vose-Mern agency in New York. I met you in their office."

He clasped his hands behind him as if he feared to have them free in front of him; her proximity seemed to invite those hands, but his countenance revealed that he was not in a mood then to give caresses. "Was, eh? May I ask what you are right now?"

"I'm doing my best to help in getting the Flagg drive down the river—without trouble!"

"Trouble!" He was echoing her again; it was as if, in his waxing ire, he did not dare to launch into a topic of his own. "What do you call it, what has been happening upriver?"

"I presume you mean that dams have been blown to get water for our logs."

"Our dams!" he shouted.

"I'm a stranger up here. I don't know whose dams they were. I have heard all kinds of stories about the rights in the dams, sir."

"I can't say to you what I think—and what I want to say! You're a girl, confound it! I'll only make a fool of myself, talking to you about our rights and our property. But I can say to you, about your own work, that you have been paid by our money to do a certain thing."

She opened her eyes on him in offended inquiry.

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"I take it that you're the same one who called herself Miss Patsy Jones when you operated at Adonia."

"I did use that name—for personal reasons."

He did not moderate his wrath. "Here I find that Patsy Jones is Miss Kennard of the Vose-Mern agency. We have paid good money to the agency. When I settled for the last job I added two hundred dollars as a present to you."

"I have not received the gift, sir. It does not belong to me. I'm here on my own account. I came north at my own expense without notifying Chief Mern that I was done with the agency; and strictly personal reasons, also, influenced me on that point." She was trying hard to keep her poise, not losing her emotions, preserving her dignity with a man of affairs and phrasing her replies with rather stilted diction. "I have my good reasons for doing all I can in my poor power to help the Flagg drive go through."

The fact that her name was Kennard meant nothing to Rufus Craig, a New Yorker who had never bothered himself with the ancient tales of the Noda country. He did not understand what interest she could have in opposing the Comas company; he could see only the ordinary and sordid side of the affair. He looked her up and down and curled his lip.

"You have been a traitor!"

"Not to the right, sir, when I found out what the right was."

"I think you'll have a chance to say something about that in court, in your defense! You have put the devil into those men and I'm giving you warning."

"I shall tell the truth in court, Mr. Craig. You may or you may not find that promise a warning of my own to you and your corporation methods."

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He blinked and looked away from her. "I'm busy! What are you doing here on this dam? What do you want of me? Is it more detective work?" he sneered. "Are you getting ready to double-cross the new gang you're hitched up with. For what reason you went over to 'em God only knows!"

"He does know!" she returned, earnestly. She stepped closer to him. "I came down here to plead that you'll let the Flagg logs go through this dam."

"I will not." His anger had driven him to the extreme of obstinacy.

"Mr. Craig, that stand means a wicked fight between men who are not paid to fight."

"You've had a lot of influence in making men blow our dams. Use that influence in keeping 'em away from this one, and there'll be no fight." He turned away, but she hastened forward and put herself in front of him.

"I cannot do it, sir! That will be asking our men to give up all they have been struggling for. I don't know what the law is—or what the law will say. Please listen to me! Keep the men from fighting—this season! Then allow the law to put matters right up here. The Flagg logs have gone down the river every year before this one. The good Lord has furnished the water for all. Mr. Craig, out of the depths of my heart I entreat you." She had tried hard to keep womanly weakness away. She wanted to conduct the affair on the plane of business good sense; but anxiety was overwhelming her; she broke down and sobbed frankly.

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What appeared to be recourse to woman's usual weapons served to make him more furious. "The matter is before the courts. There's a principle involved. This dam stays as it is. That's final!"

"I'm pleading for a helpless old man who cannot come here to talk for his own rights."

"Look here, my girl, you're merely a smart trickster from the city—a turncoat who can't give one good excuse for being a traitor to your employers."

"I can give an excuse!"

"I've had enough of this," he retorted, brutally, pricked by the reflection that his corporation would disown him and his methods if he failed to make good. "Can't you see that you're driving me insane with your girl's folly? You're lucky because I haven't brought officers up here and ordered your arrest for conspiracy. You belong in jail along with that fool of a Latisan." His rage broke down all reserve. "Do you see what he did to me in New York?" He pointed to his bandaged face. "I'll admit that he did have some sort of an excuse. You have none."

"I have this," she said. "Mr. Craig! I am Echford Flagg's granddaughter."

The shell of his skepticism was too thick!

"Do you think I am a complete fool? Flagg has no kin whatever!"

"How long have you been acquainted in these parts?"

"Three years," he admitted; but he scowled his sentiment of utter disbelief in her claim.

"I am what I say I am," she insisted. "Does that make any difference in your stand here to-day?"

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"Not a bit!"

They surveyed each other for some time, the mists swirling slowly about their heads.

"If I shed any more tears and do any more pleading, sir, you'll have good reasons for believing that I have no blood of the Flaggs in me! Do you still think I'm not what I say I am?"

He sliced the fog contemptuously with the edge of his palm. "You can't talk that stuff to me!" She understood the futility of appeal; he turned from her and she looked for a moment on the bulging scruff of his obstinate neck.

"Very well, Mr. Craig! If talk can't convince you, I'll try another way!"

She ran along the string piece and the curtain of the fog closed in behind her.

During her absence from the deadwater there had been a rallying of forces.

All the men were called in from the headworks and the booms. In that following conference over the methods of the impending battle the riverjacks were able to express themselves with more sanguinary vehemence than would have been allowed in the presence of the girl.

They felt that the fog was a particularly fortunate circumstance, and with grim haste they set about taking advantage of the mask that would hide their advance. In single file they began their march down the river shore. There were men who bore cant dogs; others were armed with pike poles. But there was no intent to cut and thrust. It was to be a man's fight with the flat of those weapons, with the tools of the job, honest thwacks given and taken. If one of them had ventured to pack an edged weapon or a gun he would have been shamed among his fellows.

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Halfway to the dam they met the girl, hurrying back. She understood. She did not ask questions. But when they halted she explained her own movements.

