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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SNOWSHOE TRAIL ***

THE SNOWSHOE TRAIL

by

EDISON MARSHALL

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"The Voice of the Pack," etc.**

With Frontispiece by Marshall Frantz

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To Agnes, of the South—this story of the North

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The Snowshoe Trail

I

It was not the first time that people of the forest had paused on the hill at twilight to look down on Bradleyburg. The sight always seemed to intrigue and mystify the wild folk,—the shadowed street, the spire of the moldering church ghostly in the half-light, the long row of unpainted shacks, and the dim, pale gleam of an occasional lighted window. The old bull moose, in rutting days, was wont to pause and call, listen an instant for such answer as the twilight city might give him, then push on through the spruce forests; and often the coyotes gathered in a ring and wailed out their cries over the rooftops. More than once the wolf pack had halted here for a fleeting instant; but they were never people to linger in the vicinity of men.

But to-night it was not one of these four-footed wild folk—this tall form—that emerged from the dark fringe of the spruce forest to gaze down at the town. But he was none the less of the forest. Its mark was upon him; in the silence of his tread, the sinuous strength of his motions; perhaps it lay even in a certain dimness and obscurity of outline, framed by the thickets as he was, that was particularly characteristic of the wild denizens of the woods. But even in the heavy shadows his identity was clear at once. He was simply a woodsman,—and he held his horse by the bridle rein.

The long file of pack horses behind him halted, waiting for their master to go on. He stood musing, held by the darkened scene below him. Hard to read, in the deepening shadows, was the expression on his bronzed face. It revealed relief, of course, simple and heartfelt joy at the sight of his destination. Men do not wander over the blazed trails of the North Woods and not feel relief at the journey's end. There was a hint of fatigue in his posture, the horses' heads were low; and the shacks below meant food and rest. But there was also a pensiveness, a dreamy quietude in his dark eyes that revealed the greater sweep of his thoughts.

He had looked down on Bradleyburg on many previous occasions, but the scene had never impressed him in quite this way before. Already the shadows had crept out from the dark forests that enclosed the little city and had enfolded it in gloom: the buildings were obscured and the street was lost, and there was little left to tell that here was the abode of men. A dim light, faint as the glowing eyes of the wild creatures in the darkness, burned here and there from the window of a house: except for this the wilderness would have seemed unbroken.

"It's getting you down," the man muttered. "It's closing you in and smothering you—just as it has me."

Perhaps, had his words carried far enough in the silence, the townspeople in the houses below wouldn't have understood. His horses, sniffing at his knees, did not seem to hear. But the woodsman could not have made himself any clearer. Words never come easy to those that dwell in the silences of the North. To him it seemed that the twilight was symbolic of the wilderness,—stealing forth with slow encroachments until all of the little town was enfolded within itself. It was a twilight city, the little cluster of frame shacks below him. It could be brave and gay enough in the daylight, a few children could play in its streets and women could call from door to door, but the falling darkness revealed it as it was,—simply a fragment that the dark forests were about to claim. The day was done in Bradleyburg; as in the case of many of the gold camps of the North the wilderness was about to take back its own.

It had had a glorious past, this little city lost in the northern reaches of the Selkirks. In the man's own boyhood it had been one of the flourishing gold camps of the North; and miners had come from all over the continent to wash the gravel of its streams. In all directions up the hillside the tents and shacks had stretched, dance halls were gay, freighters plied along the winding road to the south. The man's mother had been one of the first women in the camp; and one of the last to go. The mines were fabulously rich; tens of thousands in dust were often taken in a single day by a lone miner, fortunes were made and lost at the gambling tables, and even the terrible winters could not triumph over the gold seekers. But in a little while the mines gave out, one terrible winter night the whole town was destroyed by fire, and now that the miners were drifting

to other camps, few of the shacks were rebuilt. Of the six thousand that had been, scarcely threescore remained. A few trappers ran their lines out from the town, a few men had placer claims in the old diggings, two or three woodsmen made precarious livings as guides for such wealthy men as came to hunt moose and caribou, and Bradleyburg's course was run. The winter cold had triumphed at last, and its curse was over the city from October till June. The spruce forest, cleared away to make room for the cabins, had sprung up again and was steadily marching toward the main street of the town.

But the man on the hilltop felt no regret. Except for a few memories of his young days he had no particular fondness for the little cluster of shacks. Long ago the wilderness had claimed him for its own; his home was the dark forest from which even now he was emerging. Bradleyburg was simply his source of supplies and his post office, the market for his furs. He had reached back and stroked the warm nose of his horse.

"Another half mile, old fellow," he said gently. "Then oats—rice and meat for me at Johnson's—and oats—honest-to-goodness oats—for you. What you think about that, eh, Mulvaney? Then show a little speed this last half-mile."

The man swung on his horse, and even the cattlemen of the plains would have found something to admire in the ease and grace with which his body slipped down into the saddle. The horse moved forward, the pack animals pushed on behind him. A few minutes later they had swung down into the still street of the town. Tired as he was, his hands were swift and strong as he unpacked the animals and tied them in the bar back of Johnson's,—the little frontier inn. As always, after the supper hour, a group of the townsmen were gathered about the hotel stove; and all of them spoke to him as he entered. He stood among them an instant, warming his hands.

They had few words at first. The lesson of silence is taught deeply and sure in the North. The hostess went to her kitchen to order the man's supper, the townsmen drew at their pipes.

"Well, Bill," one of them asked at last, "how's everything with you?"

It was not the usual how-d'ye-do of greeting. The words were spoken in actual question, as if they had special significance.

The man straightened, turning sober eyes. "Nothing startling yet," he replied.

"In after supplies?"

"Yes—and my mail."

There was a long pause. The conversation was apparently ended. Bill turned to go. A stranger spoke from the other side of the fire.

"How's Grizzly River?" he asked. Bill turned to him with a smile.

"Getting higher and higher. All the streams are up. You know that bald-faced bay of Fargo's?"

Fargo was the Bradleyburg merchant, and the stranger knew the horse,—one of the little band that, after the frontier custom, Fargo kept to rent. "Yes, I remember him."

"Well, I've got him this fall. You know he's a yellow cuss."

The stranger nodded. In this little community the dumb brutes were almost as well known as the human inhabitants. The meaning was wholly plain to him too, and the term did not apply to the horse's color. Yellow, on the frontier, means just one thing: the most damning and unforgivable thing of all. When one is yellow he gives up easily, he dares not lift his arms to fight, and the wilderness claims him quickly. "There's a little creek with a bad mudhole just this side of the ford," Bill went on. "All the horses got through but Baldy, and he could have made it easy if he'd tried. But what did he do but just sit back on his haunches in the mud, like an old man in a chair, his head up and his front legs in his lap, and just give up? Quite a sight—that horse sitting in the mud. I had to snag him out."

The others smiled, but none of them with the brilliance of the story-teller himself. The wilderness picture—with the cowardly horse sitting in the mud—was again before his eyes; and none of the hardship of the journey could cost him his joy in it. Bill Bronson was no longer just a dim form on the twilight hilltop. The lamplight showed him plain. In this circle of townspeople he was a man to notice twice.

The forests had done well by him. Like the spruce themselves he had grown straight and tall, but his form was sturdy too. There was a lithe strength about him that suggested the larger felines; the hard trails of the forest had left not a spare ounce of flesh on his powerful frame. His mold, except for a vague and indistinct refinement in his long-fingered and strong hands, was simply that of a woodsman,—sturdy, muscular, untiring. His speech was not greatly different from that of others: the woodspeople, spending many of the long winter days in reading, are usually careless in speech but rarely ungrammatical. His clothes were homely and worn. He wore a blue mackinaw over a flannel shirt, dark trousers and rubber boots: garments that were suited to his life.

But it was true that men looked twice into Bill Bronson's face. His features were rugged, now his mouth and jowls were dark with beard, yet written all over his sunburned face was a kindness and gentleness that could not be denied. There was strength and good humor in plenty; and it was hard to reconcile these qualities with an unquestioned wistfulness and boyishness in his eyes. They were dark eyes, the eyes of a man of action who could also dream, kindly, thoughtful eyes which even the deep shadows of the forest had not blinded to beauty.

As he waited for his meal he crossed the dark road to the little frontier post office, there to be given his two months' accumulation of letters. He looked them over with significant anxiety. There were the usual forders from fur buyers, a few advertisements and circulars, and a small batch of business mail. The smile died from his eyes as he read one of these communications after another. Their context was usually the same,—that his proposition did not look good, and no investment would be made in a plan as vague as his. The correspondents understood that he had been grubstaked before without result. They remained, however, his respectfully,—and Bill's great hand crumpled each in turn.

Only one letter remained, written in an unknown hand from a far-off city; and it dropped, for the moment, unnoticed into his lap. His eyes were brooding and lifeless as he stared out the hotel window into the darkened street. There was no use of appealing again to the business folk of the provincial towns; the tone of their letters was all too decisive. The great plans he had made would come to nothing after all. His proposition simply did not hold water.

He had been seeking a "grubstake,"—some one to finance another expedition into the virgin Clearwater for half of such gains as he should make. In a few weeks more the winter would close down; the horses, essential to such a trip as this, had to be driven down to the gate of the Outside,—three hundred miles to the bank of a great river. He had time for one more dash for the rainbow's end, and no one could stake him for it. He had some food supplies, but the horse-rent was an unsolved problem. He could see no ray of hope as he picked up, half-heartedly, the last letter of the pile.

But at once his interest returned. It had been mailed in a far distant city in the United States, and the fine, clear handwriting was obviously feminine. He didn't have to rub the paper between his thumb and forefinger to mark its rich, heavy quality and its beauty,—the stationery of an aristocrat. The message was singularly terse:

My Dear Mr. Bronson:

I am informed, by the head of your provincial game commission, that you can be employed to guide for hunting parties wishing to hunt in the Clearwater, north of Bradleyburg. I do not wish to hunt game, but I do wish to penetrate that country in search of my fiance, Mr. Harold Lounsbury, of whom doubtless you have heard, and who disappeared in the Clearwater district six years ago. I will be accompanied by Mr. Lounsbury's uncle, Kenly Lounsbury, and I wish you to secure the outfit and a man to cook at once. You will be paid the usual outfitter's rates for thirty days. We will arrive in Bradleyburg September twentieth by stage. Yours sincerely,
Virginia Tremont.

Bill finished the note, pocketed it carefully, and a boyish light was in his eyes as he shook fragrant tobacco into his pipe. "The way out," he told himself. "She won't care if I do my prospecting the same time."

His thought swung back to a scene of many Septembers before, of a camp he had made beside a distant stream and of a wayfarer who had eaten of his bread and journeyed on,—never to pass that way again. There had been one curious circumstance connected with the meeting, otherwise it might not have lingered so clearly in Bill's memory. It had seemed to him, at the time, that he had encountered the stranger on some previous occasion. There was a haunting familiarity in his face, a fleeting memory that he could not trace or identify. Yet nothing in the stranger's past life had offered an explanation. He was a newcomer, he said,—on his first trip north. Bill, on the other hand, had never gone south. It had been but a trick of the imagination, after all. And Bill did not doubt that he was the man for whom the girl sought.

The little lines seemed to draw and deepen about the man's eyes. "Six years—but six years is too long, for Clearwater," he murmured. "Men either come out by then, or it gets 'em. I'm afraid she'll never find her lover."

He went to make arrangements with Fargo, the merchant, about supplies. At midnight he sat alone in the little lobby of the inn; all the other townsmen had gone. The fire was nearly out; a single lamp threw a doubtful glow on the woodsman's face. His thoughts had been tireless to-night. He couldn't have told why. Evidently some little event of the evening, some word that he had not consciously noticed had been the impulse for a flood of memories. They haunted him and held him, and he couldn't escape from them.

His thought moved in great circles, always returning to the same starting point,—the tragedy and mystery of his own boyhood. He knew perfectly that there was neither pleasure nor profit in dwelling upon this subject. In the years that he had had his full manhood he had tried to force the matter from his thoughts, and mostly he had succeeded. Self-mastery was his first law, the code by which he lived; and mostly the blue devils had lifted their curse from him. But they were

shrieking from the gloom at him to-night. In the late years some of the great tranquility of the forest had reposed in him and the bitter hours of brooding came ever at longer intervals. But to-night they held him in bondage.

It was twenty-five years past and he had been only a child when the thing had happened. He had been but seven years old,—more of a baby than a child. He smiled grimly as the thought went home to him that childhood, in its true sense, was one stage of life that he had missed. He had been cheated of it by a remorseless destiny; he had been a baby, and then he had been a man. There were no joyous gradations between. The sober little boy had sensed at once that the responsibilities of manhood had been thrust upon him, and he must make good. After all, that was the code of his life,—to take what destiny gave and stand up under it.

If the event had occurred anywhere but in the North, the outcome might have been wholly different. Life was easy and gentle in the river bottoms of the United States. Women could make a brave fight unaided; even fatherless boys were not entirely cheated of their youth. Besides, in these desolate wastes the code of life is a personal code, primitive emotions have full sway, and men to not change their dreams from day to day. Constancy and steadfastness are the first impulses of their lives; neither Bill nor his mother had been able to forget or to forgive. Here was an undying ignominy and hatred; besides—for the North is a far-famed keeper of secrets—the mystery and the dreadful uncertainty, haunting like a ghost. As a little boy he had tried to comfort his mother with his high plans for revenge; and she had whispered to him, and cried over him, and pressed him hard against her; and he had promised, over and over again, that when manhood came to him he would right her wrongs and his own. He remembered his pathetic efforts to comfort her, and it had never occurred to him that he had been in need of comforting himself. He had been a sober, wistful-eyed little boy, bearing bravely the whole tragic weight upon his own small shoulders.

The story was very simple and short,—nothing particularly unusual in the North. His father had come early to the gold fields of Bradleyburg, and he had been one of few that was accompanied by his wife,—a tender creature, scarcely molded for life in the northern gold camps. Then there had been Rutheford, his father's partner, a man whom neither Bill nor his mother liked or trusted, but to whom the elder Bronson gave full trust. Somewhere beyond far Grizzly River, in the Clearwater, Bronson had made a wonderful strike,—a fabulous mine where the gravel was simply laden with the yellow dust; and because they had prospected together in times past, Bronson gave his partner a share in it.

They had worked for months at their mine, in secret, and then Rutheford had come with pack horses into Bradleyburg, ostensibly for supplies. He had been a guest at the Bronson cabin and had reported that all was well with his generous partner. And the next night he had disappeared.

Weeks were to pass before the truth was known. Rutheford did not return to the mine at all; he was traced clear to the shipping point, three hundred miles below Bradleyburg. And he did not go empty-handed. The pack horses had not carried empty saddlebags. They had been simply laden with gold. And Bronson never returned to his family in Bradleyburg.

There was only one possible explanation. The gold had represented the season's washings—an amount that went into the hundreds of thousands—and Rutheford had murdered his benefactor and absconded with the entire amount. No living human being except Rutheford himself knew where the mine lay; there was no way for Bronson's family either to reclaim the body or to continue to work on the mine. Search parties had sought it in vain, and the lost mine of the Bronsons became a legend, a mystery that had grown constantly more dim in the passing years.

"When I am gone," little Bill would whisper to his mother, as she knelt crying at his feet, "I will go out and find my papa's mine. Also I will chase down Rutheford, and track him all over the world until I find him, and make him suffer for all he has done!"

This was a northern child, and his baby eyes would gleam and his features draw, and then his mother, half-frightened, would try to quiet him in her arms. This was the North, the land of primitive emotions, take and give, receive and pay, simple justice and remorseless vengeance; and when the storm swept over the cabin and the snow deepened at the doorway, those terrible, whispered promises seemed wholly fitting and true.

"I'll follow him till I die, and he and his wife and his son will pay for what he has done to us."

But the years had come and passed, and Rutheford had not been brought to justice nor the mine found. It was true that in a past summer Bill had traced his father's murderer as far as the shipping point, but there all trace of him was irremediably lost. Bill had made many excursions into the Clearwater in search of the lost mine, all without success. He had had but one guide,—a hastily scrawled map that Bronson had once drawn for his wife, to show her the approximate position of the claim. There had been no hope of avenging the murder, but with each recurring spring Bill had felt certain of clearing up the mystery, at least of finding the mine and its wealth and the bones of his father. But the last days of his mother, gone at last to her old home in the United States, could be made easier; but his own future would be assured. But now, at thirty-two, the recovery of the mine seemed as far distant as ever. Devoting his life to the pursuit of it, he had not prepared himself for any other occupation; he had only a rather unusual general

education, procured from the Bradleyburg schools and his winter reading, and now he was face to face with economic problems, too.

He would try once more. If he did not win, the dream of his youth would have to be given over. He had devoted his days to it; such a force as was about to send Virginia Tremont into the wilderness in search of her lover had never come up in his life. He sat dreaming, the ashes cold in his pipe.

He was called to himself by a distinct feeling of cold. The fire was out, the chill of the early midnight hours had crept into the room. The man rose wearily, then strode to the door for a moment's survey of the sky.

For a breath he stood watching. His was the only lamp still glowing: only the starlight, wan and pale, lay over the town. The night wind came stealing, an icy ghost, up the dark street; and it chilled his uncovered throat. The moon rose over the spruce forest, ringed with white. Already the frost was growing on the roofs.

The ring around the moon, the nip in the air, the little wind that came so gently, yet with such sinister stealth, all portended one thing,—that the great northern winter was lurking just beyond the mountains, ready to swoop forth. Of course there would be likely time in plenty for a dash into Clearwater; yet the little breath of fall was almost gone. Far away, rising and falling faint as a cobweb in the air, a coyote sang to the rising moon,—a strange, sobbing song of pain and sadness and fear that only the woodsman, to whom the North had sent home its lessons, could understand.

II

Bill Bronson found that he had the usual number of difficulties to contend with, when arranging for the journey. He had to procure more horses for the larger outfit, and he was obliged to comb the town of them before he had enough. This was not an agricultural land, this wild realm of the Selkirks, and all of the animals were originally Indian stock,—the usual type of mountain cayuses with which most big-game hunters are acquainted. Some of them were faithful and trustworthy animals, but many were half-broken, many cowardly and vicious. On those he rented he took the risk; he would be charged on the books for all those that were not returned to their owners at Bradleyburg by October twentieth.

Bill knew perfectly that he would play in good fortune if the loss in horseflesh did not cost him most of the gains of the undertaking. Even the sturdy mustangs were not bred for traversing the trails of Clearwater. There were steep hills where a single misstep meant death, there were narrow trails and dangerous fords, and here and there were inoffensive-looking pools where the body of a horse may sink out of sight in less time than it takes to tell it. These were not the immense-chested moose or the strong-limbed caribou, natives of the place and monarchs of its trails. Besides, if the winter caught them on the higher levels, they would never eat oats in Johnson's barn again. The six feet of snow covers all horse feed, and the alternatives that remain are simply a merciful bullet from the wrangler's pistol or death of slow starvation.

Bill had certain stores in his cabins,—the long line of log huts from which he operated in the trapping season,—yet further supplies were needed for the trip. He bought sugar, flour, great sacks of rice—that nutritious and delightful grain that all outdoor men learn to love—coffee and canned goods past all description. Savory bacon, a great cured ham of a caribou, dehydrated vegetables and cans of marmalade and jam: all these went into the big saddle-bags for the journey. He was fully aware that the punishing days' ride could never be endured on half-rations. Camp equipment, rifles, shells and a linen tent made up the outfit.