"I took it on myself to go to Director Craig," she said. "I was hoping I might be able to make him look at the thing in the right way. I did not apologize for you or for what has been done. If I could prevent this trouble I would make any sacrifice of myself."

"We know that," stated Vittum, and he was indorsed by whole-souled murmurs.

"But he would not listen to me. And all I can say to you men is this: God bless you and help you!"

They thanked her and then they stood aside from the path, offering her a way for retreat to the rear.

But she turned and walked on toward the dam. She shook her head when they protested. "No, I claim it as my right to go with you." She was even brave enough to relieve the tenseness of the situation by a flash of humor. "I don't believe one of those Comas cowards will get near enough to hurt any one of you. Haven't we found them out already? But if anybody in this crew does get hurt, you'll find me in full charge of the field hospital!"

There was no more talk after that; they trod softly on the duff under the trees; they dodged the ledges where their spike-soled boots might have rasped. [314]

"Did you note where the main bunch is, miss?" whispered the old man at her side.

"I saw only one man except Craig. The director was out on the dam, near the gates."

"Where the cap'n is, there the gang must be. We'll use that tip."

The men deployed as soon as they were in the open space near the end of the dam.

Even though they had had the protection of the fog up to that point, they knew their attack could not be made wholly a surprise; they were depending on their resoluteness and on being able to beat their way to a control of the gates.

Two men appeared to them in the fog.

"Now just a moment before you start something for which you'll be sorry," said one of the men. "I'm from the shire town and I'm attorney for the Comas corporation." He pointed to a man at his side, who pulled aside his coat lapel and exhibited a badge. "This is a deputy sheriff. The courts are protecting this property by an injunction."

"We've got only your word for that," stated the old man.

"You have been warned in law. That's all I'm here for. Now unless you keep off this property you must take the consequences."

The lawyer and the officer marched away and were effaced by the fog.

"It's too bad it ain't a clear day," remarked the spokesman to the crew. "We'd prob'ly be able to see the injunction that's guarding this dam. But I ain't going to let a lawyer tell me about anything I can't see." [315]

"But there's a thing I can see," called one of the men who had gone skirmishing in the direction which the attorney and sheriff had taken. "Here's a Comas crowd strung along the wings o' the dam. I can see what they're lugging! Come on, men! It's a cant-dog, pick-pole fight."

The attackers went into the fray with a yell.

The defenders of the dam were on higher ground; some of them thrust with the ugly weapons, others swung the strong staves and fenced. There was the smash of wood against wood, the clatter of iron. Men fell and rolled and came up! They who were bleeding did not seem to mind.

"They're backing up," yelled one of the Flagg crew. "Damn 'em, they're getting ready to run, as usual!"

There did seem to be some sort of concerted action of retreat on the part of the defenders.

"Look out for tricks," counseled Vittum, getting over the guard of an antagonist and felling him.

A few moments later the line of the defense melted; the Comas men dodged somewhere into the fog. The assailants had won to the higher level of the dam's wing.

And then that level melted, too!

It was a well-contrived trap—boards covered with earth—a surface supported by props which had been pulled away by ropes. More than half the Flagg men tumbled into deep and muddy water and threshed helplessly in a struggling mass until the others laid down their weapons and pulled the drowning men out. [316]

The attacking army retired for repairs and grouped on the solid shore. Except for the roar of the sluiceway and the gasping of the men who were getting breath there was something like calm after the uproar of the battle.

Out of the fog sounded the voice of Director Craig.

"We have given you your chance to show how you respect the law. What you have done after a legal warning is chalked up against you. Now that you have proclaimed yourselves as outlaws I have something of my own to proclaim to you. I am up here——"

A stentorian voice slashed in sharply, and Craig's speech was cut off.

The voice came from one who was veiled in the fog, but they all knew it for Ward Latisan's. "Yes, Craig, you're here—here about five hours ahead of me because you had the cash to hire a special train. However, I know the short cuts for a man on horseback. I'm here, too!"

His men got a dim view of him in the mists; he loomed like a statue of heroic size on the horse. Then he flung himself off and came running down the shore.

He went straight to Lida and faced her manfully; but his eyes were humbly beseeching and his features worked with contrite apology. "I know now who you are, Miss Kennard. I don't mean to presume, in the case of either you or your men. But will you allow me to speak to them?"

"Yes," she assented, trying to hold her poise, helped by his manner.

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He turned quickly from her eyes as if her gaze tortured him.

"I have been a coward, men. I ran away from my job. I'm ashamed of myself. I can't square myself, but let me do my bit to-day."

"I don't know what you can do—with that gang o' sneaks—after real men have had to quit," growled Vittum, unimpressed.

"Maybe I'm sneak enough these days to know how to deal with 'em," confessed Latisan, bitterly. "I stayed back there just now while the fight was on, but I knew a man fight wouldn't get us anything from them."

The men of the crew made no demonstration; they were awkwardly silent. The arrival of the deserter who confessed that he had been a coward did not encourage them at a time when they had failed ridiculously in their first sortie. He had ceased to be a captain who could inspire. He was one man more in a half-whipped crew, that was all.

They who had been dumped over the dam dragged slimy mud from their faces and surveyed him with sullen rebuke, remembering sharply that he had run away from the girl whose cause they had taken up.

The others, their faces marked with welts from blows, gazed and sniffed disparagingly.

But when he spoke out to the girl and her crew they listened with increasing respect because a quick shift to manly resolution impressed them.

His tone was tensely low and the noise of the tumbling water shielded his voice from eavesdroppers on the dam. "I stood back there in the fog and I heard what was said about an injunction. It's bad business, running against the courts, men. That injunction hangs over the crew of Echford Flagg. I am not one of that crew. What I may do is on my own account, and I'll stand the blame of it. All I ask is that you step aside and let me alone."

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"That ain't the way we want to play this game," declared Vittum.

"It isn't a square game, men, and that's why you mustn't play it. It isn't a riverman fight to-day. I came north from New York on the train with Craig. He brought a gang of gunmen with him. They're hidden there in the fog. He means to go the limit, hoping to get by with it because you made the first attack. It's up to me from now on."