He encountered real difficulty when he tried to hire a man to act as cook. Evidently the Bradleyburg citizens had no love for the mountain realms in the last days of fall. For the double wage that he promised he was only able to secure a half-rate man,—Vosper by name, a shifty-eyed youth from one of the placer mines, farther down toward the settlements.

Up to the time that he heard the far-off sound of their automobile struggling up the long hill, he had made no mental picture of his employers. He rather hoped that Mr. Kenly Lounsbury—uncle of the missing man—would represent the usual type of middle-aged American with whom he had previously dealt,—cold-nerved, likeable business men that came for recreation on the caribou trails. Virginia Tremont would of course be a new type, but he felt no especial interest in her. But as he waited at the door of the hotel he began to be aware of a curious excitement, a sense of grave and portentous developments. He did not feel the least self-conscious. But he did know a suddenly awakened interest in this girl who would come clear to these northern realms to find her lover.

The car was in evident difficulties. It was the end of the road: in fact, the old highway for the

last three miles of its length was simply two ruts on the hillside. As soon as it came in sight Bill recognized the driver,—a man who operated a line of auto-stages, during the summer months, on the long river-road below. The next instant the car drew up beside the hotel.

To a man of cities there would have been nothing particularly unusual in this sight of a well-groomed man and girl in the tonneau of an automobile. The man was a familiar type, of medium size, precise, his outing clothes just a trifle garish; the girl trim and sweet-faced, and stylish from the top of her head to the soles of her expensive little boots. But no moment of Bill's life had ever been fraught with a greater wonder. None had ever such a quality of the miraculous. None had ever gone so deep.

He had not known many women, this dark man of the forests. He had seen Indian squaws in plenty, stolid and fat, he had known a few of the wives of the Bradleyburg men,—women pretty enough, good housekeepers, neatly clad and perhaps a little saddened and crushed by the very remorselessness of this land in which they lived. But there had been no girls in Bradleyburg to grow up with, no schoolday sweethearts. He had known the dark and desolate forests, never a sweetheart's kiss. His mother was now but a memory: tenderness, loveliness, personal beauty to hold the eyes had been wholly without his bourne. And he gazed at Virginia Tremont as a man might look at a celestial light.

If the girl could have seen the swift flood of worship that flowed into his face, she would have felt no scorn. She was of the cities, caste had hardened her as far as it could harden one of her nature, she was a thoroughbred to the last inch, used to flattery and the attentions of men of her own class; yet she would have held no contempt for this tall, bronzed man that looked at her with such awe and wonder. The surge of feeling was real in him; and reality is one thing, over the broad earth, that no human being dares to scorn. If she could have read deeper she would have found in herself an unlooked-for answer, in a small measure at least, to a lifelong dream, an ideal come true, and even she—in her high place—would have known a little whisper of awe.

All his life, it seemed to him, Bill had dreamed dreams—dreams that he would not admit into his conscious thought and which he constantly tried to disavow because he considered their substance did not exist in reality and thus they were out of accord with the realism with which he regarded life. On the long winter nights, when the snow lay endless and deep over the wilderness, and the terrible cold locked the land tight, he would sit in his trapping cabins, gazing into the smoke clouds from his pipe, and a tender enchantment would steal over him. He would have admitted to no human being those wistful and beautiful hours that he spent alone. He was known as a man among men, one who could battle the snows and meet the grizzly in his lair, and he would have been ashamed to reveal this dreamy, romantic side of his nature, these longings that swept him to the depths. He would go to his bed and lie for long, tingling, wakeful hours stirred by dreams that through no earthly chance could he conceive as coming true. Arms about him, lips near, beauty and tenderness and hallowed awakenings,—he had imagined them all in his secret hours.

In the deep realms of his spirit, it seemed to him, he had always known this girl,—this straight, graceful, lovely being with eyes of an angel and smile of a happy child. He had denied her existence, and here she was before him. Dark hair, waving and just a little untidy in the brisk wind, oval face and determined little chin, shadowing lashes and the exquisite contrasts of brunette beauty, a glimpse of soft, white flesh at the throat through her dark furs, smart tailored suit and dainty hands,—they were all known to him of old. For all the indifference and distance with which she looked at him and at the other townspeople, there was a world of girlish sweetness in her face. For all her caste, there was spiritual beauty and gracious charm in every facial line.

Curiously, Bill had no tinge of the resentment he might have expected that his dream should come half-true only to be shattered like the bubble it was. Because he had no delusions. He knew that he was only an employee, that a girl of her caste would ever regard him as the great regard those that serve them—kindly but impersonally—but for now he asked for nothing more. To him she was a creature past belief, a being from another world, and he was content to serve her humbly. He knew that he was of the forest and she of the cities of men, and soon they would take separate trails. His only comfort, heretofore, had been that his dream could not possibly come true, that the stuff of which it was made could never exist in the barren, dreadful, accursed place that was his home; but his nature was too big and true for any bitterness—to hate her because she was of a sphere so infinitely apart from his. But he wouldn't give her his love, he told himself, only his adoration. He wasn't going to be foolish enough to fall in love with a star! Yet he was swept with joy, for did not a whole month intervene before she would go back to her kind? Would she not be in his own keeping for a while, before she left him to his forests and his snows? Could he not see her across the fire, exult in her beauty, even aid her in finding her lost lover? His eye kindled and his face flushed, and he leaped to help her from the tonneau.

"I suppose you are Mr. Bronson?" she asked.

It was the same friendly but impersonal tone that he had expected, but he felt no resentment. His spirits had rallied promptly; and he was already partly adjusted to the fact that his joy in the journey would consist of the mere, unembellished fact of her presence.

"Yes. Of course this is Miss Tremont and Mr. Lounsbury. And just as soon as I pack the

horses we'll be ready to start."

"I don't see why you haven't got 'em already packed," Lounsbury broke in. "If I ran my business in this shiftless way——"

Bill turned quickly toward him. He saw at once that other elements beside pleasure were to enter into this journey. The man spoke querulously, in a tone to which Bill was neither accustomed nor reconciled. If the girl had chosen to abuse him, he would have taken it meekly as his due; but it hadn't been his training to accept too many rude words from a fellow man. Yet, he remembered, he was the uncle of the girl's fiance, and that meant he was a privileged person. Besides, his temper had likely been severely strained by the rough road.

"Don't be ridiculous, Uncle," the girl reproved her. "How did he know exactly when we were going to arrive?" She tuned back to Bill. "Now tell us where we can get lunch. I'm starved."

"This country does—stimulate the appetite," Bill responded gravely. Then he showed them into the hotel.

He did a queer and sprightly little dance as he hurried toward the barn to get his horse.

III

Mr. Kenly Lounsbury, addressed affectionately as Uncle by his nephew's fiancee, was in ill humor as he devoured his lunch. In the first place he hadn't been getting the attention that he had expected. He was used to being treated with a certain deference, an abject humility was as fitting to a man of wealth and position. These northern people, however, didn't seem to know how to fawn. They were courteous enough, gave good service, but were inclined to speak to him as man to man,—an inference of equality that he regarded with great displeasure. His nephew's penniless fiancee, instead of himself, received all the attentions. Even the burly ruffian who was to guide them looked at her as if she were an angel.

The girl's voice rang over the table. "What's worrying you now, Uncle?" she asked.

Lounsbury looked up angrily. "What's worrying me now is—that I was such a fool as to come up into this country at the approach of winter. I don't like the place, and I don't like the people, and I abominate the service! Fancy eating on these great, thick plates for a month! I don't trust that big outlaw who is going to take us into the woods, either. Virginia, I have a distinct premonition of disaster."

"I rather think—that we'll be glad enough to have any china plates at all before we get back. And Mr. Bronson——"

"By the way, don't call him *Mr.* Bronson. You must learn to teach these beggars their places. Call him just Bronson. You'll get twice the service."

"Yes, Uncle. I was just going to say that he seemed very trustworthy. And it's hardly—well, the sporting thing to become discouraged so soon."

All through the journey so far this had been Lounsbury's one satisfaction—that he was doing the sporting thing. He knew perfectly that many of his business associates, many of his city's great whom he would have been flattered to know, came up into these gloomy forests every year in pursuit of big game; and he had heard of enduring hardships in a "sporting" way. But the term was already threadbare,—and the journey only commenced. The reason went back to the simple fact that Lounsbury was not a sportsman and never could be, that the red corpuscle content in his blood was wholly within the law.

Yes, Virginia felt at a disadvantage. This man's money had financed the trip; the fortune her own father had left had been almost depleted from reverses resulting from the war, and only the most meager sort of an income—according to her standards—was left. An orphan, she had always looked up to her fiance's uncle as her guardian and adviser; to see signs of discouragement in him now was a serious blow to her.

She had been somewhat surprised, in the first place, at his willingness to undertake the journey. He usually did not care to go so far from the White Way of his native city. The years had taught her to look for selfish motives behind his every action; certainly, she told herself, he was not of the unselfish mold of his nephew, Harold Lounsbury, the sweetheart of her youth, but in this particular case the expedition seemed entirely altruistic. She wondered now whether, after all her dreams, she would be forced to turn back before her purpose was accomplished.

They pushed back their chairs and started to leave the dining room. But it was not written that Kenly Lounsbury should reach the door without further annoyance. The waiter came

shouting after them.

"Excuse me, Mister," he said kindly, holding out a quarter, "you left some money on the table."

Virginia laughed with delight and pocketed the coin herself, but Lounsbury's face became purple. These northern fools did not even know the meaning of a tip.

A few minutes later the pack train emerged through the little alley at the side of the hotel and halted in front. Bill Bronson led his own bay, Mulvaney, and the pack horses were tailed,—the halter rope of each tied to the tail of the horse in front, like elephants on parade. The idea was simply to keep them in formation till they were launched forth upon the trail. Vosper, the cook, led three horses with riding saddles at the end of the line.

Virginia had changed to outing clothes when she emerged into the street, leaving her tailored suit in charge of the innkeeper. Bill beamed at her appearance. "Miss Tremont," he began, doing the honors, "this is Mr. Vosper, who will cook the beans."

Both nodded, the girl smiling rather impersonally, and Bill noticed a horrifying omission. Vosper actually lacked the intelligence to remove his hat! The first instinct of the woodsman was to march toward him and inflict physical violence for such an insult to his queen, but he caught himself in time. Vosper, damaged in the encounter, would likely refuse to make the trip, upsetting all their plans.

But at that instant Bill forgot all about it. He suddenly noticed his employers' clothes. And he gazed in open-mouthed astonishment.

Both Virginia and Lounsbury were well gotten up according to their idea of proper garb for outdoor people. The man wore knickerbockers with gold stockings, riding habit and stock, the girl a beautifully tailored, fine-textured lady's riding habit. Both were immediately conscious of the guide's stare, and Virginia was aware of a distinct embarrassment. Something, somewhere, had evidently gone wrong. Lounsbury took refuge in hauteur.

"Well?" he demanded icily.

"Excuse me," Bill replied. "But those aren't—are those the clothes you're going to wear on the trip?"

"We're not parading for any one's benefit, I hope," was the sarcastic answer. "These are our rough clothes. Have you any objections to 'em?"

The guide's eyes puckered about the corners. "No, sir—not any objections—and they'd be all right for a day or two—until bad weather. But they are hardly the togs for the North. What you want is a good pair of slicker pants, both of you, and plenty of wool inside. Also a rubber coat of some kind, over sheepskin. In the first good snow those clothes would just melt away. If you'll come with me, I'll help you lay in some—and I'll pack 'em right on one of the horses for the time of need. There's a store adjoining the hotel—"

Virginia's confusion had departed, giving way to mirth, but Lounsbury was swollen and purple with wrath. "You—you—" he began. His face grew crafty. "I suppose you get a commission on every garment you sell."

Bill turned rather quiet eyes on the man; and for one little instant the craven that dwelt under Lounsbury's skin told him he had said one sentence too many; but he took heart when Bill looked away. "I'll keep what I've got on," he announced. "I'm not used to being told what kind of clothes to wear. Virginia, we'll start on."

"Wait just a minute, Uncle," the girl replied coolly. She turned to Bill. "You say these won't do at all?"

"They'll be torn off of you in the brush, Miss Tremont. And they won't turn the cold and the snow, either. This is the North, you know."

"Then I, for one, am going to take your advice. Please help me pick out the things, Bronson."

They left Lounsbury fuming in the road, and they had a rather enjoyable ten minutes searching through Fargo's stock for suitable garb. He selected a pair of slicker pants to wear over riding trousers, a coat lined with sheepskin, boy's size, and an awkwardly made but effective rubber coat for outside wear when the snow lay on the branches. It was not, Virginia decided, quite like choosing gowns at her modiste's; yet she was bright-eyed and laughing at the end.

Bill unhitched a pack, inserted the bundle of clothes, then bracing his boots against the horse's side pulled and tugged until the pack was right again. "You'll be glad you've got these things before the trip is done," he prophesied. He pointed to the North, an unlooked for sobriety upon his face.

Far against the horizon the clouds were beginning to spread, dark and gray and strange, over the northern hills. These were not the clouds of summer rains. They were the first banners of an

enemy—a grim and dreadful foe who had his ramparts in the wilds, and his ambush laid for such feeble creatures as would dare to brave his fastness.

Bill Bronson gave his last directions, tightened the last cinch, and slipped his rifle into the saddle scabbard. "There's just one thing more—the choice of horses," he said. "Miss Tremont, of course you can take your pick." His tone was trustful. "Of course that will be all right with the other gentlemen—for you to have the best and safest horse."

Strangely, neither of the two men seemed to greet this suggestion with especial enthusiasm. "I want a good and a safe horse," Lounsbury said evenly. "Of course you must provide Miss Tremont with the same."

The woodsman sighed, ever so softly. He returned to Vosper, but if the latter had any suggestions to offer, the hard eyes of the guide caused him to think better of them. "I'm sorry to say that good horses—and safe horses—aren't to be found in the same animal up here," Bill explained. "If you have a good horse—one that'll take the mud and swim the river and stand up under the day's march—he'll likely have too much sense and spirit to be safe. He'll more than likely prance around when you get on and buck you off if he thinks he can get away with it. If you've got a safe horse, one that's scared to death of you, he won't be a good horse—a yellow cuss that has to be dragged through every mud-puddle. These are all Indian ponies, the best that can be got up here, but they're not old ladies' driving mares. Miss Tremont, the best horse in this bunch is my bay, Mulvaney—but nobody can ride him but me. I'd love to let you ride him if you could, and after a day or two I'd be willing for you to try it. But he doesn't know what fear is, and he doesn't know when to give up."

The man spoke soberly. It was wholly plain that Mulvaney was very dear to his heart. Men do not ride over the caribou trails without engendering strong feelings toward their mounts. Sometimes it is love. And not unusually it is detestation.

"That little black there—Buster, we call him—is the next best bet. It's an important choice you're making, and I'll tell you about him. He threw a man off once, and when I got him he was supposed to be the most vicious animal in the Northwest. The truth is, he hasn't got a vicious hair on his head. But he will try to get away, and he will dance a bit when you first get on and wheel in circles, and he's hard to catch in the morning. But he's sure-footed and courageous and strong; he'll take you up hills where the others can't go. The other two horses—Colt and Scotty—maybe seem safer, but they haven't got the life Buster has, nor the sense."

Bill reached to pet the black Buster, and the animal shied nervously. Virginia walked up to him and seized his bridle rein. In an instant she had vaulted into the saddle.

He wheeled and plunged at first, but soon she quieted him. In none too good humor, Lounsbury made his selection, and Vosper took what was left. Bill led his animal to Virginia's side.

"And are there any special instructions—before we start?" he asked.

"I can give you some special instructions," Lounsbury interrupted. "I didn't come up here to risk my life on a wild mustang in the mountains. I want you to pick easy trails—you can if you've just got energy enough to try."

A half-smile lingered a moment at the woodsman's lips. There was no choice of trails into Clearwater. He might have told Lounsbury that once they were out of sight of the roofs of the town they were venturing into the Unknown, a land where the caribou and the moose made trails through the forest but where men came not, a land of beasts rather than men, of primeval grandeur but savage might. "Have you any orders to give?" he asked the girl again.

"None. All I can do is tell you what I have already done—and then let you do the best you can. As you know, he left six years ago."

"I know. I saw him when he came through."

His eyes were fast upon her, and he saw her start. Her face seemed to flame. Stranger as he was to the hearts of women, Bill could understand. It was word of her lover, a message from the dead, and it moved her to the depths. But he couldn't understand the curious weight of depression that descended upon him.

"You did?" she answered quickly. "Was he all right—then?"

"All right, but that was just after he came to the North. I was camping on this side of Grizzly River, and he stayed to eat with me. He said his name was Lounsbury. I've never heard of him since."

The surface lights died in her eyes. "Then that doesn't help us much, except to know that he got that far, at least," she went on. "I'll tell you the whole thing, simply; maybe it will help you in deciding where to look for him. He was twenty-seven then—and he'd spent the fortune his father left him. He had to have more, and he came up here—to look for gold."

"Like many other men—before him," Bill interrupted gravely.

"He had some sort of definite plan—a vacation place to go—but he never told me what it was. He told me he was going into Clearwater. He had to have money—he was in debt and besides, he was engaged to marry me. The last word I ever heard of him was a note he wrote from Bradleyburg. I was just a girl then—and I've waited ever since. His friends, his aunt, sometimes even his uncle thought that he was dead. I've always felt, just as sure as I am here, that he was still alive—and in some trouble—and he couldn't come back. Mr. Lounsbury has hired detectives, but none of them have ever made a real search. He's financing this trip now—I've been able to persuade him at last to make one great try to find him. What's what we've hired you to do."

"It's a big order," Bill spoke softly. "There's just one thing we can do—to look into the country where he's gone and try to trace him. Every man who goes through Clearwater leaves his mark—there's not so many of them that their trails get crossed. My plan would be to watch for the camps he made—there'd be some sign of 'em yet—the trees he cut and the trails he blazed—and trace him clear to the Valley of the Yuga."

"And what is there?"

Bill's ears, trained to the silences of the woodland, caught the almost imperceptible tremor in her voice. "There are a few Indians who have their tents there—trappers and fishers—and I know how to get things out of 'em. If he's passed that way, they'd know about it. If he hasn't—something has happened to him—somewhere between here and there. He couldn't have remained out of sight so long."

"I want you to make every try. I can't bear—to give up."

Even this woodsman, knowing men to the heart but stranger to the world of women, knew that she meant what she said. She wasn't of the mold that gives up quickly. For all her cool exterior, her impersonal voice, the grace and breeding that went clear to her finger tips, he had some measure of understanding of an ardor and an intensity that might have been native to his own wilderness. Not often has girlhood love stood such a test as this,—six years of silence. He could not doubt its reality; no small or half-felt emotion could have propelled her forth into these desolate wastes. Her love had gone deep and it lived.

He answered very gravely and humbly, perhaps a even a little sadly: "I'll do everything I can to find him for you, Miss. I'll get your sweetheart for you if it can be done."

To Vosper and Lounsbury the two little sentences were just the assurances of a hired employee, half-felt and forgotten soon. But Virginia heard more clearly. She had a vague feeling that she was a witness to a vow. It seemed to her that there was the fire of a zealot in his dark eyes, and by token of some mystery she did not understand, this strong man had seen fit to give her his oath. She only knew that he spoke true, that by a secret law that only strong men know he would be as faithful to this promise as if he had given bond.