"What in the name of the horn-headed Sancho do you think you can do all alone against guns?" demanded Vittum, scornfully.

"Think?" repeated Latisan. "I've had plenty of time for thinking on my way up here. Let me alone, I say!"

Lida went to him and put her hand on his arm, and he trembled; it seemed almost like a caress. But by no tenderness in his eyes or his expression was he indicating that he considered himself back on his former footing with her.

"Miss Kennard, don't keep me from trying to square myself with the Flagg crew, if I can. I'm not hoping that anything can square me with you; it's past hope."

He moved away, but she clung to him. "I must know what you intend to do. I'll not accept a reckless sacrifice—no, I'll not."

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"One evening in Adonia you gave me a lecture on duty and self-respect, Miss Kennard. I wish I'd taken your advice then. But that advice has never left my thoughts. I'm taking it now. I entreat you, don't let me shame myself again. This is before men," he warned her, in low tones. "Give me my fighting chance to make good with them—I beg you!"

He set back his shoulders, turned from her, and shouted Craig's name till the Comas director replied.

"Craig, yon in the fog! Do you hear?"

"I hear you, Latisan!"

"Do our logs go through Skulltree by your decent word to us?"

"I'll never give that word, my man!"

"Then take your warning! The fight is on—and this time I'm in it."

"I'm glad to be informed. I have an announcement of my own to make. Listen!" He gave a command. Instantly, startlingly, in the fog-shrouded spaces of the valley rang out a salvo of gun fire. Many rifles spat. The sound rolled in long echoes along the gorge and was banged back by the mountain sides.

"Latisan, those bullets went into the air. If you and your men come onto this dam——"

"There's only one kind of a fight up here among honest men—and you won't stand for it, eh?"

"We've got your number! You're declared outlaws. These men will shoot to kill."

In the chorus from the Flagg crew there were howls and groans.

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"And argument won't bring to you any sense of reason and decency, will it?" demanded the drive master.

"We shall shoot to kill!" insisted the magnate of the Comas corporation.

"All right! If those are your damnable principles, I'll go according to 'em."

The girl caught his hands when he started away. "You must not! No matter what you are—no matter what you know I am, now. He'll understand when we tell him—down there! There's more to life than logs!"

"I have my plans," he assured her, quietly. "You must realize how much this thing means to me now."

The unnatural silence in the ranks of the Flagg crew, after Latisan's declaration had been voiced, provoked Craig to venture an apprehensive inquiry. "You don't intend to come ramming against these guns, do you?"

"Hold your guns off us! I'm going away. And these men are going with me."

"That's good judgment."

"But I'm coming back! I won't sneak up on you. That isn't my style of fighting. You'll hear me on the way. I'll be coming down almighty hard on my heels. Remember that, Craig!"

Lida was at his side when he marched away up the shore toward the Flagg camp at the deadwater, and his men trailed him, mumbling their comments on the situation and wondering by what sort of miracle he would be able to prevail over armed gangsters who were paid to kill.

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"I'm going to ask you all to excuse me for playing a lone hand from now on, boys," said the drive master, standing in front of them when they were gathered at the camping place. "If they weren't working a dirty trick with their guns, I'd have you along with me just as I intended in the past. But you have had your fun while I've been making a fool of myself! Give me my chance now!"

He bowed to Lida and walked up the shore alone. No one stayed him. The girl locked together her trembling fingers, straining her eyes till he disappeared.

He knew the resources and methods of the drive. Soon he came upon a bateau pulled high on the river bank. There were boxes in the bateau, covered by a tarpaulin whose stripings of red signaled danger. He found a sack in the craft. He pried open one of the boxes and out of the sawdust in which they were packed he drew brown cylinders and tucked them carefully into the sack. The cylinders were sticks of dynamite. The sack was capacious and he stuffed it full. The bag sagged heavily with the weight of the load when he swung it over his shoulder and started up the bank, away from the river.

When Latisan walked away from Lida the mist again had lent its illusion, and he

seemed to become of heroic size before the gray screen hid him from her sight.

Vittum tried pathetically to relieve the stress of the silence.

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"The last peek at him made him look big enough to do 'most anything he sets out to do."

"Yes! But how can he fight them all single-handed?" She was pale and trembling.

"If I'm any judge, by the direction he took just now he has gone up and tapped our stock of canned thunder, miss. And if I ain't mistook about his notions, he is going to sound just about as big as he looked when we got that last peek!"

The rivermen did not lounge on the ground, as they usually did when they were resting. They stood, tensely waiting for what Latisan's manner of resolution had promised.

Lida asked no more questions; she was unable to control her tones. She had been given a hint of Ward's intentions by what the old man had said about the "canned thunder." She did not dare to be informed as to the probable details of those intentions; to know fully the nature of the risk he was running would have made the agony of her apprehensiveness unendurable.

It seemed to them, waiting there, that what Latisan had undertaken was never going to happen. They were not checking off the time in minutes; for them time was standing still. The far grumble of waters in the gorge merely accentuated the hush—did not break upon the profound silence. When a chickadee lilted near at hand the men started nervously and the girl uttered a low cry; even a bird's note had power to trip their nervous tension.

The sound for which they were waiting came to them at last.

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It was a sound with a thud in it!

Listeners who possessed an imagination would have found a suggestion of the crash of the hammer of Thor upon the mountain top.

"He looked big enough for that when he left us!" muttered the old man. He had never heard of the pagan divinity whom men called Thor. His mind was on the river gladiator who had declared that he would come down heavy on his heels when he started.

The brooding opacity which wrapped the scene made the location of the sound uncertain; but it was up somewhere among the hills. The echoes battered to and fro between the cliffs.

Before those echoes died the sound was repeated.

"He's coming slow, but he's come sure!" Vittum voiced their thoughts. "Them's the footsteps of Latisan!"

On they came! And as they thrust their force upon the upper ledges there was a little jump of the earth under the feet of those who stood and waited.

There was something indescribably grim and bodeful in those isochronal batterings of the solid ground. The echoes distracted the thoughts—made the ominous center of the sounds a matter of doubt. That uncertainty intensified the threat of what was approaching the dam of Skulltree.

There were other sounds, after a few moments. Rifles were cracking persistently; but it was manifestly random firing.

The old man stepped to Lida and grasped her hand and held it. "Don't be 'feared for him, miss. They're only guessing! He'll be knowing the ledges—every lift of 'em that's betwixt him and them. They'll never get him with their popguns. But he'll get *them!*" he declared, with venom. "I wonder what Craig is thinking now, with his old bug eyes poking into that fog and doing him as much good as if he was stabbing a mill pond with his finger!"

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The rifle fire died away, after a desultory patter of shots.

"They're running!" said one of the crew. "They must be on the run!"

"You bet they're running," agreed the old man. "The Three C's hasn't got money enough to hire men, to stand up in front of what's tromping down toward Skulltree! Heavier and heavier on his heels!"

Measuredly slow, inexorably persistent, progressed the footsteps of the giant blasts.

Latisan's men needed no eye-proof in order to understand the method.

The drive master was hurling the dynamite sticks far in advance of himself and to

right and to left, making his own location a puzzling matter. The men had seen him bomb incipient jams in that fashion, lighting short fuses and heaving the explosive to a safe distance.

The blasts were nearer and still nearer, and more frequent; the ground quaked under their feet; in the intervening silences they heard the whine and the rustle of upthrown litter in the air, the patterings and plops of debris raining into the spaces of the deadwater.

Behind the attack was the menace of the bodefully unseen—the lawlessness of the fantastically unprecedented. [325]

“I don’t blame the fellers with the guns, if they have quit,” commented Vittum. “They might as well try to lick the lightning in a thundercloud.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

[326]

MERN’S mercenaries were not cowards. They had served valiantly as guards of strike breakers, had fought in many forays, had winged their attackers, and had been winged in return. At mill gates they had resisted mobs and had endured missiles; they had ridden on trucks, protecting goods and drivers, through lanes of howling, hostile humanity; they had thrown the cordon of their bodies around dock workers.

But the gunmen’s exploits in intrepidity had been, of and in the cities.

The environment at Skulltree was the Great Open.

They were not backed by solidity or barricaded behind walls. There was not the reassurance of good, honest earth under their feet; they were precariously perched in space, so it seemed—standing on the stringers of the dam, peering into a void of shrouding mists and thunderous waters, the wilderness all about them!

In their battles in past times they had been able to see the foe; now they were called on to fight a noise—the bodeful detonations of blasts, to right, to left—here and there.

There was a foe; he was on his way. They did not know what sort of ruin he purposed to wreak as the climax of his performance. Craig himself did not know, so he affirmed in reply to anxious queries, and the boss’s uncertainty and increasing consternation added to the peculiar psychological menace of the thing. [327]

“Give us orders, Mr. Craig!” pleaded the captain of the guards. “Show us something to fight against. How many of ’em are there? Where are they?”

“It’s that damnable Latisan, working single-handed. I’m sure of it. Go get him!”

“If you don’t get him, he’s going to blow up this dam,” stated the frightened lawyer.

A far-flung bomb of dynamite landed in the water and shot a geyser spraying against the fog pall.

“I’m taking that guess for gospel,” affirmed the chief gunman, wiping spray from his face. “Mr. Craig, you can’t expect us to hang on here, facing a thing like what’s coming!”

“Shoot him!” gasped the Comas director, but he was revolving on unsteady feet and the aimlessness of his gaze revealed that he had no definite idea of procedure; his incertitude wrecked all the courage of his supporters.

“It can’t be done, sir. Not in this fog! We’d better get ashore——”

“And let him wreck this dam?”

“If he’s going to wreck it, we’d better be off it.”

In his fear Craig became insulting, and that attitude ended his control of the situation. “You’re hired with money, you cowards! Now earn it!”

“This is where your money can’t buy something for you, Mr. Craig,” the captain of the gunmen declared, and then he led the retreat of his squad across Skulltree dam and into the woods on the far shore from the portentous, invisible peril. [328]

And with dire extremity clearing for the moment his clouded vision, enabling him to look squarely at the matter of service and loyalty as he was able to command it,

Craig knew that when his money failed him in the north country he had no other resource. He had blinked that fact in the past, having found that in ordinary affairs his dollars were dominant; but this extraordinary event was knocking out from under him all the props of confidence; he felt bitterly alone all of a sudden.

"We'll have to vamoose off this dam," declared the deputy sheriff.

"You've got your duty as an officer of the law," shouted Craig, desperately feeling that in the case of this man, at least, he was making an appeal to something that was not covered by a money consideration.

"And I've got my common sense, too!" retorted the sheriff. He started away.

"So have I," agreed the attorney, a lawyer who had obeyed a telegram and had joined the Craig expedition at the shire town of the county the night before.

"There's an injunction!" stormed the field director.

"And there's a lunatic with a sack of dynamite." The lawyer crooked his arm across his face; a missile from the white void had splashed near by and water sprayed him. "You have told me that Latisan is no longer in Flagg's service. I'm not depending now on law, Mr. Craig, I'm depending on my legs."

He fled on the trail of the officer. But he left a pregnant thought in Craig's mind: Latisan was not an employee of Echford Flagg. As a matter of fact, Craig owned to himself—his clarity of vision persisting in that time of overwhelming disaster, in the wreck of the hopes built on the power of his money—that the thing had now become almost wholly a personal, guerrilla warfare between himself and Latisan; and when the truth came out, if the matter were forced to that issue, Craig would lack the backing of authority fully as much as Latisan lacked it then, in his assault on property. The bluff of the guns had not worked! Craig was realizing that in hiring such men, as he had on the spur of the moment, his rage instead of his business good judgment had prevailed. [329]

There were the repeated warnings of his superiors! The law would be obliged to investigate if Skulltree dam were wrecked, and would probe to the bottom of the moving reasons! Scandal, rank scandal! Craig could behold President Horatio Marlow as he sat that day with upraised, monitory forefinger, urging the touchy matter of credits and reputation. Craig could hear Dawes, the attorney: "That talk puts the thing up to you square-edged!"