IV

It was one of the decrees of the forest gods that no human being shall ride for five miles through the spruce forests of the Selkirks and fail to glean at least some slight degree of wilderness knowledge. Both Virginia and Lounsbury had been on horseback before. Virginia had ridden in the parks of her native city: long ago and far away a barefoot, ragged boy—much to be preferred to the smug and petulant man who now tried to hard to forget those humble days—had bestrode an old plow horse nightly on the way to a watering trough. But this riding had qualities all its own. There was no open road winding before them. Nor was there any trail,—in general or particular.

It was true that the moose had passed that way, leaving their great footprints in the dying grass. They had chosen the easiest pathway over the hills, and Bill was enough of a woodsman to follow where they led. Traversing the Clearwater was simply a matter of knowing the country and going in a general direction. Almost at once the evergreen thickets closed around them.

Virginia found that safety depended upon constant watchfulness. The evergreen branches struck cruel blows at her face, the spruce needles cut like knives. Sometimes the horse in front would bend down a young tree, permitting it to whip back with a deadly blow; she had to watch her knees in the narrow passages between the trunks; and the vines reached and caught at her. Sometimes the long-hanging limbs of the young trees made an impassable barrier, and more than once she was nearly dragged from the saddle. Shortly they came to the first fallen log.

Mulvaney, Bill's horse, took it lightly; and the man turned to watch the girl. Her horse stepped gingerly, making it without trouble. Then the guide saw fit to give her a little good advice.

"Kick Buster in the ribs just before you come to a log," he said. "He'll jump 'em then. It's a whole lot safer—if he tries to step over 'em he's apt to get his foot caught and give you a bad fall."

Virginia looked up coldly. She wasn't accustomed to being spoken to in quite this tone of voice, particularly by an employee. But she saw his sober eyes and immediately forgot her resentment. And she found an actual delight in bounding over the next obstruction.

"And there's one more thing," the guide went on. "I've ridden plenty of horses, and I've found there's only one way to handle 'em. I'm going to try a new way to-day, because there's a lady in the party. But if I'm tried too heavy——"

"Go ahead," the girl replied, smiling. "I suppose you mean—to swear."

"Not just to swear. Call names. These horses won't think we're present if we don't swear at 'em. And the only name they know refers to them is one that casts slurs upon their ancestry, but I'll try to avoid it to-day. I suppose I can make a roaring sound that sounds enough like it to fool the horses."

Virginia was naturally alert and quick-witted, and she needed both of these traits now. The guide helped her all he could, warning her of approaching thickets; yet the first hour was a grim initiation to the woods. Lounsbury was having even a more difficult time. He was afraid of his horse, to start with—and this is never an auspicious beginning. A frightened rider means a nervous, excited animal—and nervousness and excitement are unhealthy qualities in the Selkirks. Neither put trust in the other, and Lounsbury's cruel, lashing blows with the long bridle ends only made matters worse. The horse leaped and plunged, slipped badly on the hills, progressed awkwardly over the fallen logs, and flew into wild panic when he came to the quagmires. The man's temper fell far below the danger point in the first hour, and he was savage and desperate before half of the afternoon's ride was done.

The thickets were merciless. They knew him, those silent evergreens: they gave no welcome to his breed; and it seemed to him they found a hundred ways to plague him. Their needles scratched his face, their branches whipped into his eyes, the limbs dealt cruel blows at his side and the tree trunks wrenched at his knees. Worse still, they soon came to a hill that Bill advised they take on foot.

"Not me," Lounsbury shrilled. "I'll swear I won't walk any hills. You've provided a vicious horse for me, and I'm going to ride him up if it kills him. I didn't come out here to break my wind on mountains—and this horse needs the devil taken out of him, anyway."

It was in Virginia's mind that none of the emphatic but genial oaths that Bill had let slip from time to time grated on her half so much as this frenzied complaint of her companion, but she kept her thoughts to herself. But Bill turned with something dangerously like a smile.

"Suit yourself, of course," he replied. "I'm not asking you to walk up to spare your horse. Only, from time to time a horse makes a misstep on this hill—just one little slip—and spins down in backward somersets a thousand feet. If you want to try it, of course it's all right with me."

He swung off his horse, took the bridle reins of both his own animal and Virginia's, and started the long climb. And it was to be noticed that at the first steep pitch Lounsbury found that he was tired of riding and followed after meekly, but with wretched spirit.

They stopped often to rest; and from the heights Virginia got her first real glimpse of Clearwater. Her first impression was simply vast and unmeasured amazement at the dimensions of the land. As far as she could see lay valley after valley, range upon range, great forests of spruce alternating with open glades, dim unnamed lakes glinting pale blue in the afternoon sun, whole valleys where the foot of white man had never trod. She felt somewhat awed, scarcely knowing why.

Rivers gleamed, marshes lay yellow and somber in the sun, the dark forests stretched until the eyes tired; but nowhere were there any homes, any villages or pastures, not a blaze upon a tree, not the smoke of a camp fire. Bradleyburg was already obliterated and lost in the depths of the woodland. The silence was incredible,—as vast and infinite as the wilderness itself. It startled her a little, when they paused in their climb, to hear the pronounced tick of her wrist watch, even the whisper of her own breath. It was as if she had gone to an enchanted land, a place that lay in a great sleep that began in the world's young days, and from which the last reaches of time it could never waken.

Bill, standing just above her, pointed to a dash of golden across the canyon. "That's quivering asp," he told her, "turned by the frost. It seems good to see a bit of color in this world of dark woods. It's just like a flash of sunshine in a storm."

She listened with some surprise. The same detail had held her gaze, the same thought—almost the same simile—had come into her mind; but she had hardly expected to find a love of the beautiful in this bronzed forester. In fact, she found that a number of her preconceived ideas were being turned topsy-turvy.

Heretofore, it seemed to her, her thought had always dwelt on the superficialities rather than the realities of life. Her income was pitifully small according to her standards, yet she had never had to consider the question of food and shelter. She had known social success, love of beauty and of art, gayety and luxury; she had had petty discouragements and triumphs, worries and fears, but of the simple and primitive basis of things she took no cognizance. She had never dealt with essentials. They had always seemed outside her life.

Virginia had never lived in the shadow of Fear,—that greatest and most potent of realities. In truth she didn't know the meaning of the word. She had been afraid in her bed at night, she had been apprehensive of a block's walk in the twilight, but Fear—in its true sense—was an alien and a stranger. She had never met him in the waste places, seen him skulking on her trail through the winter snows, listened to his voice in the wind's wail. She didn't know the fear of which the coyotes sang from this hill, the blind and groping dread of an immutable destiny, the ghastly realization of impotence against a cruel and omnipotent fate. She hadn't ever learned about it. Living a protected life she didn't know that it existed. Food and shelter and warmth and safety had always seemed her birthright; about her house marched the officers of the law protecting her from evildoers; she lived in sight of great hospitals that would open their doors to the sick and injured and of charitable institutions that would clothe and feed the needy: thus the world had kept its bitter truths from her. But she was beginning to learn them now. She was having her first glimpse of life, life stripped of all delusion, stark and naked, the relentless reality that it was.

Fear was no stranger to these forests. Its presence, in every turn of the trail, filled her with awe. A single misstep, a little instant of hesitation in a crisis, might precipitate her a thousand feet down the canyon to her death. Dead trees swayed, threatening to fall; snow slides roared and rumbled on the far steepes; the quagmire sucked with greedy lips, the trail wandered dimly,—as if it were trying to decoy her away into the fastnesses where the wilderness might claim her. No one had to tell her how easy it would be to lose the trail, never to find it again. The forests were endless; there were none to hear a wanderer's cry for help. Wet matches, an accident to the food supplies, a few nights without shelter in the dismal forest,—any of these might spell complete and irrevocable disaster.

What had she known of Death? It was a thing to claim old people, sometimes to take even her young friends from their games among the flowers, but never had it been an acquaintance to hers. It was as wholly apart from her as the beings of another planet. But here she had come to the home of Death,—cold and fearful obliteration dwelling in every thicket. She found herself wondering about it, now, and dreading it with a new dread that she had never dreamed of before. The only real emotions she had ever known were her love for Harold Lounsbury and her grief at his absence: in these autumn woods she might easily learn all the others. She had never known true loneliness; here, except for her fiance's uncle with whom she had never felt on common ground and two paid employees—the latter, she told herself, did not count—she was as much alone as if she had been cast upon an uninhabited sphere. Already she knew something of the great malevolence that is the eternal tone of the wilderness, the lurking peril that is the North.

This new view influenced her attitude toward Bill. At first she had felt no interest in him whatever. Of a class that does not enter into a basis of equality with personal employees, to her he had seemed in the same category with a new house servant or chauffeur. He had been hired to do her service; he was either a bad servant or a good one, and from her he would receive kindness and patronage, but never real feeling or friendship, never more than an impersonal interest. But now that she knew something of the real nature of this expedition, affairs had taken a new turn. She suddenly realized that her whole happiness, her comfort, perhaps even life itself depended upon him. He was their protector, their source of supplies, their refuge and their strength as well.

The change did not mean that she was willing to enter upon a basis of comradeship with him—yet. But she did find a singular satisfaction in the mere fact of his presence. Here was one who could build a fire in the snow if need be, whose strong arms could cut fuel, who could manage the horses and bring them safe to the journey's end. His rifle swung in his saddle scabbard, his pistol belt encircled his waist; he knew how to adjust the packs, to peg the tent fast in a storm, to find bread and meat in the wilderness. She began to notice his lithe, strong figure as he sat in his saddle, the ease with which he controlled his horse and avoided the pitfalls in the trail. When the moose tracks were too dim for her eyes to see, he followed them with ease. When the horses bolted from some unfamiliar smell in the thicket, he was quick to round them up. The animals were swift in obedience when he spoke to them, but they were only terrified by Lounsbury's shrill shouts. He was cool of nerve, self-possessed, wholly self-reliant. She listened with an eager gladness to his soft whistling: simple classics that she herself loved but which came strangely from the lips of this son of the forest.

His eyes were bright and music was in his heart,—in spite of the dark menace of these northern woodlands. He was not afraid: rather he seemed to be getting a keen enjoyment out of the afternoon's ride. And the great truth suddenly came to her that in his strength lay hers, that she had entrusted her welfare to him and for the present, at least, it was secure. And she put her own cares away.

She would not have admitted that she had simply followed the example of the uncounted millions of women that had preceded her through the long reaches of the centuries that had found strength and peace in the shelter of a strong man's arm. She only knew that her mind no

longer dwelt on danger, but it had marvelously opened to receive the image of the grim but ineffable beauty of this wild land through which she rode. She felt secure, and she began to have an intangible but ever-increasing delight in the wonderland about her.

Her first impression of the wilderness was that of a far-stretching desert, forgotten and desolate and unpeopled as the fiery stars. Likewise this was Lounsbury's view, as in the case of every tenderfoot who had preceded him, but Lounsbury would likely grow old and perish without discovering his mistake. Clear eyes are needed to read the secrets of the wild: the dark glass through which he gazed at the world had never cleared. Vosper had lived months and years in the North, but he had only hatred in his heart of these waste places and thus received no glory from them. But Virginia soon found out the truth.

"There's an old bull been along here not twenty minutes ago," Bill told her after they reached the hilltop. "The mud hasn't begun to dry in his tracks."

"An old bull?" she repeated. "Do cattle run here——?"

"Good Lord, there isn't a cow this side of the shipping point. I mean a bull moose. And he's a lunker, too. Maybe we'll catch a glimpse of him."

In her time she had talked enough to big-game hunters to have considerable respect for the moose, the largest of all deer tribe, and she thrilled a little at the thought that she was in his own range. She didn't get a sight of the great creature, but she began to pay more attention to the trail. Seeing her interest the guide began to read to her the message in the tracks,—how here a pair of otters had raced along in the dawn, stopping at intervals to slide; how a cow caribou and calf had preceded them at midday; how a coyote had come skulking the previous night. Beside a marsh he showed her the grim evidence of a wilderness tragedy,—the skeleton and feathers of a goose that a stalking wolf had taken by surprise. And once he showed her a great tear in the bark of a tree, nearly as high as she could reach on horseback.

"What is it?" she inquired.

"That's the sign that the lord of the manor has been along. Miss Tremont, did you ever hear of an animal called the grizzly bear?"

"Good heavens! A bear couldn't reach that high——"

"Couldn't? Some of these bears could scoop the man out of the moon!"

He showed her gray, crinkling hairs that had caught in the bark, explaining that mysterious wilderness custom of the grizzly of measuring his length on the tree trunks and leaving a mark, as high as he can bite, for all to see. According to many naturalists any bear that cannot bite an equal height immediately seeks a new range, leaving the district to the larger bear. But Bill confessed that he took the legend with a grain of salt. "I've seen too many bear families running around the woods together," he explained. "Pa bears, ma bears, and baby bears, all different sizes."

Virginia noticed that he spoke with great respect for that huge forest king, the grizzly; but she needn't have wondered. The great creature was worthy of it.

Perhaps the most intelligent wild animal that roams the American continent—on the same intellectual plane with the dog and elephant—he was also the most terrible. The truth has been almost established among the big-game hunters that wild animals, with few exceptions, even when wounded practically never charge or attack the hunter. But his imperial majesty, the grizzly, was first on the list of exceptions. He couldn't be entirely trusted. His terrible strength, his ferocity, most of all his courage won him a wide berth through this mountain land.

She began to catch glimpses of bird life,—saucy jays and glorious-colored magpies and grossbeaks. She cried out in delight when a pine squirrel scampered up a little tree just over her head, pausing to look down at these strange forms that had disturbed the cathedral silence of the tree aisles. And all at once Bill drew up his horses.

"Miss Tremont, do you like chicken?" he asked.

She was somewhat startled by the abrupt question, and her horse nosed Mulvaney's flanks before she drew him to a halt. It occurred to her that such a query scarcely came under the title of small talk, and she found some difficulty in shaping her answer. "Why yes," she agreed. "I'm very fond of chicken."

"It's pretty good, boiled with rice," the man went on gravely. "We'll have some for supper."

Virginia stared at him in blank amazement as he slipped down from the saddle and drew his automatic, small-calibered pistol from the holster. He stole forward into the flaking shadows of late afternoon, and at once the brush obscured him. Then he shot,—four times in succession.

She was wholly unable to guess what manner of target he had. Chickens were one thing that

she found it hard to believe ranged in these northern woods. She felt certain that he had missed the first three shots, but she waited with considerable interest the result of the fourth. And soon he pushed through the thickets to her side.

In his hand he held a queer, gray, shapeless bundle that at first she could not recognize. Then she saw that they were gray grouse, almost the color of a Plymouth Rock hen, and there was not one, but four! He started to stuff them into his saddlebag. "Pretty lucky that time," he explained. "Got 'em through the neck. That leaves the meat clean——"

He seemed wholly matter-of-fact about the incident, but Virginia continued to stare at him in open-mouthed astonishment. "Four of them?" she cried.

"One apiece. There was five in the flock, but the other looked like a tough old hen. But don't look so amazed, Miss Tremont. They are fool hens—Franklin's grouse—and that means that they'll set all day and let you pepper at 'em. And with a little practice it's easy to get them in the neck pretty near every time."

He swung into the saddle, and they started forth upon the last hour of their day's journey. And Vosper made the only remark worth recording.

"When I was in Saskatchewan last year," he began in a thin, far-carrying voice, "I must 'a shot a thousand grouse and didn't miss one."

Virginia felt that she'd like to go back and shake him.

V

Now that they were upon the last hour of the day's ride Virginia began to be aware of the full measure of her fatigue. She was strained and tired from the saddle, her knees ached, her face burned from the scratch of the spruce needles. Ever she found it more difficult to dodge the stinging blows of the boughs, she was less careful in the control of her horse. From sheer exhaustion Lounsbury had stopped his complaints.

The first grayness of twilight had come, like mist, over the distant hills; but the peaks were still bathed in the sunset's glow. She began to have a real and overwhelming longing for camp and rest. And in the midst of her dejection the dark man in front threw her a smile.

"It goes hard at first," he told her gently. "But we'll soon be in camp—with a good fire. You'll feel better right away."

It had not been Virginia's way—or the way of Virginia's class—to depend upon their menials for encouragement; but, strangely, the girl felt only grateful.

She was hungry, chilled through by the icy breath of the falling night, half-sick with fatigue. The last mile seemed endless. And she was almost too tired to drag herself off the horse when they came to camp.

Back among the dark spruce, by the edge of a fast-flowing trout stream, Bill had built a cabin,—one of the camps of his trap line. It was only a hut, perhaps ten feet long by eight wide; it had no floor and but slabs for a roof, no window and no paneled interior; only the great logs, lifted one upon another; yet no luxurious hotel that had been her lodging for the night on previous journeys had ever seemed to her such a haven; none had ever been such a comfort to her tired spirit. Her heart flooded with joy at the sight of it. Bill smiled and held the door open wide.

"Sit down on that busted old chair," he advised. "I'll have a fire for you in a minute."

A rusted camp stove had been erected in the cabin and she watched, fascinated, his quick actions as he built a fire. With astonishingly few strokes he cut down a pitch-laden spruce, trimmed the branches, and soon came staggering into camp with a four-foot length of the trunk across his brawny back, grunting like a buffalo the while. This he split and cut into lengths suitable for the stove. With his hunting knife he cut curling shavings, and in a moment a delicious warmth began to flood the cabin. The girl's body welcomed it, it stole into her tissues and buoyed up her spirits. She opened her hands to it as to a beloved friend.

It was only warmth,—the exhalation from a rusted stove in a crudely constructed cabin. Yet to Virginia it was dear beyond all naming. In one little day on that dreadful trail she had, in some measure at least, got down to essentials; the ancient love of the fire, implanted deeply in the germ plasm, was wakened and recalled. It was not a love that she had to learn. The warp and woof of her being was impregnated with it; only in her years of ease she had forgotten what an ancient friend and comfort it was.

In her past life Virginia had never known the real meaning of hunger. Her meals were inadvertent; she had them more from a matter of habit than a realization of bodily craving. But curiously, for the last hour her thought had dwelt on food,—the simple, material substance with no adornment. The dainty salads and ices and relishes that had been her greatest delight in her city home hadn't even come into her mind, but she did remember, with unlooked-for fondness, potatoes and meat. And now she watched Vosper's supper preparations with an eagerness never known before.

Although Vosper had been hired for cook, Virginia noticed that Bill kept a watchful eye over the preparation of the food; and she felt distinctly grateful. She saw the grouse in the process of cleaning, and the red stains on Vosper's hands did not repel her at all. She beheld the smooth cascade of the rice as Bill poured it into the boiling water, her own hand opened a can of dehydrated vegetables that was to give flavor to the dish. She gave no particular thought to the fact that the hour was revealing her not as an exquisite creature of a higher plane, but simply a human animal with an empty stomach. If the thought did come to her she didn't care. She only knew she was hungry,—hungry as she had never dreamed she could be in all her days.

The white flesh of the grouse was put with the rice, one bird after another, until it seemed impossible that four human beings could consume them all. In went the seasoning, spaghetti and the vegetables, and not even Lounsbury railed at the little handful of ashes that floated on top the mixture. And Virginia exulted from head to toes when Bill passed the tin plates.