Down from the mist-shrouded cliff was advancing a vengeful man who walked with the footsteps of thunder.

As Craig had looked ahead, basing his judgment on his experience with men and matters, it had seemed an easy matter to guard Skulltree with money and law. But in this astounding sortie of Latisan's, Comas money was of no use and Craig was developing an acute fear of the law which, invoked, would take matters into court. Over and over, his alarmed convictions pounded on his caution. [330]

He crouched under a rain of dirt and pebbles—then he ran away.

When he reached the far shore he jumped into a bateau that was pulled up there. With all the power of his lungs he yelled for rowers. He was obliged to confess loudly and unreservedly that he was giving up the fight—was seeking a way of stopping Latisan—before any of his men would come from the shelter of woods and fog and serve him.

He cursed them with the vigor of a master of galley slaves when the bateau was frothing along the deadwater. Then he bellowed into the fog, seeking a replying hail which would locate for him the Flagg crew. There was no repentance in him; his was a panic of compromise—a headlong rush to save himself from consequences. There was just as much uncertainty about what Latisan would do as there was about the dynamiter's exact location in that fog.

Therefore, Craig announced himself with raucous staccato of: "I quit! I quit! Get that man! Tell him I quit!"

Men hailed from the shore and their voices guided the rowers. Craig leaped from the bow of the bateau and waded for the last few yards.

"Go stop him! Bring him here!" He tossed his arms.

"Huh!" scoffed old Vittum. "That's a job for somebody who can tell which way the next stroke of lightning is heading."

"I'll give five hundred dollars to the man who'll get to him and stop him before he smashes that dam!" [331]

Craig added to the other visions which had been torturing him the possible catastrophe of the Comas logs roaring through past the mouth of a useless canal; he could look ahead still farther and see the grins of the sawmill men down the Noda,

setting their own prices.

Once more Craig was finding that his money was getting him nothing that day, and his sense of helplessness was revealed by his sagging jowls and dolorous eyes; and he had always depended on what money could buy!

There was no alacrity for service shown by any man of Flagg's crew.

"We're not afraid," said Felix Lapierre, breaking on Craig's furious taunts. "We have promise' to keep off and let him make good for himself—the lone hand—that's it!"

"That's it!" agreed Vittum.

"He has made good," bleated the Comas man. "If he goes any farther it will only be bad."

The dialogue was taking place disjointedly in the silences between the blasts. But Craig made himself heard above the next explosion. "He's ripping hell out of that dam now. Get to him. A thousand dollars for the man who stops him!"

"No man in this crew needs any of your money!" Lida was defiantly in front of the Comas director. "But if you're ready to listen to reason after this——"

She broke off and turned from him.

Before they realized that she had volunteered, she was away in the fog.

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In a moment they heard her voice, raised in a thrilling call, appealing to the avenger.

"That'll fetch him back—even if he was two miles deep in hell," Craig was informed by one of the men. "It's a lucky thing for the Three C's that she's on the job to-day."

The Comas director stood holding to a tree. He shivered every time an explosion clanged its echoes from cliff to cliff.

And when, after a waiting that was agony, the dreadful bombardment ceased, Craig staggered to the bateau and sat down on its prow.

"I don't blame you for looking that way," said Vittum. "If Latisan had been driven to get that dam to-day you would have lost your drive for the canal; and, before God and your directors, you would have been responsible!"

When Latisan came out of the fog he had put away, somewhere, the sack which had held destruction.

When he had gone away from them, entering upon the perils of his undertaking, he was calm and resolute. Now that he was back, a champion who had prevailed single-handed, he was pale, trembling, and broken; they did not understand, at first.

Lida came with him, trying to soothe him, pleading and protesting; he constantly muttered broken speech and seemed to be trying to control a mood that was half frenzy. He left her and stumbled across the open space to Craig.

"Everything else you have done—it's nothing as bad as this last. You sent her where you didn't dare to go yourself. Good God! you Comas sneak, I ought to kill you where you sit! For all you cared you were making me a murderer of an innocent girl!"

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"You had to be stopped. She went before I knew what she was going to do."

"And if she hadn't gone on her own account you would have tried to hire her to do it! It's always a case of what you can buy with your money—that's your style, Craig. Now you're up against something you can't buy. I'm still working alone—understand that? If you want to report me as an outlaw, go ahead! I'm giving you squarer warning than you gave me on the Tomah when you smashed the Latisans. If I smash that dam down there I'll be smashing you! I'll do it if you put as much as a toothpick in the way of the independent drives. I'll blow the bottom out of your canal, in the bargain. And if you think you or your gang can locate me over there"—he pointed in the direction of the hills of the watershed between the rivers basins—"try it! I know every hole in those hills. I'll keep bombing your drives till you can't keep a man on the job. That's the kind of an outlaw I am from now on."

"It's between us now, Latisan. I'll own up to it. It has come to that."

"Yes, it's between renegades. I'm admitting that I'm one," retorted Ward.

Craig stood up. If there was any of the spirit of Three C's bluster left in him he was concealing it successfully.

"Latisan, all these men have heard me say that I quit. I lost my head and was pushing the thing too far, considering it from a business standpoint. Can I be any

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more honest than that?"

"It sounds all right, but I take stock in you only to the extent that you'll stay in line if I stay on the job. I shall stay, as I have warned you."

"Suppose we talk turkey about the common rights at Skulltree!"

"You'll have to talk with Miss Kennard about her grandfather's interests. I'm simply a chance comer here!"

Latisan walked away and leaned against a tree.

Craig approached Lida. "We have already had some talk about the matter, I believe. I retreat from the position I have taken. Evidently we must make mutual allowances. What have you thought out about the details of a plan to let your logs through?"

The girl did not reply; she had no plans; she did not understand such matters.

"We'll have to decide on the head of water you'll need, and I take it you'll allow us enough for the canal so that we can save our drive." Craig was trying hard to offer compromise, but he was not able to repress all his sarcastic venom. "There's the matter of sorting and the other details. I'll have to ask for your views, Miss Kennard, because any misunderstanding may be dangerous, so I have been informed."

She looked helplessly from Craig to Latisan. The latter's aloofness, which he had displayed ever since he first appeared to her that day, his present peculiar relationship to the affair, his insistence that he must serve alone, made her problem more complex. Her vivid yearning was to give all into Latisan's keeping, but she did not dare to propose it. [335]

She looked at Vittum and Felix, seeking advice. The French Canadian smiled and shrugged his shoulders, evading responsibility. He did not understand such matters, either.

"I suppose I might be able to dig up some sort o' general ideas, give me time enough," said Vittum, when her eyes questioned him anxiously. "But I'm sort of hazy right now." He winked at her and ducked his head to indicate Latisan.

"I'm afraid!" she phrased the lament with a doleful motion of her lips rather than with spoken words.

"It can't be said but what he'll be impartial—the best one to ask," mumbled Vittum, stepping close to her. "He ain't hired by either side, as I understand it!" He was ironic, but there was a suggestion which she grasped desperately. She went to Latisan. Their conversation was in an undertone and the bystanders did not hear the words.

When she returned to Craig, Lida, confident in her new poise, reassured, informed in a fashion which fortified her self-reliance, met the Comas man with a demeanor which did credit to the granddaughter of Echford Flagg.

"I have not tried to involve Mr. Latisan in any way. I have asked his advice as an expert." She looked straight into the shifting eyes of the Comas director. "Last fall he was at Tech, and took a special course in hydraulic engineering. You know that, of course, Mr. Craig!" She paused till he bowed to admit the truth with which she insisted on displacing the lie which had followed Latisan in the north country. "And Mr. Latisan has had a great deal of practical experience on his own drives. It seems absolutely necessary to have a sorting gap here, with men of both crews handling the logs. When our timber is through the sluiceway—the daily run of logs—we are to be given a head of water which will take us through the gorge. As to the logs upriver—the rear—we are willing to join drives with you, Mr. Craig, so that we may use all the water together." She set back her shoulders. "That plan will serve us this season. For another season the independents will have laws of their own from the legislature. I'm quite sure that the independents have waked up and know now what some special legislative acts can do for their interests." [336]

"I beg your pardon for breaking in, Miss Kennard," said Latisan, from his distance. "But this seems to be the time for me to say to Mr. Craig, in the presence of witnesses, that the same plan goes for the Tomah region. The independents over there can't be licked, sir."

"Nor the Latisans," shouted somebody in the Flagg crew.

That friendly corroboration of the young man's inmost determination served as a challenge. The drive master walked toward Craig and shook his fist. "No, nor the Latisans! We have a sawmill, and we're not worrying about the logs to feed it. But you understand, Mr. Craig, that the independents must have gangway on the river for their cut. And we know how to get gangway!" [337]

He went back to his tree and resumed his whittling.

"To me the future looks very promising," said Lida. "We're all a little disturbed now, Mr. Craig, but we're coming to a perfect understanding. Don't you think so?"

Craig did not reply at once, and she added, with ingenuous affectation of desiring to bring forward reasons for his agreement, "If the Comas company does join drives with us you will have the help of a perfectly wonderful crew, Mr. Craig. I'm told that we're a week or ten days ahead of the usual time—and the men have never seemed to be considering mere wages!"

The Three C's director rolled his eyes, avoiding her candidly provoking regard. He shifted his gaze to Latisan, who had turned his back on the group and was still whittling placidly, propped against a tree by his shoulder. "Wonderful teamwork," growled the Comas man. "But sticking out for anything else will be a fool stunt. Miss Kennard, there's a lawyer over there in the woods, somewhere! The thing to do now seems to be to hunt him up so that he can help us to pass papers of agreement." He swung his hand to indicate the bateau. "Will you go with me?"

She hesitated. Then she smiled amiably on Craig. "I think I'd rather walk along the path, sir. I'll meet you and the lawyer at this end of the dam."

Craig trudged down to the boat and was swept away into the fog.

Latisan did not turn; he kept on whittling.

"Mr. Latisan!" she invited. "May I have your company to the dam? I'm sorry to trouble you, but I may be obliged to refer to you for further advice." [338]

"I feel called on to remark," said old Vittum, always an irrepressible commentator when comment seemed to be necessary, speaking after Latisan and Lida had walked away into the mist—"I'll say to all that she knows her business."

"But it was Latisan who advised her," objected a literalist.

"Hell! I ain't speaking of this drive," snapped the old man. "I'm complimenting her on a job where she doesn't need anybody's advice!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

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THE sun at meridian that day burned away the mists, for it was May and the high sun was able to prevail.

The sluiceway of Skulltree dam was open and in the caldron of the gorge a yeasty flood boiled and the sunlight painted rainbows in the drifting spume. Rolling cumbrously, end over end, at the foot of the sluice, lifting glistening, dripping flanks, sinking and darting through the white smother of the waters, the logs of the Flagg drive had begun their flight to the holdbooms of Adonia.

Lida and the taciturn squire whom she had drafted had climbed to the cliffs above the gorge in order to behold the first fruits of the compact which had been concluded with Craig and the Comas. Latisan went with her to the cliff because she had asked him to show her the way. His manner with her was not exactly shyness; she had been studying him, trying anxiously to penetrate his thoughts. He was reserved, but awkwardly so; it was more like embarrassment; it was a mingling of deference and despair in the face of a barrier.

It was warm up there where the sun beat against the granite, and she pulled off the jacket which had been one of her credentials in the north country. "I took the liberty of wearing it—and the cap. I'll not need them any more." [340]

She took the cap from her head. The breeze which had followed the calm of the mist fluttered a loose lock of her hair across her forehead and the sun lighted a glint within the tress. He gazed and blinked.

"I heard you had them—I heard it in Mern's office in New York," he said, with poor tact.