It was well for Virginia's peace of mind that no one told her how much she ate. In her particular set it wasn't a mark of breeding to eat too heartily; and an entire grouse, at least two cups of the stew and several inch-thick slices of bread with marmalade would have been considered a generous meal even for a harvest-hand.

As soon as the meal was done she felt ready for bed. Bill ventured into the darkness with an ax over his shoulder, but not until his return did she understand his mission. His arms were heaped with fragrant spruce boughs. These he laid on the cot in the cabin, spreading the blankets he had provided for her over them. He placed the pillow and turned down the blanket corners.

"Any time you like," he told her gently. "Vosper is putting up the linen tent for we three men, and I'll build a fire in front of it to keep us warm while we smoke. You must be tired."

She smiled wanly. "I am tired, Bronson," she confessed. "And thank you, very much."

She didn't notice the wave of color that flowed into his bronzed cheeks and the strange, jubilant light in his eyes. She only knew that she was warm and full-fed, and the wind would bluster and threaten around her cabin walls in vain.

For a long hour after Virginia was asleep Bill sat by the fireside alone, his pipe glowing at his lips. Lounsbury had gone to his blankets, Vosper was splitting wood for the morning's fire. As often, late at night, he was held and intrigued by the mystery about him,—the little, rustling, whispered sounds of living things in the thicket, the silence and the darkness and the savagery.

He knew perfectly the tone and spirit of these waste places: their might, their malevolence, their sadness, their eternal beauty. He hated them and yet he loved them, too. He had felt their hospitality, yet he knew that often they rose in the still night and slew their guests. They crushed the weak, but they lent their own strength to the strong. And Bill felt that he was face to face with them as never before.

He was going to plumb their secret places,—not only for the missing man, but for the lost mine he had sought so long. He must not only fight his own battles, but he had in his charge a helpless, tender thing of whom his body must be a shield. Never, it seemed to him, had he met the wilderness night in just this mood,—threatening, vaguely sinister, tremulous and throbbing with impending drama.

"You've got something planned for me, haven't you?" he asked his forest gods. "You've got your trap all set, and you're going to test me as never before. And Heaven give me strength to meet that test!"

At that instant he started and looked up. The stars were obscured, the firelight died swiftly in unfathomable darkness, the tops of the spruce were lost in gloom. A flake of wet snow had fallen and struck his hand.

All night long the storm raged over the spruce forest; lashing rain that beat and roared on the cabin roof, then the unutterable silence of falling snow. The camp fire hissed and went out, the tent sagged with the load, the horses were wet and miserable in the glade below. Virginia slept fitfully, waking often to listen to the clamor of the storm, then falling into troubled dreams. Bill lay at the tent mouth for long hours, staring into the darkness.

In the morning the face of the wilderness was changed. Every bough, every spruce needle, every little grass blade had its load of snow. The streams were higher, a cold and terrible beauty dwelt in the forest. The sky was still full of snow, dark flakes against the gray sky, and the clouds

were sullen and heavy. Bill rose before daylight to build the fire at the tent mouth.

This was no work for tenderfeet, striking a blaze in the snow-covered grass. But Bill knew the exact course to pursue. He knew just how to lay his kindling, to protect the blaze from the wind, to thrust a fragment of burning candle under the shavings. Soon the blaze was dancing feebly in the darkness. He piled on fuel, and with Vosper's aid started breakfast preparations.

When the meal was nearly ready he knocked at the cabin door. "Yes?" Virginia called.

Bill hesitated and stammered. He didn't exactly know whether or not he was stepping outside the bounds of propriety. "Would you like to have me come in and build a fire for you to dress by?" he asked.

Virginia considered. Few were the eyes, in her short days, that had beheld her in bed; but to save her she could not think of a reason why this kind offer should not be accepted. She was down to the realities; besides, the room was disagreeably chilly. She snuggled down and drew the blankets about her throat.

"Come ahead," she invited.

With scarcely a glance at her he entered and built a fire, and a few minutes later he brought in her steaming breakfast. The door was open then, and she saw the snow without.

Her face was a little pale and her voice was strained when she spoke again. "What does it mean?" she asked.

"What? The snow?"

"Yes. Does it mean that winter has come?"

"No. When winter does come, there never is any question about it—and it really isn't due for another month. If I thought it was real winter I'd advise going back. But I think it's just an early snowfall—to melt away the first warm day."

"But isn't there danger—that by going farther we'd be snowed in?"

"Even if winter should close down, and we find the snow deepening to the danger point, it wouldn't be too late to turn back then. Of course we've got to keep watch. A week or so of steady snow might make these mountains wholly impassable—the soft, wet snow of the Selkirks can't even be manipulated with snowshoes to any advantage. We'd simply have to wait till the snow packed—which might not be for months. But we can go on a few days, at least, and ride safely back through two feet of snow or more. Of course—it depends on how badly you want to go on."

"I want to go—more than anything in the world."

"Then we will go on. I've already sent Vosper to get the horses."

He turned to his work. Lounsbury, his mood still unassuaged, called from his bed. "Bring me my breakfast here, Bronson," he commanded. "Lord, I've had a rotten night. This bed was like stones. I can't compliment you on your accommodations."

Bill brought him his breakfast, quietly and gravely. "They're not my accommodations," Bill replied. "They're God Almighty's. And I made it just as comfortable for you as I can."

"I think you could have provided folding cots, anyway. I've a great mind to turn back." He looked into the snow-filled sky. "By George, I will turn back. There's no sense in going any farther in this wild goose chase. It's a death trip, that's all it is—going out in this snow. Tell Miss Tremont that we're starting back."

Bill stood straight and tall. "I've already talked that over with Miss Tremont," he answered quietly. "She has given the order to go on."

The fleshy sacks under Lounsbury's eyes swelled with wrath. "She has, has she? I think she's already told you that I'm financing this trip, not her, and I've told you so too. I'm doing the hiring and giving the orders."

"In that case, it's your privilege to order me to turn back, and of course I will obey. You will owe me, however, for the full thirty days."

For a moment a spectator would have eyed Lounsbury with apprehension; to all appearances he had swollen past the danger mark and was about to explode. "You'd hold me up, would you—you—you—I'd like to see you get it."

Bill eyed him long and grimly. There was a miniature flake of fire in each of his dark eyes and a curious little quiver, vaguely ominous, in his muscles. There was also a grim determination in the set of his features. "I'd get it all right," he assured him. Then his voice changed, friendly and soft again. "But you'd better talk it over with Miss Tremont, Mr. Lounsbury. The snow is likely only temporary. I'll see that you turn back before it gets too deep for safety."

They folded the tent and packed the horses, and shortly after eight Bill led the way deeper into the forest. The snow-swept trees, the white glades between, the long line of pack horses following in the wake of the impassive form of Bill made a picture that Virginia could never forget. And ever the snow sifted down upon them, ever heavier on the branches, ever deeper on the trail.

If the record of the wild things had been clear in yesterday's mud it was an open book to-day. Everywhere the trail was criss-crossed with tracks. In that first mile she saw signs of almost every kind of living creature that dwelt in this northern realm. Besides those of the larger mammals, such as bear and moose and caribou, she saw the tracks of those two savage hunters, the wolverine and lynx. The latter is nothing more nor less than an overgrown tomcat, except for a decorative tuft at his ears, and like all his brethren soft as flower petals in his step; but because he mews unpleasantly on the trail he has a worse reputation than he deserves. But not so with the wolverine. Many unkind remarks have been addressed to him, but no words have ever been invented—even the marvelous combinations of expletives known to the trapper—properly to describe him. The little people of the forest—the birds in the shrubbery and the squirrels in the trees and the little digging rodents in the ground—fear him and hate him for his stealth and his cunning. Even the cow caribou, remembering his way of leaping suddenly from ambush upon her calf, dreads him for his ferocity and his strength; and the trapper, finding his bait stolen from every trap on his line, calls down curses upon his head. But for all this unpopularity he continues to prosper and increase.

Virginia saw where a marten and a squirrel had come to death grips in the snow: the tracks and an ominous red stain told the story plainly. The squirrel had attempted to seek safety in flight, but the marten was even swifter in the tree limbs than the squirrel himself. The little animal had made a flying leap to the ground,—a small part of a second too late. The marten, Bill explained, were no longer numerous. Fur buyers all over the world were paying many times their weight in gold for the glossy skins.

"Marten can catch squirrel, but fisher can catch marten," is an old saying among the trappers; and as they rode Bill told her some of his adventures with these latter, beautiful fur bearers. The fisher, it seemed, hunted every kind of living creature that he could master except fish. When the names of the animals were passed around, Bill said, the otter and the fisher got their slips mixed, and the misnomer had followed them through the centuries. He showed her the tracks of the ermine and, now that they were reaching the high altitudes, the trail of the ptarmigan in the snow. Mink, fox, and coyote had hunted each other gayly through the drifts, and all three had hunted the snowshoe rabbit and field mouse; a half-blind gopher had emerged from his den to view the morning and had ducked quickly back at the sight of the snow; an owl had snatched a Canada jay from her perch and had left a few clotted feathers when the daylight had driven him from his feast.

The rigors of the day's travel were constantly increasing. The wet snow steaming on their sides sapped the vitality of the horses; to keep them at a fair pace required a constant stream of nervous energy on the part of their riders. Virginia found it almost impossible to dodge the snow-laden branches. They would slap snow into her face, down her neck and into her sleeves: it sifted into her eyes and hair and chilled her hands until they ached. The waterproof garments that she wore were priceless after the first mile.

Lounsbury had an even more trying time. His clothes soaked through at once, and the piercing, biting cold of the northern fall went into him. He was drenched, shivering, incoherent with wrath when they stopped for noon. He was not enough of a sportsman to take the consequences of his arrogance in good spirit. He didn't know the meaning of that ancient law,—that men must take the responsibility of their own deeds and with good spirit pay for their mistakes. He didn't know how to smile at the difficulties that confronted him. That ancient code of self-mastery, of taking the bitter medicine of life without complaint clear to the instant of death was far beyond his grasp. "You've made everything just as hard for us as you could," he stormed at Bill. "If I ever get back alive I'll get your guide's license snatched away from you if I never do another thing. You don't know how to guide or pick a trail. You brought us out here to bleed us. And you'll pay for it when I get back."

Bill scarcely seemed to hear. He went on with his work, but when the simple meal was over and the packing half done, he made his answer. He drew a cloth sack from one of the packs, swung it on his shoulder, and stepped over to Lounsbury's side.

"There's a couple of things I want to tell you," he began. He spoke in a quiet voice, so that Virginia could not hear.

Lounsbury looked up with a scowl. "I don't know that I want to hear them."

"I know you don't want to hear 'em, but you are going to hear 'em just the same. I want to tell you that first I'm doing everything any human being can to make you more comfortable. You can't take Morris chairs along on a pack train. You can't take electric stoves, and you can't boss the weather. It's your own fault you didn't provide yourself with proper clothes. And I'm tired of hearing you yelp."

Lounsbury tried to find some crushing remark in reply. He only sputtered.

"I can only stand so much, and then it makes me nervous," the guide went on, in a matter-of-fact tone. "I don't care what you do when you get back to town. I just don't want you pestering me any more with your complaints. I've stood a lot for Miss Tremont's sake—she probably wouldn't like to see anything happen to you. But just a few more little remarks like you made before lunch, and you're apt to find yourself standing in mud up to your knees in one of these mud holes—wrong end up! And that wouldn't be becoming at all for an American millionaire."

Lounsbury opened his mouth several times. The same number of times he shut it again. "I see," he said at last, clearly.

"Good. And here's some clothes of mine. They're not handsome, and they'll not fit, but they'll keep you dry."

He dumped the larger portion of his own waterproofs on the ground at Lounsbury's feet.

VI

In the two days that followed, the pack train crossed the divide into Clearwater. From now on the little rivers, gathering headway as they coursed down into the ravines, flowed into the Grizzly and from thence into the great Yuga, far below. The party had crossed ridge on ridge, hill on hill that were a bewilderment to Virginia; they had gained the high places where the marmots whistled shrill and clear at the mouth of their rocky burrows and the caribou paced, white manes gleaming, in the snow; they had seen a grizzly on the far-away slide rock; they had lost their way and found it again; walked abrupt hillsides where the horses could scarcely carry their packs, descended into mysterious, still gullies, forded creeks and picked their way through treacherous marshes; and made their noon camp on the very summit of a high ridge. The snow was deeper here—nearly eighteen inches—but the gray clouds were breaking apart in the sky. Apparently the storm was over, for the time being at least.

They had trouble with slipping packs on the steep pitches of the morning's march and made slow progress. Bill glanced at his watch with displeasure. He rushed through the noon meal and cut their usual rest short by a full half-hour.

"We're behind schedule," he explained, "and we've got a bad half-day before us. I was counting on making Gray Lake cabin to-night, and we've got to hurry to do it."

"That is beyond Grizzly River," Lounsbury remarked.

Bill turned in some wonder. He hadn't know that Lounsbury was so well acquainted with the topography of the region. Stranger still, the man started at his glance, flushing nervously. "I heard some one say that Gray Lake was beyond Grizzly River," he explained lamely. "By all means make it if we can."

There was no possible deduction to make from the incident, so Bill turned his thought to other matters. "It's almost necessary—that we make it," he said. "There's no horse feed nor decent camp site between here and there. Besides, I don't like to put Miss Tremont up in a tent to-night. The best cabin in my whole string is at Gray Lake—a really snug little place, with a floor and a stove. Keep most of my trapping supplies there. If we can make the ford by dark, we'll run in there easy, it's only a mile or so over a well-run moose trail."

"And you think we're entirely safe in going on?" the girl asked.

"As far as I can see. I'm a little bit worried about Grizzly River—I'm afraid it's up pretty high—but I'll try it first and see if it's safe to ford. The snow-storm has quit—I think we'll have nice weather in a few days. If it should begin again we could turn back and make it through before the drifts got too deep to cross—that is, if we didn't delay. And besides, when we get across Grizzly River we're in favorable country for your search. We can put up at the cabin a few days and make a thorough hunt for any sign of the missing man. If the weather will permit—and I believe it will—we can follow down the river to the Yuga and make inquiries of the Indians."

His words heartened the party. Even Lounsbury had begun to show some eagerness; Vosper, flinching before the hard work of the trail, was jubilant at the thought of a few days' rest. They pushed on into the snow-swept waste.

The clouds knit again overhead, but as yet the air was clear of snow. The temperature, however, seemed steadily falling. The breath of the horses was a steam cloud; the potholes in the marsh were gray and lifeless with ice. And it seemed to Virginia that the wild things that they passed were curiously restless and uneasy; the jays flew from tree to tree with raucous cries, the waterfowl circled endlessly over the gray lakes.

This impression grew more vivid as the hours passed; and there was an elusive but sinister

significance about it that engrossed her, but which she couldn't name or understand. She didn't mention the matter to Bill. She couldn't have told why, for the plain reason that in her simplicity she was not aware of her own virtues. A sportswoman to the last hair, she simply did not wish to depress him with her fears. There was a suspense, a strange hush and breathlessness in the air that depressed her.

The same restlessness that she observed in the wild creatures began to be noticeable in the horses. Time after time they bolted from the trail, and the efforts of all the party were needed to round them up again. Their morale—a high degree of which is as essential in a pack train as in an army—was breaking before her eyes. They seemed to have no spirit to leap the logs and battle the quagmire. They would try to encircle the hills rather than attempt to climb them.

She wondered if the animals had a sixth sense. She was a wide-awake, observing girl, and throughout the trip she had noticed instances of a forewarning instinct that she herself did not possess. On each occasion where the horses were more or less unmanageable she found, on progressing farther, some dangerous obstacle to their progress,—a steep hill or a treacherous marsh. Could it be that they were forewarned now?

Fatigue came quickly this afternoon, and by four o'clock she was longing for food and rest. She was cold, the snow had wet the sleeves and throat of her undergarments, the control of her horse had cost her much nervous strength. The next hour dragged interminably.

But they were descending now, a steep grade to the river. Twilight, like some gray-draped ghost of a shepherdess whom Apollo had wronged and who still shadowed his steps, gathered swiftly about them.

Bill urged his horse to a faster walk; tired as the animal was he responded nobly. Because Virginia's horse was likewise courageous he kept pace, and the distance widened between the two of them and the remainder of the pack train. Lounsbury's shrill complaints and Vosper's shouts could not urge their tired mounts to a faster gait. The shadows deepened in the tree aisles; the trail dimmed; the tree trunks faded in the growing gloom.

"We won't be able to see our way at all in five minutes more," Virginia told herself.

Yet five minutes passed, and then, and still the twilight lingered. The simple explanation was that her eyes gradually adjusted themselves to the soft light. And all at once the thickets divided and revealed the river.

She didn't know why her breath suddenly caught in awe. Some way the scene before her eyes scarcely seemed real. The thickets hid the stream to the right and left, and all she could see was the stretch of gray water immediately in front. It was wide and fretful, and in the half-light somehow vague and ominous. It had reached up about the trunks of some of the young spruces on the river bank, and the little trees trembled and bent, stirred by the waters; and they seemed like drowning things dumbly signaling for help. Because the farther bank was almost lost in the dusk the breadth of the stream appeared interminable. In reality it was a full ninety yards at the shallower head of the rapids where the moose trail led down to the water.

The roar of the river had come so gradually to her ear that now she was hardly aware of it; indeed the wilderness seemed weighted with silence. But it was true that she heard a terrifying roar farther down the stream. Yet just beyond, perhaps a mile from the opposite bank, lay camp and rest,—a comfortable cabin, warmth and food. She hoped they would hurry and make the crossing.

But Bill halted at the water's edge, and she rode up beside him. He seemed to be studying the currents. The pack train caught up, and Lounsbury's horse nudged at the flank of her own animal. "Well?" Lounsbury questioned. "What's the delay? We're in a hurry to get to camp."

"It's pretty high," Bill replied softly. "I've never tried to cross when it was so high as this." It was true. The rains and the snow had made the stream a torrent.

"But, man, we can't camp here. No horse feed—no cabin. We've got to go on."

"Wait just a minute. Time is precious, but we've got to think this thing out. We can put up a tent here, and cold as it is, make through the night somehow. I'm not so sure that we hadn't ought to do it. The river looks high, and it may be higher than it looks—it's hard to tell in the twilight. Ordinarily I cross at the head of the rapids—water less than three feet deep. But it isn't the depth that counts—it's the swiftness. If the river is much over three feet, a horse simply can't keep his feet—and Death Canyon is just below. To be carried down into that torrent below means to die—two or three parties, trying to ship furs down to the Yuga, have already lost their lives in that very place. The shallows jump right off into ten feet of water. It'll be tough to sleep out in this snow, but it's safer. But if you say the word we'll make the try. At least I can ride in and see how it goes—whether it's safe for you to come."

Lounsbury didn't halt to ask him by what justice he should take this risk—why he should put his own life up as a pawn for their comfort and safety. Nor did Bill ask himself. Such a thought did not even come to him. He was their guide, they were in his charge, and he followed his own law.

"Try it, anyway," Lounsbury urged.

Bill spoke to his horse. The animal still stood with lowered head. For one of the few times in his life Bill had to speak twice,—not sharply, if anything more quietly than at first. The brave Mulvaney headed into the stream.

As Bill rode into those gray and terrible waters, Virginia's first instinct was to call him back. The word was in her throat, her lips parted, but for a single second she hesitated. It was part of the creed and teachings of the circle in which she moved to put small trust in instinct. By a false doctrine she had been taught that the deepest impulses of her heart and soul were to be set aside before the mandates of convention and society; that she must act a part rather than be herself. She remembered just in time that this man was not only an employee, a lowly guide to whom she must not plead in personal appeal. She had been taught to stifle her natural impulses, and she watched in silence the water rise about the horse's knees.

But only for a second the silence endured. The reaction swept her in a great flood. The generous, kindly warmth of her heart surged through her in one pulse of the blood; and all those frozen enemies of her being—caste and pride of place and indifference—were scattered in an instant. "Oh, come back!" she cried. "Bronson—Bill—come back. Oh, why did I ever let you go!"

For Bill did not look around. Already the sound of the waters had obscured the voices on the shore. Again she called, unheard. Then she lashed her horse with the bridle rein.

The animal strode down into the water. Vosper, his craven soul whimpering within him, had fallen to the last place in the line, but Lounsbury tried to seize her saddle as she pushed forward.

"Where are you going, you little fool?" he cried. "Come back."

The girl turned her head. Her face was white. "You told him to go in," she replied. "Now—it's the sporting thing—to follow him."

The water splashed about her horse's knees. Lounsbury called again, commandingly, but she didn't seem to hear. She lifted her feet from the stirrups as Bill had done before her, and the angry waters surged higher.

Already she knew the strength of the river. She felt its sweeping force against the animal's frame: the brave Buster struggling hard to keep his feet. Ahead of her, a dim ghost in the half-light, Bill still rode on toward the opposite shore. And now—full halfway across—he was in the full force of the current.

It was all too plain that his horse was battling for its life. The stream had risen higher than Bill had dreamed, and the waters beat halfway at the animal's side. He knew what fate awaited him if he should lose his foothold. Snorting, he threw all of his magnificent strength against the current.

It was such a test as the animal had never been obliged to endure before. He gave all that he had of might and courage. He crept forward inch by inch, feeling his way, bracing against the current, nose close to the water. In animals, just the same as in men, there are those that flinch and those that stand straight, the courageous and the cowardly, the steadfast and the false,—and Mulvaney was of the true breed. Besides, perhaps some of his rider's strength went into his thews and sustained him. Slowly the water dropped lower. He was almost to safety.

At that instant Bill glanced around, intending to warn his party not to attempt the crossing. He saw the dim shape of Virginia close behind him, riding into the full strength of the current.

All color swept in an instant from his face, leaving it gray and ashen as the twilight itself. Icy horror, groping and ghastly, flooded his veins as he saw that he was powerless to aid her. Yet his mind worked clear and sure, fast as lightning itself. Even yet it was safer for her to turn back than attempt to make the crossing. He knew that Buster's strength was not that of Mulvaney, and he couldn't live in the deepest, swiftest part of the river that lay before her.

"Turn back," he said. "Turn your horse, Virginia—easy as you can."

At the same instant he turned his own horse back into the full fury of the torrent. It had been his plan to camp alone on the other side of the river, returning to the party in the better light of the morning; but there was not an instant's hesitation in turning to battle it again. His brave horse, obedient yet to his will, ventured once more into that torrent of peril. Virginia, cool and alert, pressed the bridle rein against her horse's neck to turn him.

On the bank Lounsbury and Vosper gazed in fascinated terror. Buster wheeled, struggling to keep his feet. Mulvaney pushed on, clear to the deepest, wildest portion of the stream. And then Virginia's horse pitched forward into the wild waters.

Perhaps the animal had simply made a misstep, possibly an irregularity in the river bottom had upset his balance. The waters seemed to pounce with merciless fury, and struck with all their power.

In the half-light it was impossible even for Bill to follow the lightning events of the next second. He saw the horse struggle, flounder, then roll on his back from the force of the current. It swept him down as the wind sweeps a straw. And he saw Virginia shake loose from the saddle.

He had but an instant's glimpse of a white face in the gray water, of hair that streamed; an instant's realization of a faint cry that the waters obscured. And then he sprang to her aid.

He could do nothing else. When the soul of the man was made it was given a certain strength, and certain basic laws were laid down by which his life was to be governed. That strength sustained him now, those laws held him in bondage. He could be false to neither.

He knew the terror of that gray whirlpool below. He had every reason to believe that by no possible effort of his could he save the girl; he would only throw away his own life too. The waters were icy cold: swiftly would they draw the life-giving heat from their bodies. Soaked through, the cold of the night and the forest would be swift to claim them if by any miracle they were able to struggle out of the river. Yet there was not an instant's delay. The full sweep of his thoughts was like a flash of lightning in the sky; he was out of the saddle almost the instant that the waters engulfed her. He sprang with his full strength into the stream.

On the bank the two men saw it as in a dream: the horse's fall, the upheaval of the water as the animal struggled, a flash of the girl's face, and then Bill's leap. They called out in their impotence, and they gazed with horror-widened eyes. But almost at once the drama was hidden from them. The twilight dropped its gray curtains between; besides, the waters had swept their struggling figures down the stream and out of their sight.

Already the river looked just the same. Mulvaney, riderless, was battling toward them through the torrent, but the stress and struggle of the second before had been instantly cut short. There was no spreading ripples, no break in the gray surface of the stream to show where the two had fallen. The stream swept on, infinite, passionless for all its tumult, unconquerable,—like the River of Death that takes within its depths the souls of men, never to yield them, never to show whence they have gone.

The storm recommenced, the wind wailed in the spruce tops, and the snow sifted down into the gray waters.

VII

Bill Bronson had no realization of the full might of the stream until he felt it around his body. The waters were fed from the snowfields on the dark peaks, and every nerve in his system seemed to snap and break in the first shock of immersion. But he quickly rallied, battling the stream with mighty strokes.

He knew that if the rescue were accomplished, it would have to be soon. The torrent grew ever wilder as it sped down the canyon: no human being could live in the great, black whirlpool at its mouth. Besides, the cold would claim him soon. Just a few little instants of struggle, and then exhaustion, if indeed the icy waters did not paralyze his muscles.

He swam with his eyes open, full in the current, and with a really incredible speed. And by the mercy of the forest gods almost at once he caught a glimpse of Virginia's dark tresses in the water.

She was ten feet to one side, toward the Gray Lake shore of the river, and several feet in front. The man seemed simply to leap through the water. And in an instant more his arm went about her.

"Give yourself to the current," he shouted. "And hang on to me."

He knew this river. They were just entering upon a stretch of water dreaded of old by the rivermen that had sometimes plied down the stream in their fur-laden canoes,—a place of jagged rocks and crags and boulders that were all but submerged by the waters. To be hurled against their sharp edges meant death, certain and speedily. He knew that his mortal strength couldn't avail against them. But by yielding to the current he thought that he might swing between them into the open waters below. His arm tightened about the girl's form.

He had not come an instant too soon. Already she had given up. A fair swimmer, she had been powerless in the rapids. She had not dreamed but that the trail of her life was at an end. She was cold and afraid and alone, and she had been ready to yield. But the sight of the guide's strong body beside her had thrilled her with renewed hope.

Even in the shadow of death she was aware of the strong wrench of his muscles as he swam, the saving might of his powerful frame. She knew that he was not afraid for himself, but only for

her. Even death, with all its shadow and mystery, had not broken his spirit or bowed his head: he faced it as he faced the wilderness and the whole dreadful battle of life,—strongly, quietly, with never-faltering courage. And the girl found herself partaking of his own strength.

Up to now she had not entered into comradeship with this man. But had held herself on a different plane. But he was a comrade now; no matter the outcome, even if they should find the inhospitable Death at the end of their trial, this relationship could never be destroyed. They fought the same fight, in the same shadow. Now she would not have to enter the dark gates of Eternity alone and afraid. Here was a comrade; she knew the truth at the first touch of his arm. He could buoy up her spirit with his own.

"If I let go of you, can you hang on to my shoulder?" he asked her.

"Yes——"

He tried to look into her face, to see if she spoke the truth. But the shadows were almost impenetrable now, and the air was choked with falling snow.

"Then put your hand on my shoulder. I can't make progress the way I'm holding you now. I'll try to work in to the nearest shore."

She seized his shoulder, but nearly lost her grasp in a channel of swift water. Her fingers locked in the cloth of his shirt. And he began, a little at a time, to cross the sixty feet of wild water between them and the shore.

He had never been put to a greater test. Every ounce of his strength was needed. The tendency of the stream was to carry him into the center of the current, he was heavily clothed and shod, and the girl, exhausted, was scarcely able to give aid at all. More than once he felt himself weakening. Once a sharp pain, keen as a knife wound, smote his thigh, and he was shaken with despair at the thought that swimmer's cramps—dreaded by all men who know the water—were about to put an end to the struggle. In the icy depths his bodily heat was flowing from him in a frightfully rapid stream.

Closer and closer he swam, and at last only thirty feet of fast, deep water stretched between. But it seemed wholly impossible to make this last stretch. The sharp pain stabbed him again, and it seemed to him that his right leg only half responded to the command of his nerves. In a moment more they would be flung again into the cascades.

"I'm afraid I can't make it," he said, too softly for Virginia to hear. He wrenched once more toward the shore.

But the river gods were merciful, after all. A jack pine had fallen on the shore, struck down by a dead tree that had fallen beyond, and its green spire, still clothed with needles, lay half-submerged, forty feet out into the stream. Bill's arm encountered it, then snatched at it in a final, spasmodic impulse of his muscles. And his grip held fast.

For an instant they were tossed like straws in the water, but gradually he strengthened his grip. He caught a branch with his free hand, then slowly pulled up on it. "Hang on," he breathed. "Only a moment more."

He drew himself and the girl up on the slender trunk, then crawled along it toward the shore. Now they were half out of the water. And in a moment later they both felt the river bottom against their knees.

He drew her to the bank, staggered and fell, and for a moment both of them lay lifeless to the soft caress of the snow. But Bill did not dare lose consciousness. He was fully aware that the fight was only half won. And despair swept the girl when her clear thought returned to tell her they had emerged upon the opposite shore from the party, and that they were drenched through and lost in the night and storm,—endless, weary paces from warmth and shelter.

Before the thought had gone fully home she saw that Bill was on his feet. The twilight had all but yielded to the darkness, yet she saw that he still stood straight and strong. It was not that he had already recovered from the desperate battle in the river. Strong as he was, for himself he had only one desire—to lie still and rest and let the terrible cold take its toll. But he was the guide, the forester, and the girl's life was in his care.

"Get off your clothes," he commanded. "All of them—the darkness hides you—and I'll wring 'em out. If I don't you can't live to get to the cabin. Your stockings first."

The thought of disobedience did not even come to her. He was fighting for her life; no other issue remained.

"Rub your skin all over with your hands," he went on, "and keep moving. Above all things keep the blood going in your veins. Rub as hard as you can—I can't make a fire here—with no ax—in the snow."

Already she had tossed him her drenched stockings, and he was wringing them in his strong

hands. She rubbed her legs dry with her palms, and put the stockings back on. Then she drew off her coats and outing suit, and he wrung them as dry as he could. Then quickly she dressed again.

"Now—fast as you can walk toward the cabin."

He was not sure that he could find it in the darkness. He hoped to encounter the moose trail where it left the ford; beyond that he had to rely on his woodsman's instincts. He was soaked through and exhausted and he knew from the strange numbness of his body that he was slowly being chilled to death. It was a test of his own might and endurance against the cruel elements and a power beyond mere physical strength came to his aid.

They forced their way through the evergreen thickets of the river bank, walking up the stream toward the ford. He broke through the brushy barriers with the might of his body; he made a trail for her in the snow. The darkness deepened around them. The snow fell ever heavier, and the winds souged in the tree tops.

After the first half-mile all consciousness of effort was gone from the girl. She seemed to move from a will beyond her own, one step after another over that terrible trail. She lost all sense of time, almost of identity. Strange figures, only for such eyes as might see in the darkness, they fought their way on through the drifts.

But they conquered at last. Partly by the feel of the snow under his feet, partly by his woodsman's instincts, but mostly because the forest gods were merciful, Bill kept to the moose trail that led from the ford to the cabin. And the man was swaying, drunkenly, when he reached the door.

His cold hands could scarcely draw out the rusted file that acted as a brace for the chain. Yet his voice was quiet and steady when he spoke.

"There are blankets in there, plenty of 'em," he told her. "It's my main supply cabin. Spread some of them out and take off your clothes—all of 'em—and get between them. I'll build a fire as fast as I can."

She turned to obey. She heard him take down an ax that had been left hanging on the cabin walls and heard his step in the snow as he began to cut into kindling some of the pieces of cordwood that were heaped outside the door. She undressed quickly, then lay shivering between the warm, heavy blankets.

In a moment the man faltered in, his arms heavy with wood. She heard him fumbling back of the little stove, then a match gleamed in the gloom. She had never seen such a face as this before her now. Its lines were deep and incredibly dark: utter fatigue was inscribed upon the drawn features and in the dark, dull eyes. She was suddenly shaken with horror at the thought that perhaps she was looking upon the first shadow of death itself.

He had cut the kindling with his knife, inserted the candle end, and a little blaze danced up. She watched him feed the fire with strange, heavy motions. He took a pan down from the wall, then went out into the darkness.

Haunted by fears, it seemed to her she waited endless hours for him to return again. When he came the pan was filled with water from a little stream that flowed behind the cabin. He put it on the stove to heat.

She dozed off, then wakened to find him sitting on the edge of her bed, holding a cup of some steaming liquid. Vaguely she noticed that he had taken off his wet clothes and had put on a worn overcoat that had been hanging back of the stove, wrapping two thick blankets over this. He put his left arm behind her and lifted her up, then fed her spoonfuls of the hot liquid. She didn't know what it was, other than it contained whisky.

"Take some of it yourself," she told him at last.

He shook his head and smiled,—a wistful yet manly smile that almost brought tears to her eyes. That smile was the last thing that she remembered. The warm, kindly liquor stole through her veins, and she dropped into heavy slumber.

In the stress of that first hour after the disaster of the river, Lounsbury and Vosper had a chance to test the steel of which they were made. This was the time for inner strength, and courage, and beyond all things else, for self-discipline. But only the forest creatures, such little folk as watch with beady eyes from the coverts all the drama of the wilderness, beheld how they stood that test.

For the first few seconds Lounsbury sat upon his horse and simply stared in mute horror. Then he half-climbed, half-fell from the saddle, and followed by Vosper, started running down the river bank. Immediately he lost sight of Virginia and Bill. Almost at once thereafter the cold and the darkness got into his spirit and appalled him.

"They're lost, they're lost," he cried. "There's not a chance on earth to get 'em out."

The branches tripped him and he fell sprawling in the snow. He got up and hastened on. Vosper, his thews turning to mushroom stalks within him, could only follow, swearing hoarsely. At each break of the trees they would clamber down to the water's edge and look over the tumultuous wastes, and each time the twilight was deeper, the snow flurries heavier. And soon they came to a steep bank which they could not descend.

"It's a death trip. I knew it was a death trip," Lounsbury moaned. "And what's the use of going farther. They haven't a chance on earth."

They did, however, push on a short distance down the river. Lounsbury was of the opinion it was very far indeed. In reality it was not two hundred yards in all. And they halted once more to stare with frightened eyes at the stream.

"It ain't the first this river's taken," Vosper told him. "And they never even found their bodies."

"And we won't find these, now," Lounsbury replied. They waited a little while in silence, trying to pierce the shadows. "What do you suppose we'd better do?" he questioned.

"I don't know. What can we do?"

"There's no chance of saving them. They're gone already. No swimmer could live in that stream. Why did we ever come—it was a wild-goose chase at best. If they did get out they'd be lost—and couldn't find their way. It seems to me the wisest thing for us to do is to go back—and build a big fire—so they can find their way in if they did get out."

It was a worthy suggestion! The voice of cowardice that had been speaking in Lounsbury's craven soul had found expression in words at last. He was frightened by the storm and the darkness, and he was cold and tired, and a beacon light for the two wanderers in the storm was only a subterfuge whereby he might justify their return to camp. The understrapper understood, but he didn't disagree. They were two of a kind.

It was not that they did not know their rightful course. Both were fully aware that such a fire as they could build could only gleam a few yards through the heavy spruce thicket. They knew that braver men would keep watch over that dreadful river for half the night at least, calling and searching, ready to give aid in the feeble hope that the two exhausted swimmers might come ashore.

"Sure thing," Vosper agreed. "It'll be hard to make a good fire in the snow, and we can't build one at all if them pack horses has got away by now."

"You mean—we'd die?" Lounsbury's eyes protruded.

"The ax is in the pack. We wouldn't have a chance."

Lounsbury turned abruptly, scarcely able to refrain from running. The pack horses, however, hadn't left their tracks. And now the brave Mulvaney had gained the shore and was standing motionless, gazing out over the troubled waters. No man might guess the substance of his thoughts. He scarcely glanced at the two men.

They unpacked the animals, and by scraping off the snow and by the aid of the keen ax and a candle-stub soon lighted a fire. To satisfy the feeble voice of his conscience Lounsbury himself cut wood to make it blaze high. They made their coffee and cooked an abundant meal.

They stretched the tent in the evergreen thicket, and after supper they sat in its mouth in the glow of the fire. Its crackle drowned out the voices of the wilderness about them,—such accusations as the Red Gods pour out upon the unworthy. And for all their shelter they were wretched and terrified, crushed by the might of the wilderness about them,—futile things that were the scorn of even the beasts.

"Of course we'll never find the bodies," Lounsbury suggested at last.

"No chance, that I can see. The winter's come to stay. We won't be able to get any men from Bradleyburg to help us look for 'em. They couldn't get through the snow."

"You think—" Lounsbury's voice wavered, "you think—we can get back all right ourselves?"

"Sure. That is, if we start first thing to-morrow. There's a clear trail through the snow most of the way—our own trail, comin' out. But it will be hard goin' and not safe to wait."

"Then I suppose—the horses will be sent down below, because of the snow. That's another reason why they can't even search for the bodies."

"Yes. Of course they may float down to the Yuga and be seen somewhere by the Indians. But not much chance."

They lighted their pipes, and the horror of the tragedy began slowly to pass from them. The blinding snow and the cold and their own discomfort occupied all their thoughts. There was only

one ray of light,—that in the morning they could turn back out of the terrible wilderness, down toward the cities of men.

They didn't try to sleep. The snow and the cold and the shrieking wind made rest an impossibility. They did doze, however, between times that they rose to cut more fuel for the fire. The hours seemed endless.

Darkness still lay over the river when they went again to their toil. Lounsbury, himself offered to cook breakfast and tried to convince himself the act entitled him to praise. In reality, he was only impatient to hasten their departure. Vosper packed the hungry horses, slyly depositing portions of their supplies and equipment in the evergreen thickets to lighten his own work. He further lightened the packs by putting a load on Mulvaney. And they climbed down to the water's edge to glance once more at the turbulent stream.

"No use of waiting any more," Lounsbury said at last.

"Of course not. Get on your horse." Then they rode away, these two worthy men, back toward the settlements. Some of the pack horses—particularly the yellow Baldy and his kind—moved eagerly when they saw that their masters had changed directions. But Vosper had to urge Mulvaney on with oaths and blows.

VIII

In Virginia's first moment of wakening she could not distinguish realities from dreams. All the experiences of the night before seemed for the moment only the adventures of a nightmare. But disillusionment came quickly. She opened her eyes to view the cabin walls, and the full dreadfulness of her situation swept her in an instant.