She offered them and he took the garments, clutching the cap and holding the jacket across his arm.

"I don't blame you for looking at me as you do," she went on, demurely and deprecatingly feminine at that moment. She smoothed her blouse with both hands and glanced down at her stained and ragged skirt. "It's my only warm dress and I've lived and slept in it—and I haven't minded a bit when the coffee sopped. I was trying to do my best."

He rocked his head voicelessly, helplessly—striving to fit speech to the thoughts that surged in him.

Then she made a request which perturbed him still more: "You came up here on horseback, I think you said. May I borrow the horse?"

"Do you mean that you're going away?" he gulped.

She spread her hands and again glanced down at her attire. She was hiding deeper motives behind the thin screen of concern for her wardrobe, trying to make a jest of the situation, and not succeeding. "You must own up that I need to go shopping."

He turned from her to the chasm where the logs were tumbling along.

"And there's nothing to keep me here any longer, Mr. Latisan, now that you have come back!"

He faced her again, swinging with a haste that ground his heels sharply on the ledge. But she put up her hand when he opened his mouth. [341]

"Do you think it will do us any good to bring up what has happened? I don't. I implore you not to mention it. You have come back to your work—it's waiting for you. After what you have done to-day you'll never need to lower your eyes before any man on this river. In my heart, when I gave you your cap and jacket, I was asking you to take back your work. I ask you with all the earnestness that's in me! Won't you do it?" There was a hint of a sob in her tones, but her eyes were full of the confidence of one who felt that she was not asking vainly.

He did not hesitate. But words were still beyond the reach of his tongue. He dragged off the billycock hat which he had bought in town and scaled it far out into the turbid flood. He pulled off the wrinkled coat of the ready-made suit and tossed it down the side of the cliff. With the cap on his head and buckling the belt of the jacket he stood before her. "The men gave me my chance to-day; you're giving me a bigger one."

"Then I'm only wasting your time—up here!"

It had not been in Latisan's mind that he would make any reference to the past; she had implored him to keep silent and he was determined to obey. He was rigidly resolved to offer no plea for the future; this was the granddaughter—presumably the heiress of Echford Flagg, to be taken into her own after this service she had rendered. A Latisan of the broken Latisans had no right to lift his eyes to her!

If there had been a twinkle of hope for his comfort in her attitude of reliance on him after he had arrived at Skulltree, there was none at that moment, for she had become distinctly dignified and distant. He swung back to that bitter conclusion which he had made a part of his convictions when he had pondered on the matter in his little room in New York—her frantically pledged affection had been only a part of her campaign of sacrifice. He was not blaming her for the pretense—he was not calling it deceit. She had fought for her own with such weapons as she could command in a time of stress. [342]

He followed her meekly when she hurried down from the cliff.

On the path which led back to the Flagg camp a breathless cookee met them. "A team is here from Adonia, miss. It's the big bays—Mr. Flagg's horses."

Instinctively she turned to Ward, making him her prop as she had done previously on that day.

"I've been expecting it," he told her. "It's just what your grandfather would do after he got word that Craig had gone through Adonia with his roughnecks. Mr. Flagg wouldn't leave you here to face what was threatened."

"I didn't tell my grandfather who I was. Dick promised to keep the secret," she faltered.

"Remember! Words have wings up in this region! I explained to you once, Miss Kennard, and you know what happened when I let loose that flock of them at Adonia—like a fool. I don't dare to think about it!"

He paced away from her; then he returned, calm again. "Mr. Flagg must have heard—he would keep in touch with what has been going on up here—and after he knew, it would be his style to let you go ahead and win out. He would understand what it is you're trying to do. His sending that team, now that he is afraid of danger, proves that he knows." [343]

When she ran on ahead Latisan did not try to keep up with her; he was once again the drive boss of Flagg's crew, a hired man; he had no excuse for meddling in the family affairs of his employers, he reflected, and in his new humility he was avoiding anything which might savor of inquisitive surveillance.

The man who had put the horses to the jumper in Adonia, the man whom she knew as Jeff, was the deputy whom Flagg had sent. He had come in haste—that was plain to her; he was mopping the flanks of the sweating bays.

The deference with which he touched his cap informed her fully as to the amount of knowledge possessed by the Flagg household. He unbuttoned, one after the other, his overcoat, his inner coat, his waistcoat, and from the deepest recess in his garments produced a sealed letter; his precautions in regard to it attested the value he put on a communication from the master to the master's granddaughter.

The envelope was blank.

The men of the shift that had been relieved stood about her in a circle. The arrival of the bays was an event which matched the other sensational happenings of the crowded day, and she was conscious that, without meaning to be disrespectful, the men were hankering to be taken wholly into her confidence—were expecting that much favor from her. [344]

Granddaughter of Echford Flagg she might be—but more than all she was one of the crew, that season, a companion who had inspired them, toiled with them, and triumphed with them. If any more good news had come they, as friends, were entitled to know it, their expressions told her. They were distinctly conveying to her their notion that she should stand there and read the letter aloud.

The hand which clutched the missive was trembling, and she was filled with dread in spite of the consoling thought that she had achieved so much. She was afraid to open the letter and she escaped out of the circle of inquiring faces and hid herself in her tent; even the crude flourish of importance displayed by the manner of Jeff in delivering the communication to her had its effect in making her fears more profound. The whims of old age—Flagg had dwelt on the subject! She remembered that when she was in the big house with Lisan, her grandfather had beat on the page of the Bible and had anathematized the ties of family in his arraignment of faults. He had been kind, after his fashion, when she was incognito, but now that he knew—

She ripped the envelope from the letter and opened the sheet; it was a broad sheet and had been folded many times to make it fit the envelope.

It was more like rude print than handwriting. At first she thought that her grandfather had been able to master a makeshift chirography with his left hand. But boldly at the top of the sheet, as a preface of apology, was this statement: "Dicktated to Dick and excuse looks and mestreaks. Hese a poor tool at writtin." [345]

Crouching on her bed of boughs, the sheet on her knees, her hands clutched into her wind-rumpled hair above her temples, she read the letter which her grandfather had contrived with the help of his drafted amanuensis.