Her tears came first. She couldn't restrain them, and they were simply the natural expression of her fear and her loneliness and her distress. For long moments she sobbed bitterly, yet softly as she could. But Virginia was of good metal, and in the past few days she had acquired a certain measure of self-discipline. She began to struggle with her tears. They would waken Bill, she thought—and she had not forgotten his bravery and his toil of the night before. She conquered them at last, and, miserable and sick of heart, tried to go back to sleep.

Her muscles pained her, her throat was raw from the water, and when she tried to make herself comfortable her limbs were stiff and aching. But she knew she had to look her position in the face. She turned, pains shooting through her frame, and gazed about her.

The cabin, she could see, was rather larger than any of those in which they had camped on their journey. It was well-chinked and sturdy, and even had the luxury of a window. For the moment she didn't see Bill at all. She wondered if he had gone out. Then, moving nearer to the edge of her cot, she looked over intending to locate the clothes she had taken off the night before. Then she saw him, stretched on the floor in the farthest corner of the room.

He gave the impression of having dropped with exhaustion and fallen to sleep where he lay. She could see that he still wore the tattered overcoat he had found hanging on the wall, and the two blankets were still wrapped about him. He was paying for his magnificent efforts of the night before. Morning was vivid and full at the window, but he still lay in heavy slumber.

She resolved not to call him; and in spite of her own misery, her lips curled in a half-smile. She was vaguely touched; somehow the sight of this strong forester, lying so helpless and exhausted in sleep, went straight to some buried instinct within her and found a tenderness, a sweet graciousness that had not in her past life manifested itself too often.

But the tenderness was supplanted by a wave of icy terror. She was a woman, and the thought suddenly came to her that she was wholly in this man's power, naked except for the blankets around her, unarmed and helpless and lost in the forest depths. What did she know of him? He had been the soul of respect heretofore, but now—with her uncle on the other side of the river—; but she checked herself with a revulsion of feeling. The strength that had saved her life would save him against himself. They would find a way to get out to-day; and she thought that this, at least, she need not fear.

He had been busy before he slept. His clothes and hers were hung on nails back of the little stove to dry. He had cut fresh wood, piling it behind the stove. She guessed that he had intended to keep the fire burning the whole night, but sleep had claimed him and disarranged his plans.

His next thought was of supplies. The simple matter of food and warmth is the first issue in the wilderness; already she had learned this lesson. Her eyes glanced about the walls. There were two or three sacks, perhaps filled with provisions, hanging from the ceiling, safely out of the reach of the omnivorous pack-rats that often wreak such havoc in unoccupied cabins. But further

than this the place seemed bare of food.

Blankets were in plenty; there were a few kitchen utensils hanging back of the stove, and some sort of an ancient rifle lay across a pair of deer horns. Whether or not there were any cartridges for this latter article she could not say. Strangest of all, a small and battered phonograph, evidently packed with difficulty into the hills, and a small stack of records sat on the crude, wooden table. Evidently a real and fervent love of music had not been omitted from Bill's make-up.

Then Bill stirred in his sleep. She lay still, watching. She saw his eyes open. And his first glance was toward her.

He flashed her a smile, and she tried pitifully to answer it. "How are you?" he asked.

"Awfully lame and sore and tired. Maybe I'll be better soon. And you—?"

"A little stiff, not much. I'm hard to damage, Miss Tremont. I've seen too much of hardship. But I've overslept—and there isn't another second to be lost. I've got to dress and go and locate Vosper and Lounsbury."

"I suppose you'd better—right away. They'll be terribly distressed—thinking we're drowned." She turned her back to him, without nonsense or embarrassment, and he started to dress. She didn't see the slow smile, half-sardonic, that was on his lips.

"I'm not worrying about their distress," he told her. "I only want to be sure and catch them before they give us up for lost—and turn back. I can never forgive myself for failing to waken. It was just that I was so tired——"

"I won't let you blame yourself for that," the girl replied, slowly but earnestly. "Besides, Uncle Kenly won't go away for two or three days at least. He's been my guardian—I'm his ward—and I'm sure he'll make every effort to learn what happened to us."

"I suppose you're right. You know whether or not you can trust Lounsbury. I only know—that I can't trust Vosper."

"They'll be waiting for us, don't fear for that," the girl went on. She tried to put all the assurance she could into her tone. "But how can we get across?"

"That remains to be seen. If they're there to help, with the horses, we might find a way." The man finished dressing, then turned to go. "I'm sorry I can't even take time to light your fire. You must stay in bed, anyway—all day."

He left hurriedly, and as the door opened the wind blew a handful of snow in upon her. The snow had deepened during the night, and fall was heavier than ever. Shivering with cold and aching in every muscle, she got up and put on her underclothing. It was almost dry already. Then, wholly miserable and dejected, she lay down again between her blankets, waiting for Bill's return. And his step was heavy and slow on the threshold when he came.

She couldn't interpret the expression on his face when she saw him in the doorway. He was curiously sober and intent, perhaps even a little pale. "Go to sleep, Miss Tremont," he advised. "I'll make a fire for breakfast."

He bent to prepare kindling. The girl swallowed painfully, but shaken with dread shaped her question at last. "What—what did you find out?"

He looked squarely into her eyes. "Nothing that you'll want to hear, Miss Tremont," he told her soberly. "I went to the river bank and looked across. They—they——"

"They are gone?" the girl cried.

"They've pulled freight. I could see the smoke of their fire—it was just about out. Not a horse in sight, or a man. There's no chance for a mistake, I'm afraid. I called and called, but no one answered."

The tears rushed to the girl's eyes, but she fought them back. There was an instant of strained silence. "And what does it mean?"

"I don't know. We'll get out someday——"

"Tell me the truth, Bill," the girl suddenly urged. "I can stand it. I will stand it—don't be afraid to tell me."

The man looked down at her in infinite compassion. "Poor little girl," he said. "What do you want to know?"

She didn't resent the words. She only felt speechlessly grateful and somehow comforted,—as a baby girl might feel in her father's arms.

"Does it mean—that we've lost, after all?"

"Our lives? Not at all." She read in his face that this, at least, was the truth. "I'll tell you, Miss Tremont, just what I think it means. If we were on the other side of the river, and we had horses, we could push through and get out—easy enough. But we haven't got horses—even Buster is drowned—and it would be a hard fight to carry supplies and blankets on our backs, for the long hike down into Bradleyburg. It would likely be too much for you. Besides, the river lays between. In time we might go down to quieter waters and build a raft—out of logs—but the snow's coming thicker all the time. Before we could get it done and get across, we couldn't mush out—for the snows have come to stay and we haven't got snowshoes. We could rig up some kind of snowshoes, I suppose, but until the snow packs we couldn't make it into town. It's too long a way and too cold. In soft snow even a strong man can only go a little way—you sink a foot and have to lift a load of snow with every step. Every way we look there's a block. We're like birds, caught in a cage."

"But won't men—come to look for us?"

"I've been thinking about that. Miss Tremont, they won't come till spring, and then they'll likely only half look for us. I know this northern country. Death is too common a thing to cause much stir. Lounsbury will tell them we are drowned—no one will believe we could have gotten out of the canyon, dressed like we were and on a night like last night. If they thought we were alive and suffering, the whole male population would take a search party and come to our aid. Instead they know—or rather, they think they know—that we're dead. There won't be any horses, it will be a fool's errand, and mushing through those feet of soft snow is a job they won't undertake."

"But the river will freeze soon."

"Yes. Even this cataract freezes, but it likely won't be safe to cross for some weeks—maybe clear into January or February. That depends on the weather. You see, Miss Tremont, we don't have the awful low temperatures early in the winter they get further east and north. We're on the wet side of the mountains. But we do get the snow, week after week of it when you simply can't travel, and plenty of thirty and forty, sometimes more, below zero. But the river will freeze if we give it time. And the snow will pack and crust late in the winter. And then, in those clear, cold days, we can make a sled and mush out."

"And it means—we're tied up here for weeks—and maybe months?"

"That's it. Just as sure as if we had iron chains around our ankles."

Then the girl's tears flowed again, unchecked. Bill stood beside her, his shoulders drooping, but in no situation of his life had he ever felt more helpless, more incapable of aid. "Don't cry," he pleaded. "Don't cry, Miss Tremont. I'll take care of you. Don't you know I will?"

Her grief rent him to the depths, but there was nothing he could say or do. He drew the blankets higher about her.

"Perhaps you can get some more sleep," he urged. "Your body's torn to pieces, of course."

Fearful and lonely and miserable, the girl cried herself to sleep. Bill sat beside her a long time, and the snow sifted down in the forest and the silence lay over the land. He left her at last, and for a while was busy among the supplies that he found on a shelf behind the stove. And she awakened to find him bending over her.

His face was anxious and his eyes gentle as a woman's. "Do you think you can eat?" he asked. "I've warmed up soup—and I've got coffee, too."

He had put the liquids in cups and had drawn the little table beside her bed. She shook her head, but she softened at the swift look of disappointment in his face. "I'll take some coffee," she told him.

He held the cup for her, and she drank a little of the bracing liquid. Then she pushed the cup away.

He waited beside a moment, curiously anxious. "Give me your hand," he said.

"Why?"

Cold was her voice, and cold the expression on her face. It seemed to her that the lines of Bill's face deepened, and his dark eyes grew stern. But in a moment the expression passed, and she knew she had wounded him. "Why do you think? I want to test your pulse."

He had seen that she was flushed, and he was in deadly fear that the plunge into the cold waters had worked an organic injury. He took her soft, slender wrist in his hand, and she felt the pressure of his little finger against her pulsing arteries. Then she saw the dark features light up.

"You haven't any fever," he told her joyfully. "You're just used up from the experience. And God knows I can't blame you. Go to sleep again if you like."

She dozed off again, and for a little while he was busy outside the cabin, cutting fuel for the night's blaze. He stole in once to look at her and then turned again down the moose trail to the river. He had been certain before that the others had gone; now he only wanted to make sure.

The long afternoon was at an end when he returned. He had gazed across the gray waters and called again and again, but except for the echo of his shout, the wilderness silence had been inviolate. Virginia was awake, but still miserable and dejected in her blankets. They talked a little, softly and quietly, about their chances, but he saw that she was not yet in a frame of mind to look the situation squarely in the face. Then he cooked the last meal of the day.

"I don't want anything," she told him, when again he proffered food. "I only want to die. I wish I had died—in the river last night. Months and months—in these awful woods and this awful cabin—and nothing but death in the end."

He did not condemn her for the utterance, even in his thoughts. He was imaginative enough to understand her despair and sympathize with it. He remembered the sheltered life she had always lived. Besides, she was his goddess; he could only humble himself before her.

"But I won't let you die, Miss Tremont. I'll care for you. You won't even have to lift your hand, if you don't want to. You'll be happier, though, if you do; it would break some of the monotony. There's a little old phonograph on the stand, and some old magazines under your cot. The weeks will pass somehow. And I promise this." He paused, and his face was gray as ashes. "I won't impose—any more of my company upon you—than you wish."

The response was instantaneous. The girl's heart warmed; then she flashed him a smile of sympathy and understanding. "Forgive me," she said. "I'll try to be brave. I'll try to stiffen up. I know you'll do everything you can to get me out. You're so good to me—so kind. And now—I only want to go to sleep."

He watched her, standing by her bed. After all, sleep was the best thing for her—to knit her torn nerves and mend her tired body. Besides, the wilderness night was falling. He could see it already, gray against the window pane. The first day of their exile was gone.

"I'll be all right in the morning," she told him sleepily. "And maybe it's for the best—after all. At least—it gives you a better chance to find Harold—and bring him back to me."

Bill nodded, but he didn't trust himself to speak.

IX

There is a certain capacity in young and sturdy human beings for accepting the inevitable. When Virginia awakened the next morning, her physical distress was largely past and she was in a much better frame of mind. She pulled herself together, stiffened her young spine, and prepared to make the best of a deplorable situation. She had come up here to find her lost beloved, and she wasn't defeated yet. This very development might bring success.

She realized that the fact that she had thus found a measure of compensation for the disaster would have been largely unintelligible to most of the girls of her class,—the girls she knew in the circle in which she had moved. It was not the accustomed thing to remain faithful to a fiance who had been silent an missing for six years, or to seek him in the dreary spaces of the North. The matter got down to the simple fact that these girls were of a different breed. Culture and sophistication and caste had never destroyed an intensity and depths of elemental passion that might have been native to these very wildernesses in which she was imprisoned. Cool and self-restrained to the finger tips, she knew the full meaning of fidelity. Orphaned almost in babyhood, she had lived a lonely life: this girlhood love affair of hers had been her single, great adventure. She had been sure that her lover still lived when all her friends had judged him dead. Months and years she had dreamed of finding him, of sheltering again in his arms, and proving to all the world that her faith was justified.

Bill was already up, and the room warmed from the fire. The noise of his ax blows had awakened her. And she took advantage of his absence to dress.

"You up?" he cried in delight when she entered. His arms were heaped with wood. "I'm not sure that you hadn't ought to rest another day. How do you feel?"

"As good as ever, as far as I can tell. And pretty well ashamed of being such a baby yesterday."

But his smile told her that he held no resentment. "I trust you'll be able to eat to-day?"

"Eat? Bill, I am famished. But first"—and her face grew instantly sober—"I want to know just

how we stand, and what our chances are. I remember what you told me yesterday about getting out. But we can't live here on nothing. What about supplies?"

"That's what we've got to see about right now. It's an important matter, true enough. For a certain very good reason I couldn't make a real investigation till you got up. You'll see why in a minute. Well, we have a gun at least; you can see it behind the stove. It's an old thing, but it will still shoot. And we've got at least one box of shells for it—and not one of them must be wasted. They mean our meat supply. I'm still wearing my pistol, and I've got two boxes of shells for it in my pocket—it's a small caliber, and there's fifty in each box. There are plenty of blankets and cooking utensils, magazines for idle hours and, Heaven bless us, an old and battered phonograph on the table. Don't scorn it—anything that has to be packed on a horse this far mustn't be scorned. We can have music with our meals, if we like." He stopped and smiled.

"There's a cake of soap on the shelf," he went on, after the gorgeous fact of the phonograph had time to sink home, "and another among the supplies—but I'm afraid cold cream and toilet water are lacking. I don't even know how you'll comb your hair."

The girl smiled—really with happiness now—and fished in the pockets of a great slicker coat she had worn the night of the disaster. She produced a little white roll, and with the high glee opened it for him to see. Wrapped in a miniature face towel was her comb, a small brush, and a toothbrush!

They laughed with delight over the find. "But no mirror?" the man said solemnly.

"No. I won't be able to see how I look for weeks—and that's terrible. But where are your food supplies? I see those sacks hanging from the ceiling—but they certainly haven't enough to keep us alive. And there's nothing else that I can see."

"We'd have a hard time, if we had to depend on the contents of those sacks. Miss Tremont, can you cook?"

"Cook? Good Heavens—I never have. But I can learn, I suppose."

"You'd better learn. It will help pass away the time. I'll be busy getting meat and keeping the fires high, among other things."

"But what is there to cook?"

He walked, with some triumph, to the bunk on which she had slept the night before, and lifting it up, revealed a great box beneath. She understood, now, why he had not been able to make a previous investigation. They danced with joy at its contents,—bags of rice and beans, dried apples, marmalade and canned goods, enough for some weeks at least. Best of all, from Bill's point of view, there were a few aged and ripened plugs of tobacco, for cutting up for his pipe.

"The one thing we haven't got is meat," Bill told her, "except a little jerky; but there's plenty of that in the woods if we can just find it. And I don't intend to delay about that. If the snow gets much deeper, we'd have to have snowshoes to hunt at all."

"You mean—to go hunting to-day?"

"As soon as we can stir up a meal. How would pancakes taste?"

"Glorious! I'll cook breakfast myself."

"Not breakfast—lunch," he corrected. "It's already about noon. But it would be very nice if you'd do the cooking while I cut the night's fuel. You know how—dilute a little canned milk, and a little baking powder, stir in your flour—and it's wheat mixed with rye, and bully flour for flapjacks—and fry 'em thick. Set water to boil and we'll have coffee, too."

They went to their respective tasks. And the pancakes and coffee, when at last they were steaming on the little, crude board-table, were really a very creditable effort. They were thick and rich as befits wilderness flapjacks, but covered with syrup they slid easily down the throat. Bill consumed three of them, full skillet size, and smacked his lips over the coffee. Virginia managed two herself.

He helped her wash the scanty dishes, then prepared for the hunt. "Do you want to come?" he asked. "It's a cool, raw day. You'll be more comfortable here."

"Do you think I'd stay here?" she demanded.

She didn't attempt to analyze her feelings. She only knew that this cabin, lost in the winter forest, would be a bleak and unhappy place to endure alone. The storm and the snow-swept marshes, with Bill beside her, were infinitely preferable to the haunting fear and loneliness of solitude. The change in her attitude toward him had been complete.

Dressing warmly, they ventured out into the snowy wastes. The storm had neither heightened nor decreased. The snow still sifted down steadily, with a relentlessness that was somehow

dreadful to the spirit. The drifts were about their knees by now; and the mere effort of walking was a serious business. The winter silence lay deep over the wilderness.

It was a curious thing not to hear the rustle of a branch, the crack of a twig; only the muffled sound of their footsteps in the snow. Bill walked in front, breaking trail. He carried the ancient rifle ready in his hands.

The truth was that Bill did not wish to overlook any possible chance for game. Each hour traveling was more difficult, the snow encroached higher, and soon he could not hunt at all without snowshoes. It was not good for their spirits or their bodies to try to live without meat in the long snowshoe-making process. This was no realm for vegetarians. The readily assimilated animal flesh was essential to keep their tissues strong.

Fortune had not been particularly kind so far on this trip—at least from Virginia's point of view—but he did earnestly hope that they might run into game at once. Later the moose would go to their winter feeding grounds, far down the heights. Every day they hunted, their chance of procuring meat was less.

He led her over the ridge to the marshy shores of Gray Lake,—a dismal body of water over which the waterfowl circled endlessly and the loons shrieked their maniacal cries. He noticed, with some apprehension, that many sea birds had taken to the lake for refuge,—gulls and their fellows. This fact meant to the woodsman that great storms were raging at sea, and they themselves would soon feel the lash of them. They waited in the shadow of the spruce.

"Don't make any needless motions," he cautioned, "and don't speak aloud. They've got eyes and ears like hawks."

It was not easy to stand still, in the snow and the cold, waiting for game to appear. Virginia was uncomfortable within half an hour, shivering and tired. In an hour the cold had gripped her; her hands were lifeless, her toes ached. Yet she stood motionless, uncomplaining.

It was a long wait that they had beside the lake. The short, snow-darkened afternoon had not much longer to last. Bill began to be discouraged; he knew that for the girl's sake he must leave his watch. He waited a few minutes more.

Then the girl felt his hand on her arm. "Be still," he whispered. "Here he comes."

They were both staring in the same directions, but at first Virginia could not see the game. Her eyes were not yet trained to these wintry forests. It was a strange fact, however, that the announcement was like a hot stimulant in her blood. The sense of cold and fatigue left her in an instant. And soon she made out a black form on the far side of the lake.

"He's coming toward us," the man whispered.

Although she had never seen such an animal before, at once she recognized its kind. The spreading horns, the great frame, the long, grotesque nose belonged only to the moose,—the greatest of American wild animals. Her blood began to race through her veins.

The animal was still out of range, but the distance between them rapidly shortened. He was following the lake shore, tossing his horns in arrogance. Once he paused and gazed a long time straight toward them, legs braced and head lifted; but evidently reassured he ventured on. Now he was within three hundred yards.

"Why don't you shoot?" the girl whispered.

"I'm afraid to trust this old gun at that range. I could get him with my thirty-five. Now don't make a motion—or a sound."

Now the creature was near enough so that she could receive some idea of his size and power. She knew something of the quagmires such as lay on the lake shore. She had passed some of them on the journey. But the bull moose took them with an ease and a composure that was thrilling to see. Where a strong horse would have floundered at the first step, he stretched out his hind quarters, and, striking with his long, powerful front legs, pulled through. Then she was aware that Bill was aiming.

At the roar of the rifle she cried out in excitement. The old bull had traversed the marches for the last time: he had fought the last fight with his fellow bulls in the rutting season. He rocked down easily, and Bill's racing fingers ejected the shell and threw another into the barrel, ready to fire again if need be. But no second bullet was required. The man's aim had been straight and true, and the bullet had pierced his heart.

The two of them danced and shouted in the snow. And Virginia did not stop to think that the stress of the moment had swept her back a thousand—thousand years, and that her joy was simply the rapture of the cave woman, mad with blood lust, beside her mate.

X

The shoulder of a bull moose was never a load for a weak back. The piece of meat weighed nearly one hundred pounds and was of awkward shape to carry. Bill, secure in his strength, would never have attempted it except for the fact that after one small ridge was climbed, the way was downhill clear to the cabin.

He skinned out the quarter with great care; then, stooping, worked it on his back. Virginia took his gun and led the way back over their snow trail.

By resting often, they soon made the hilltop. From thence on they dragged the meat in the immaculate snow. Twilight had fallen again when they made the cabin.

Already Virginia thought of it as home. She returned to it with a thrill in her veins and a joy in her heart. She was tired out and cold; this humble log hut meant shelter from the storm and warmth and food. Bill hung the meat; then with his knife cut off thick steaks for their supper. In a few moments their fire was cracking.

Bill showed her how to broil the steak in its own fat, and he cooked hot biscuits and macaroni to go with it. No meal of her life had ever given her greater pleasure. They made their plans for the morrow; first to construct a crude sled and then to bring in the remainder of the meat. "If the wolves don't claim it to-night," Bill added, as he lighted his pipe.

"It's strange that I don't want to smoke myself," the girl told him.

"You? Why should you?"

"I smoke at home. I mean I did. It's getting to be the thing to do among the girls I know. Someway, the thought of it doesn't seem interesting any more."

"Did you—really enjoy it then? If you did, I'll split my store with you. You've got as much right to it as I." The man spoke rather heavily.

"I didn't think I did enjoy it. I did it—I suppose because it seemed sporting. It never made me feel peaceful—only nervous. I don't believe tobacco is a temperamental need with women as it is with some men—otherwise it wouldn't have taken so many centuries to establish the custom. It would only—seem silly, up here."

He had an impression that she was speaking very softly. The quality of absolute and omnipresent silence had passed from the wilderness. There was a low stir, a faint murmur that at first was so far off and vague that neither of them could name it.

But slowly the sound grew. The tree tops, silent before with snow, gave utterance; the thickets cracked, stirred, and moved as if some dread spirit were coming to life within them. The candle flickered. A low moan reached them from the chimney. Bill strode to the door and threw it wide.

He did not have to peer out into that unfathomable darkness to know the enemy that was at his gates. It spoke in a sudden fury, and the snow flurries swept past, like strange and wandering spirits, in the dim candle light. No longer the flakes drifted easily and silently down. They seemed to be coming from all directions, whirling, eddying, borne swiftly through the night and hurled into drifts. And a dread voice spoke across the snow.

"The north wind," Bill said simply.

Virginia's eyes grew wide. She sensed the awe and the dread in his tones; even she, fresh from cities, knew that this foe was not to be despised. She felt the sharp pinch of the cold as the heat escaped through the open door. The temperature was falling steadily; already it was far below freezing. Bill shut the door and walked back to her.

"What does it mean?" she asked breathlessly.

"Winter. The northern winter. I've seen it break too many times. Perhaps we can drown out the sound of it—with music."

He walked toward the battered instrument. Her heart was cold within her, and she nodded eagerly. "Yes—a little ragtime. It will be frightfully loud in the cabin, but it's better than the sound of the storm."

She didn't dream that this wilderness man would choose any other kind of music than ragtime. She was but new to the North, otherwise she would have made no such mistake. Superficiality was no part of these northern men. They knew life in the raw, the travail of existence, the pinch of cold and the fury of the storm; and the music that they felt in their hearts was never the light-hearted dance music of the South. Music is the articulation of the soul, and the souls of these men were darkened and sad. It could not be otherwise, sons of the wilderness

as they were.

The pack song, on the hilltop in the winter moon, was never a melody of laughter. Rather it was the song of life itself, life in the raw, and the sadness and pain and the hopeless war of existence find their echo in the wailing notes. None of the wilderness voices were joyous. When Bill had chosen his records he took those that answered his own mood and expressed his own being.

Not all of them were sad music, in the strictest sense. But they were all intense, poignant and tremulous with the deepest longings of the human soul.

"I haven't any ragtime," the man explained humbly. "I could only bring up a few records, and so I took just the ones I liked best. They're simple things—I'm sorry I haven't any more."

She looked at this man with growing wonder. Of course he would like the simple things. No man of her acquaintance had ever possessed truer standards: no sophistication or cultural growth such as she herself had know could have given him a truer gentility. What was this thing that men could learn in the woods and in the North that gave them such poise, such standards, and brought out such qualities of manhood? Yet she knew that the forests did not treat all men alike. Those of intrinsic virtue were made better, their strength was supplemented by the strength of the wilderness itself, but the weaklings perished quickly. This was not a land for soft men, for the weak and the cowardly and the vicious. The wild soon found them out, harried them by storms and broke their hearts and their spirits, and kept from them its gracious secrets. Perhaps in this latter thing lay the explanation. It seemed to her that Bill was always straining, listening for the faintest, whispered voices of the forest about him. He was always watching, always studying—his soul and his heart open—and Nature poured forth upon him her incalculable rewards.

He put on a record, closed the doors of the instrument tight to muffle the sound, and set the needle. She recognized the melody at once. It was Drdla's "Souvenir"—and the first notes seemed to sweep her into infinity.

It was a beautiful, haunting thing, sweet as love, warm as a maiden's heart, tender as motherhood; and all at once Virginia was aware of a heart-stirring and incredible contrast. The melody did not drown out the sound of the storm. It rose above it, infinitely sweet and entreating, and all the time the wild strains of the storm outside made a strange and dreadful background. Yet the two songs mingled with such harmony as only old masters, devotees to music, can sometimes hear in their inmost souls but never express in notes.

She felt the tears start in her eyes. Her cheeks flamed. Her heart raced and thrilled. For all the exquisite beauty of the song, a vague dread and an incomprehensible fear seemed to come upon her. For all the stir and impulse of the melody, a strange but exquisite sadness engulfed her spirit. In that single instant the North drew aside its curtains of mystery and showed her its secret altar. For a breath at least she knew its soul,—its travail, its dreadful beauty, its infinite sadness, its merciless strength.

In her time Virginia had now and then known the fear of Death. Two nights previous, as the waters had engulfed her, she had known it very well. But never before had she known fear of life. That's what it was—fear of *life*—life that could only cost and could not pay, that could take and could not give, that could pain but could not heal. She knew now the dreadful persecution of the elements, cold and storm and the snow fields stretching ever from range to range. She knew the fear of hunger, of struggle to break the spirit and rend the body, of disaster that could not be turned aside, of cruel and immutable destiny. She knew now why the waterfowl had circled all day so restlessly: they too had known the age-old fear of the northern winter. They had sensed, in secret ways, the swift approach of the storm.

Winter was at hand. It would lock the streams and sweep the land with snow, the sun would grow feeble in the sky, and the spirit of Cold would descend with its age-old terrors. And the creepy fear, the haunting terror known to all northern creatures, man or beast, crept into her like a subtle poison.

It was a moment of enchantment. The music rose high, fell in soaring leaps, trembled in infinite appeal, and slowly died away. Outside the storm increased in fury. The wind sobbed over the cabin roof, the trees complained, the snow beat against the window pane. And still the spell lingered. Her lustrous eyes gazed out through the darkened pane, but her thoughts carried far beyond it.

And it was well for her peace of mind that she did not glance at Bill. The music had moved him too: besides the fear of the North he had been torn by even a deeper emotion, and for the instant it was written all too clearly upon his rugged features. He was watching the girl's face, his eyes yearning and wistful as no human being had ever seen them.

The soaring notes, with the dreadful accompaniment of the storm, had brought home a truth to him that for days on the trail he had tried to deny. "I love you, Virginia," cried the inaudible voice of his soul. "Oh, Virginia—I love you, I love you."

XI

It was one of Bill Bronson's basic creeds to look his situations squarely in the face. It was part of the training of the wilderness, and up till now he had always abided by it. But for the past few days he had found himself trying to look aside. He had tried to avoid and deny a truth that ever grew clearer and more manifest,—his love for Virginia.

He had told himself he wouldn't give his love to her. He would hold back, at least. He had reminded himself of the bridgeless gap that separated them, that they were of different spheres and that it only meant tragedy, stark and deep, for him to let himself go. He had fought with himself, had tried to shut his eyes to her beauty and his heart to her appeal. But there was no use of trying further. In the stress and passion of the melody he had found out the truth.

And this was no moment's passion,—the love that he had for her. Bill was not given to fluency of emotion. He was a northern man, intense as fire but slow to emotional response. He had known the great discipline of the forest; he was not one to lose himself in infatuation or sentimentality. He only knew that he loved her, and no event of life could make him change.

He had had dreams, this man; but they were never so concrete, so fond as these dreams that swept him now. In the soft candlelight the girl's beauty moved him and glorified him, the very fact of her presence thrilled him to the depths, the wistfulness and appeal in her face seemed to burn him like fire. This northern land was never the home of weak or half-felt emotions. The fine shades and subtle gradations of feelings were unknown to the northern people, but they had full knowledge of the primordial passions. They could hate as the she-wolf hates the foe that menaces her cubs, and they could love to the moment of death. He knew that whatever fate life had in store for him it could not change his attitude toward her. She would leave the North and go back to her own people, and still he would be true.

Even in the first instant he knew enough not to hope. They would have their northern adventure together, and then she would leave him to his snows and his trackless forests. She would go to her own land, a place of mirth and joy and warmth, to leave him brooding and silent in his waste places. He knew that all his days this same dream would be before his eyes, this wistful-eyed, tender girl, this lovely flower of the South. Nothing could change him. The years would come and go—spring and summer flowering in the forest, dancing once and tripping on to a softer, gentler land; fall would touch the shrubs with color, whisk off the golden leaves of the quivering aspen, and speed way; and winter, drear and cheerless, would shroud the land in snow—and find his love unswerving. The forest folk would mate in fall, the caribou calves would open their wondering eyes in spring, the moose would bathe and wallow in the lakes in summer, and in winter the venerable grizzly would seek his lair, and still his dreams, in his lonely cabin, would be unchanged. His love would never lessen or increase. He had held none of it back; no more could be given or taken away. He had given his all.

But if he couldn't keep this knowledge from himself, at least he could hold it from the girl. It would only bring her unhappiness. It would destroy the feeling of comradeship for him that he had begun to observe in her. It would put an insurmountable wall between them. Besides, he didn't believe that she could understand. Perhaps it would only offend her,—that this son of the forests should give her his love. She had never dealt with men of his breed before, and she had no inkling of the smoldering, devouring fires within the man. He would not invite her pity and her distrust by letting her know.

Strangest of all, he felt no bitterness or resentment. This development was only a fitting part of the tragedy of his life: first his father's murder, his dreams that had never come true, his lost boyhood, his exile in the waste places, and now the lonely years that stretched before him with nothing to atone or redeem. He knew that there could be no other woman in his life. It was well enough for the men of cities to give and take back their love; for them it was only wisdom and good sense, but such a course was impossible to such sons of the forest as he. Life gives but one dream to the forest folk, and they follow it till they die. He knew that the yearning in his heart and the void in his life could never be filled.

Yet he didn't rail at fate. He had learned what fate could do to him, and he had learned to take its blows with a strange fatalism and composure. Besides, would he not have the joy of her presence for many days to come? Their adventure had just begun: weeks would pass before she could go home. In those days he could serve her, toil for her, devote himself wholly to her happiness. He could see her face and know her beauty, and it was all worth the price he paid. For life in the North is life in its simplest phases; and the northern men have had a chance to learn that strangest truth of all,—that he who counts the cost of his hour of pleasure shall be crushed in the jaws of Destiny, and that a day of joy may be worth, in the immutable balance of being, a whole life of sorrow.

Virginia had no suspicion of his thoughts. She was still enthralled by the after-image of the music, and her own thoughts were soaring far away. But soon the noise of the storm began to force itself into her consciousness. It caused her to consider her own prospects for the night.

Vaguely she knew that this night was different from the others. The two previous nights she had been ill and half-unconscious: her very helplessness appealed to Bill's chivalry. To-night she stood on her own feet. Matters were down to a normal basis again, and for the first time she began to experience a certain embarrassment in her position. She was suddenly face to face with the fact that the night stretched before her,—and she in a snowswept cabin in the full power of a strange man. She felt more than a little uneasy.

Already she was tired and longed to go to sleep, but she was afraid to speak her wish. As the silence of the cabin deepened, and the noise of the storm grew louder—blustering at the roof, shaking the door, and beating on the window pane—her uneasiness gave way to stark fear.

But all at once she looked up to find Bill's eyes upon her, full of sympathy and understanding. "You'll want to turn in now," he told her. "You take the bunk again, of course—I'll sleep on the floor. I'm comfortable there—I could sleep on rocks if need be."

"Can't you get some fir boughs—to-morrow?" The girl spoke nervously.

"They'd be in the way, but maybe I can arrange it. And now I've got to fix your boidoir."

He took one of the boxes that served as a chair and stood it up on the floor, just in front of her bunk. Then, holding one of the blankets in his arm and a few nails in his hand, he climbed upon the box. She understood in an instant. He was curtaining off the entire end of the cabin where Virginia slept.

The girl's relief showed in her face. Her eyes lighted, her apprehension was largely dispelled. She wasn't blind to his thoughtfulness, his quick sympathy; and she felt deeply and speechlessly grateful. And she was also vaguely touched with wonder.

"You can go in there now," he told her. "But there's one thing—I want to show you—before you turn in."

"Yes?"

"I want to show you this little pistol." He took a light arm of blue steel from his belt,—the small-calibered and automatic weapon with which he had gilled the grouse. "It's only a twenty-two," Bill went on, "but it shoots a long cartridge, and it shoots ten of 'em, fast as you pull the trigger. You could kill a caribou with it, if you hit him right."

"Yes?" And she wondered at this curious interlude in their moment of parting.

"You see this little catch behind the trigger guard?" The girl nodded. "When you want to fire it, all you have to do is to push up the little catch with your thumb and pull the trigger. To-morrow I'm going to teach you how to shoot with it—I mean shoot straight enough to take the head off a grouse at twenty feet. And so it will bring you luck, I want you to sleep with it,—under your pillow."

Understanding flashed through her, and a slow, grateful smile played at her lips. "I don't want it, Bill," she told him.

"You'd feel safer with it," the man urged. He slipped it under her pillow. "And even before you learn to shoot it well—you could—if you had to—shoot and kill a man."

He smiled again and drew her curtain.

Bill was true to his promise to teach Virginia to shoot. The next day he put up an empty can out from the door of the cabin and they had target practice.

First he showed her how to hold the weapon and to stand. "See the can just over the sights and press back gradually," he urged.

The first shot went wide of its mark. The second and third were no better. But by watching her closely, Bill found out her mistake.

"You flinch," he told her. "It's an old mistake among hunters—and the only way you can avoid it is by deepest concentration. Skill in hunting—as well as in everything else—depends upon throwing the whole energy of your mind and body into that one little part of an instant when you pull the trigger. It's all right to be excited before. You're not human if, the game knocked over, you're not excited after. But unless you can hold like iron for that fraction of a second, you can't shoot and you never can shoot."

"But I'm not excited now," she objected.

"You haven't got full discipline of your nerves, just the same. You're a little afraid of the sound and the explosion, and you flinch back—just a little movement of your hand—when you pull the trigger. If it is only an eighth of an inch here, it's quite a miss by the time the bullet gets out there. Try again, but convince yourself first that you won't flinch. You won't jerk or throw off your aim."

She lowered the weapon and rested her nerves. Then she quietly lifted the gun again. And the fourth bullet knocked the can spinning from the log.

The man shouted his approval, and her flushed face showed what a real triumph it was to her. Few of her lifelong accomplishments she had valued more. Yet it caused no self-wonder; she only knew that she respected and prized the good opinion of this stalwart woodsman, and by this one little act she had proved to him the cool, strong quality of her nerves.

And it was no little triumph. She had really learned the basic concept of good shooting,—to throw the whole force of the nervous system into the second firing. It was the same precept that makes toward all achievement. The fact that she had grasped it so quickly was a guaranty of her own metal. She felt something of that satisfaction that strong men feel when they prove, for their own eyes alone, their self-worth. It was the instinct that sends the self-indulgent business man, riding to his work in a limousine, into the depths of the dreadful wilderness to hunt, and that urges the tenderfoot to climb to the crest of the highest peaks.

It did not mean that she was a dead shot already. Months and years of practice are necessary to obtain full mastery of pistol or rifle. She had simply made a most creditable start. There would be plenty of misses thereafter; in fact, the next six shots she missed the can four times. She had to learn sight control, how to gauge distance and wind and the speed of moving objects; but she was on the straight road to success.

While Virginia cooked lunch, Bill cut young spruce trees and made a sled: and after the meal pushed out through the whirling snow to being in the remainder of the moose meat. It was the work of the whole afternoon to urge the sled up the ridge and then draw it home through the drifts. The snow mantle had deepened alarmingly during the night, and he came none too soon. It was only a matter of days, perhaps of hours, before the snow would be impassable except with snowshoes. Until at last the snowfall ceased and packed, traveling even with their aid would be a heart-breaking business.

Virginia was lonely and depressed all the time Bill was absent, and she had a moment of self-amazement at the rapidity with which she brightened up at his return. But it was a natural development: the snow-swept wilds were dreary indeed for a lonely soul. He was a fellow human being; that alone was relationship enough.

"You can call me Virginia, if you want to," she told him. "Last names are silly out here—Heaven knows we can't keep them up in these weeks to come. I've called you Bill ever since the night we crossed the river."

Bill looked his gratitude, and she helped him prepare the meat. Some of it he hung just outside the cabin door; one of the great hams suspended in a spruce tree, fifty feet in front of the cabin. The skin was fleshed and hung up behind the stove to dry.

"It's going to furnish the web of our snowshoes," he explained.

That night their talk took a philosophical trend, and in the candlelight he told her some of his most secret views. She found that the North, the untamed land that had been his home, had colored all his ideas, yet she was amazed at his scientific knowledge of some subjects.