To my Grand-daughter. He have to use short words and few. Dick is slow and can't spel.

Lida's thoughts were running parallel with her reading, and she remembered that, in those letters of hideous arraignment which she had found in her mother's effects, Echford Flagg's own spelling was fantastically original. But under the layers of ugly malediction she had found pathos: he said that he'd had no schooling of his own, and on that account had been led to turn his business over to the better but dishonest ability of Alfred Kennard.

Reading on, she could picture the scene—the two old men toiling with pathetic earnestness over the task of preparing that letter; here and there, the words only partially deleted by lines run across them, were evidences that in his frustration under the master's vitriolic complaints, old Dick had confused comment with dictated matter—and had included comment in his unthinking haste to get everything down. Three times a "Dam your pelt" had been written and crossed out.

He tell you I knew you when I gave you my old cant dog.

Lida gasped when she read the blunt declaration. She might have guessed that Echford Flagg would have repulsed a stranger; he had disguised his true sentiments under the excuse of an old man's whim! [346]

I let you go. It was making a squair deal between you and me. Nicola sent me a man to tell me how you had gorn north with his men and so I took Dick back after I had fired him.

It was at this point that a particularly prominent "Dam your pelt" was interjected.

The old fool would have blabbed to me what you told him to keep quiet about. He aint fit to be trusted with any secrits. But he was scard to tell me you was Lida. I told him. But the Comas helyun has gorn past here with men and guns. Let him have the logs. I want you, my granddaughter. Come home.

Tears flooded her eyes. "Come home!" Old Dick had printed those words in bold

letters.

This is in haist but he has been 2 hours writtin it and so I send Jeff to bring you. Dont wait. Kepe away from danjur. Come home.

And old Dick, the toiling scribe, had smuggled in at the bottom of the sheet a postscript, a vicarious confession which Echford Flagg did not know how to make, "Hese cryin and monein for you. Come home!"

It was as if those two summoning words were spoken in her ear, plaintively and quaveringly.

She ran from the tent, carrying her little bag and the cant dog scepter of the Flaggs.

"Can you start back at once?" she called to Jeff.

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"Aye! It's orders."

She saw Latisan at the shore, directing the movements of the men; he was once more the drive master, his cant dog in his hand, terse in his commands, obeyed in his authority.

He pulled off his cap and walked to meet her when she hastened toward him.

"I'm going back to Adonia."

"My guess was right, you see!"

"Are you coming soon to report?—Shall I tell my grandfather——" She halted in her query as if she were regretting the eagerness in her tone.

"I'll leave it to you to tell him all that has happened up here. But you may say to him, if you will, that I'm staying with the drive from now on."

Her charioteer swung the big bays and headed them toward the mouth of the tote road, halting them near her.

Her emotions were struggling from the fetters with which she tried to bind them. Those men standing around! She wished they would go away about their business, but they surveyed her with the satisfied air of persons who felt that they belonged in all matters that were on foot.

Latisan was repressed, grave, keeping his place, as he had assigned a status to himself. She was glad when old Vittum broke upon the silence that had become embarrassing. "It won't be like what it has been, after you're gone, Miss Lida Kennard. But I feel that I'm speaking for the men when I say that you're entitled to a lay-off, and if you'll be out on the hill where you can wave your hand to us when we ride the leader logs into the hold-boom, we'll all be much obligated to you! I was thinking of calling for three cheers, but I remember how this idea seemed to hit better." He led the procession of men past her; they scrubbed their toil-roughened palms across their breasts and gave her silent pledges when they grasped her hand. "It's sort of a family party," said Vittum.

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There was inspiration for her in that suggestion. This was no time for convention, for placid weighing of this consideration against that, for strait-laced repression. The environment encouraged her. Her exulting joy drove her on.

Once before, forced by the intensity of her need, she had made small account of convenances. But she acknowledged that a half truth had nearly compassed destruction of her hopes and the ruin of a man; a liar had taken advantage of an equivocal position. But now the whole truth about her was clear. Her identity was known—her motives were beyond all question. And there were no vindictive liars among those loyal followers who had come storming down the river for the sake of her cause.

If she did what she had in her mind to do, what was it except the confirmation of a pledge and the carrying out of a promise?

But when she looked appealingly up at Latisan he was steadfastly staring past her. Her impulses were already galloping, but the instant prick of pique was the final urge which made the impulses fairly run away.

She reached out and took Ward's hand and pressed it between her palms.

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"If it's because I'm Lida Kennard instead of the table girl at Brophy's tavern, you're foolish," she whispered, standing on tiptoe. "I gave you my promise. But perhaps you think it isn't binding because there was no seal, such as I put on that lawyer's paper down at the dam. Well—then—here's the seal."

She flung her arms about his neck and kissed his cheek.

"Now let the winged word take flight through the region!" she told herself. No man

could misunderstand the declaration of that kiss!

When Latisan came to his senses sufficiently to move his muscles, she avoided his groping arms and ran to the wagon. For a moment the big bays crouched, expecting the whistling sweep of the whip, bending their necks to watch the passenger climbing to her seat.

"Wait!" begged Latisan. He stumbled toward the wagon, staring at her, tripped by the earth ridges to which he paid no heed.

"Yes!" she promised. And then in tones that were low and thrilling and significant with honest pledge she said, "I'll wait for you—at home—at home!"

Jeff obeyed her quick command and swung the whistling whip, and Latisan stood gazing after her.

The men respected his stunned absorption in his thoughts. They went scattering to their work. Felix walked with Vittum.

"Ba gor!" The French Canadian vented the ejaculation after taking a deep breath. "When she say it to him—as she say it—it make goose flesh wiggle all over maself!"

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"As I have said!" Vittum was trudging along, his eyes on a big plug of tobacco from which he was paring a slice. "As I have said!" He slid the slice into his mouth from the blade of the knife. "She knows her business!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JOAN OF ARC OF THE NORTH
WOODS ***

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