Far from the influence of any church, she was surprised to find that he was a religious man. In fact, she found that his religion went deeper than her own. She belonged to one of the Protestant churches of Christianity, attended church regularly, and the church had given her fine ideals and moral precepts; but religion itself was not a reality to her. It was not a deep urge, an inner and profound passion as it was with him. She prayed in church, she had always prayed—half automatically—at bedtime; but actual, entreating prayer to a literal God had been outside her born of thought. In her sheltered life she had never felt the need of a literal God. The spirit of All Being was not close to her, as it was to him.

Bill had found his religion in the wilderness, and it was real. He had listened to the voices of the wind and the stir of the waters in the fretful lake; he had caught dim messages, yet profound enough to flood his heart with passion, in the rustling of the leaves, the utter silence of the night, the unearthly beauty of the far ranges, stretching one upon another. His was an austere God, infinitely just and wise, but His great aims were far beyond the power of men's finite minds to grasp. Most of all, his was a God of strength, of mighty passions and moods, but aloof, watchful, secluded.

In this night, and the nights that followed, she absorbed—a little at a time—his most harboured ideas of life and nature. He did not speak freely, but she drew him out with sympathetic interest. But for all he knew life in the raw and the gloom of the spruce forest, his outlook had not been darkened. For all his long acquaintance with a stark and remorseless Nature, he remained an optimist.

None of his views surprised her as much as this. He knew the snows and the cold, this man; the persecution of the elements and the endless struggle and pain of life, yet he held no rancor. "It's all part of the game," he explained. "It's some sort of a test, a preparation—and there's some sort of a scheme, too big for human beings to see, behind it."

He believed in a hereafter. He thought that the very hardship of life made it necessary. Earthly existence could not be an end in itself, he thought: rather the tumult and stress shaped and strengthened the soul for some stress to come. "And some of us conquer and go on," he told her earnestly. "And some of us fall—and stop."

"But life isn't so hard," she answered. "I've never known hardship or trial. I know many men and girls that don't know what it means."

"So much to their loss. Virginia, those people will go out of life as soft, as unprepared, as when they came in. They will be as helpless as when they left their mother's wombs. They haven't been disciplined. They haven't known pain and work and battle—and the strengthening they entail. They don't live a natural life. Nature meant for all creatures to struggle. Because of man's civilization they are having an artificial existence, and they pay for it in the end. Nature's way is one of hardship."

This man did not know a gentle, kindly Nature. She was no friend of his. He knew her as a siren, a murderess and a torturer, yet with great secret aims that no man could name or discern. Even the kindly summer moon lighted the way for hunting creatures to find and rend their prey. The snow trapped the deer in the valleys where the wolf pack might find easy killing; the cold killed the young grouse in the shrubbery; the wind sang a song of death. He pointed out that all the wilderness voices expressed the pain of living,—the sobbing utterance of the coyotes, the song of the wolves in the winter snow, the wail of the geese in their southern migrations.

In these talks she was surprised to learn how full had been his reading. All through her girlhood she had gone to private schools and had been tutored by high-paid intellectual aristocrats, yet she found this man better educated than herself. He had read philosophy and had browsed, at least, among all the literature of the past; he knew history and a certain measure of science, and most of all, the association of areas of his brain were highly developed so that he could see into the motives and hearts of things much more clearly than she.

In the nights he told her Nature lore, the ways of the living-creatures that he observed, and in the daytime he illustrated his points from life. They would take little tramps together through the storm and snow, going slowly because of the depth of the drifts, and under his tutelage, the wild life began to reveal to her its most hidden secrets. Sometimes she shot grouse with her pistol; once a great long-pinioned goose, resting on the shore of frozen Gray Lake, fell to her aim. She saw the animals in the marshes, the herds of caribou that are, above all creatures, natives and habitants of the snow-swept mountains, the little, lesser hunters such as marten and mink and otter. One night they heard the wolf pack chanting as they ran along the ridge.

Life was real up here. The superficialities with which she had dealt before were revealed in their true light. Of all the past material requisites, only three remained,—food and warmth and shelter. Others that she did not think she needed—protection, and strength and discipline—were shown as vitally necessary. Comradeship was needed, too, the touch of a helping hand in a moment of fear or danger; and love—the one thing she lacked now—was most necessary of all. It was not enough just to give love. For years she had poured her adoration upon Harold, lost it too, reciprocally; and this she might find strength for the war of life, even a tremulous joy in meeting and surmounting difficulties.

The snow fell almost incessantly and the tree limbs could hold no more. The drifts deepened in the still aisles between trunk and trunk. When the clouds broke through and the stars were like great precious diamonds in the sky, the cold would drop down like a curse and a scourge, and the ice began to gather on Grizzly River.

On such nights the Northern Lights flashed and gleamed and danced in the sky and swept the forest world with mystery.

XII

Virginia found the days much happier than she had hoped. She took a real interest in caring for their little cabin, cooking the meals, even mending Bill's torn clothes. She had a natural fine sense of flavors, and out of the simple materials that they had in store she prepared meals that in Bill's opinion outclassed the finest efforts of a French chef. He would exult over them boyishly, and she found an unlooked-for joy in pleasing him. She had made delicious puddings out of rice and canned milk and raisins, she knew just the identical number of minutes it required to broil a moose porterhouse just to his taste, and she could fry a grouse to surpass the most succulent fried chicken ever served in a southern home. All these things pleased her and occupied the barren hours. She learned to sew on buttons, wash her own clothes, and keep the cabin clean and neat as a hospital ward.

She liked the hours of sober talk in the evenings. Sometimes they would play through the

records, and so well had Bill made his selections that she never tired of them. His preference tended toward melodies in the minor, wailing things that to him vaguely reflected the voices of the wild things and the plaintive utterances of the forest: she liked the soul-stirring, emotional melodies. They worked up a rare comradeship before the first week was done. She had never known a human being to whom she opened her thoughts more freely.

She had her lonesome hours, but not so many as she had expected. When time hung heavy on her hands she would take out one of the old magazines that Bill had brought up to read on the winter nights, and devour it from cover to cover. She had abundant health. The experience seemed to build her up, rather than injure her. Her muscles developed, she breathed deep of the cold, mountain air, and she had more energy than she could easily spend.

She fought away the tendency to grow careless in dress or appearance. She kept her few clothes clean and mended, she dressed her hair as carefully as in her city house. Her skin was clear and soft, but she didn't know how the wilderness life was affecting her beauty. What Bill observed he did not tell her. Often the words were at his lips, but he repressed them. In the first place he was afraid of speaking too feelingly and giving away his heart's secret; in the second he had a ridiculous fear that such a personal remark might tend to destroy the fine balance of their relationship. She had no mirror, but soon she became used to going without one. But one day, on one of their tramps, she caught a perfect image of herself in a clear spring.

She had stopped to drink, but for a few seconds she only regarded herself with speechless delight. She had had her share of beauty before; now perfect health had brought its marvelous and indescribable charm. Her hair was burnished and shimmering with life, her skin clear and transparent, her throat had filled out, and her eyes were bright and clear as she had never seen them. She felt no further need of cosmetics. Her lips were red, and Nature had brought a glow to her cheeks that no human skill could equal.

"Good Heavens, Bill!" she cried. "Why didn't you tell me that I was getting prettier every day?"

"I didn't know you wanted me to," he replied. "But you are. I've been noticing it a long time."

"You're a cold, impersonal person!" But at once her talk tripped on to less dangerous subjects.

Their cabin life was redeemed by their frequent excursions into the wild. The study of Nature was constantly more absorbing to the girl. Although the birds had all gone south—except such hardy fowl as the ptarmigan, that seemed to spend most of their time buried in the snow—there was still mammalian life in plenty in the forest. The little furred creatures still plied, nervous and scurrying as ever, their occupations; and the caribou still wandered now and then through their valley as they moved from ridge to ridge. The moose, however, had mostly pushed down to the lower levels.

The grizzlies had gone into hibernation, and their tracks were no longer to be seen in the snow; but the wolf pack still ran the ridges. And one day they had a miniature adventure that concerned the gray band.

They were climbing a ridge one wintry day, unappalled by the three feet or more of snow, when the girl suddenly touched his arm.

"First blood on caribou," she cried.

His eyes lighted, and he followed her gaze. Lately they had been having a friendly contest as to who would get the first glimpse of any living creature that they encountered in their tramps, and Bill was pleased to admit that he had been barely holding his own. The girl's eyes were practically as quick as his and better at long distances, and always there was high celebration when she saw the game first. But to-day they were fated for more exciting business.

The caribou were plunging as fast as they could through the snow. They came, in caribou fashion, in a long file, each stepping into the tracks of the other, and it was a good woodsman, coming along behind them, that could tell whether there were two or ten in the band. An old bull with sweeping horns led the file.

When going is at all easy, the caribou can travel at an incredible pace. Even their swinging trot can carry them from range to range in a single day; but when they choose to run their fastest, they seem to have wings. To-day, however, the soft snow impeded their speed. They seemed to be running freely enough, in great bounds, but Bill could tell that they were hard pressed. He would have liked to have taken one of the young cows to add to his larder, but they were too far to risk a shot. Then he seized the girl by the hand.

"Plow fast as you can up hill," he urged. "I think we'll see some action."

For he had guessed the impulse behind the wild race. They plunged through the snow as fast as they could, then sank almost out of sight in the drifts. And in a moment Bill pointed to a gray, shadowy band that came loping toward them out of the haze.

It was the wolf pack, and they were deep in the hunt. They were great, shaggy creatures, lean and savage, and Virginia felt glad that this stalwart form was beside her. The wolves of the North, when the starvation time is on, are not always to be trusted. They looked ghostly and incredibly large through the flurries.

They came within a hundred yards, then their keen senses whispered a warning. Just for an instant they stood motionless in the snow, heads raised and fierce eyes grazing.

Bill raised his rifle. He took quick aim at the great leader, and the report rang far through the silences. But the entire pack sprang away as one.

"I can't believe that I missed," Bill cried. He started to take aim again.

But no second shot was needed. Suddenly the pack leader leaped high in the air and fell almost buried in the snow. His brethren halted, seemingly about to attack the fallen, but Bill's shout frightened them on. The great, gaunt creature would sing no more to the winter stars.

He was a magnificent specimen of the black wolf, head as large as that of a black bear, and a pelt already rich and heavy. "We'll add a few more from time to time," Bill told her, "and then you can have a coat."

In these excursions Virginia learned to use her pistol with remarkable accuracy. Her strength increased: she could follow wherever Bill led. Sometimes they climbed snowy mountains where the gales shrieked like demons, sometimes they dipped into still, mysterious glens; they tracked the little folk in the snow, and they called the moose from the thickets beside the lake.

They did not forget their graver business. Ever Virginia kept watch for a track that was not an animal track, a blaze on a tree that was not made by the teeth of a porcupine or grizzly, a charred cook rack over the ashes of a fire. But as yet they had found no sign of human wayfarers other than themselves. There were no cut trees, no blazed trails, no sign of a habitation. Yet she didn't despair. She had begun to have some knowledge of the great distances of the region: she knew there were plenty of valleys yet unsearched.

Bill never ceased to search for his mine. He looked for blazes too, for a sign of an old camp or a pile of washings beside a stream. When he found an open stream he would wash the gravel, and it seemed to him he combed the entire region between the two little tributaries of Grizzly River indicated on his map. But with the deepening snow search was ever more difficult. Unlike Virginia, he was almost ready to give up.

The spirit of autumn had never shown her face again: winter had come to stay. Every day the snow deepened, the cold in the long nights was more intense. Travel was no longer possible without snowshoes, but the hide stretched in the cabin was almost dry and ready to cut into thongs for the webs. The less turbulent stretches of Grizzly River were frozen fast: the actual crossing of the stream was no longer a problem. Beyond it, however, lay only wintry mountains, covered to a depth of five feet or more with soft and impassable snow; and until the snow crusted, the journey to Bradleyburg was as impossible as if they had been cast away on another sphere.

Even the rapids of the river had begun to freeze. Often the clouds broke away at nightfall and let the cold come in,—stabbing, incredible cold that meant death to any human being that was caught without shelter in its grasp. The land locked tight: no more could Bill hunt for his mine in the creek beds. The last of the moose went down to their yarding grounds, and even the far-off glimpse of a caribou was a rarity. The marmots had descended into their burrows, the snowshoe rabbit hopped, a lonely figure in the desolation, through the drifts. Such of the other little people that remained—the weasel and the ptarmigan—had turned to the hue of the snow itself.

But now the snowshoe frames were done, wrought from tough spruce, and the moose hide cut into thongs and stretched across to make the webs. For a few days Bill and Virginia had been captives in the cabin, and they held high revels in celebration of their completion. Now they could go forth into the drifts again.

It did not mean, however, that the time was ripe for them to take their sled and mush into Bradleyburg. The snow was still too soft for long jaunts. They had no tent or pack animals, and they simply would have to wait for the most favorable circumstances to attempt the journey with any safety whatever. In the soft snow they could only make, at the most, ten miles a day; the sled was hard to drag; and the bitter cold of the nights would claim them quickly. It was not merely an alternative or a convenience with them to wait for the crust. It was simply unavoidable. Worst of all, the early winter storms were not done; and a severe blizzard on the trail would put a swift end to their journey.

But once more Virginia could search the snow for traces of her lover. And after the jubilant evening meal—held in celebration of the completion of the snowshoes—the girl stood in the cabin doorway, looking a long time into the snow-swept waste.

It was a clear, icy night, and the Northern Lights were more vivid and beautiful than she had ever seen them. Bill thought that she was watching their display; if he had known the real subject of her thoughts, he would not have come and stood in the doorway with her. He would have left

her to her dreams.

The whole forest world was wan and ghostly in the mysterious light. The trees looked strange and dark, perspective was destroyed, the far mountain gleamed. The streamers seemed to come from all directions, met with the effect of collision in the sky, and filled the great dome with uncanny light. Sometimes the flood of radiance would spread and flutter in waves, like a great, gorgeous canopy stirred by the wind, and fragments and balls of fire would spatter the breadth of the heavens. As always, in the face of the great phenomena of nature, Bill was deeply awed.

"We're not the only ones to see it," Virginia told him softly. "Somewhere I think—I feel—that Harold is watching it too. Somewhere over this snow."

Bill did not answer, and the girl turned to him in tremulous appeal.

"Won't you find him for me, Bill?" she cried. "You are so strong, so capable—you can do anything, anything you try. Won't you find him and bring him back to me?"

The man looked down at her, and his face was ashen. Perhaps it was only the effect of the Northern Lights that made his eyes seem so dark and strange.

XIII

One clear, icy night a gale sprang up in the east, and Virginia and Bill fell to sleep to the sound of its complaint. It swept like a mad thing through the forest, shattering down the dead snags, shaking the snow from the limbs of the spruce, roaring and souging in the tree tops, and blustering, like an arrogant foe, around the cabin walls. And when Bill went forth for his morning's woodcutting he found that his snowshoes did not break through the crust.

The wind had blown and crusted the drifts during the night. But it did not mean that he and his companion could start at once down the settlements. The crust was treacherous and possibly only temporary. The clouds had overspread again, and any moment the snowfall might recommence. The fact remained, however, that it was the beginning of the end. Probably in a few more weeks, perhaps days, it would be safe to start their journey. Bill was desolated by the thought.

The morning, however, could not be wasted. It permitted him to make a dash over to a certain stream further down toward the Yuga River in search of any sign of the lost mine. The stream itself was frozen to blue steel, and the snow had covered it to the depth of several feet, but there might be blazes on the trees or the remnants of a broken cabin to indicate the location of the lost claim. He had searched this particular stream once before, but it was one of the few remaining places that he hadn't literally combed from the springs out of which it flowed to its mouth. He started out immediately after breakfast.

It was not to be, however, that Bill should make the search that day. When about two miles from the cabin he saw, through a rift in the distant trees, a distinct trail in the snow.

It was too far to determine what it was. Likely it was only the track of a wild animal,—a leaping caribou that cut deep into the drifts, or perhaps a bear, tardy in hibernating. No one could blame him, he thought, if he didn't go to investigate. It was a matter he would not even have to mention to Virginia. He stood a moment in the drifts, torn by an inner struggle.

Bill was an extremely sensitive man and his senses were trained even to the half-psychic, mysterious vibrations of the forest life, and he had a distant premonition of disaster. All of his fondest hopes, his dreams, all of the inner guardians of his own happiness told him to keep to his search, to journey on his way and forget he had seen the tracks. Every desire of Self spoke in warning to him. But Bill Bronson had a higher law than self. Long ago, in front of the ramshackle hotel in Bradleyburg, he had given a promise; and he had reaffirmed it in the gleam of the Northern Lights not many nights before. There was no one to hold him to his pledged word. There were none that need know; no one to whom he must answer but his own soul. Yet even while he stood, seemingly hesitating between the two courses, he already knew what he must do.

It was impossible for Bill to be false to himself. He could not disobey the laws of his own being. He would be steadfast. He turned and went over to investigate the tracks.

He was not in the least surprised at their nature. Those that had ordained his destiny had never written that he should know the good fortune of finding them merely the tracks of animals. The trail was distinctly that of snowshoes, and it led away toward the Yuga River.

Bill glanced once, then turned back toward his cabin. He mushed the distance quickly. Virginia met him with a look of surprise.

"I'm planning a longer dash than I had in mind at first," he told her. "It's important—" he hesitated, and a lie came to his lips. But it was not such a falsehood as would be marked, in ineffaceable letters, against him on the Book of Judgement. He spoke to save the girl any false hopes. "It's about my mine," he said, "and I'll not likely be back before to-morrow night. It might take even longer than that. Would you be afraid to stay alone?"

"There's nothing to be afraid of here," the girl replied. "But it will be awfully lonesome without you. But if you think you've got a real clew, I wouldn't ask you to stay."

"It's a real clew." The man spoke softly, rather painfully. She wondered why he did not show more jubilation or excitement. "You've got your pistol and you can bolt the door. I've got plenty of wood cut. There's kindling too—and you can light a fire in the morning. If you put a big log on to-night you'll have glowing coals in the morning. It will be cold getting up, and I wish I could be here to build your fire. But I don't think I can."

She gave him a smile and was startled sober in the middle of it. All at once she saw that the man was pale. He had, then, found a clew of real importance. "Go ahead, of course," she told him. "We'll fix some lunch for you right away."

He took a piece of dried moose meat, a can of beans and another of marmalade, and these, with a number of dried biscuits, would comprise his lunch. "Be careful of yourself," he told her at parting. "If I don't get back to-morrow, don't worry. And pray for me."

She told him she would, but she did not guess the context of the prayer his own heart asked. His prayer was for failure, rather than success.

Following his own tracks, he went directly back to the mysterious snowshoe trail. He followed swiftly down it, anxious to know his fate at the first possible instant. He saw that the trail was fresh, made that morning; he had every reason to think that he could overtake the man who had made it within a few hours.

He was not camped on the Yuga,—whoever had come mushing through the silences that morning. From the river to that point where he had found the tracks was too great a distance for any musher to cover in the few hours since dawn. There was nothing to believe but that the stranger's camp lay within a few miles of his own. He decided, from his frequent stops, that the man had been hunting; there was nothing to indicate that he was following a trap line. The frequent tracks in the snow, however, indicated an unusually good tracking country. He wondered if strangers—Indians, most likely—had come to poach on his domain.

He did not catch up with the traveler in the snow. The man had mushed swiftly. But shortly after the noon hour his keen eyes saw a wisp of smoke drifting through the trees, and his heart leaped in his breast. He pushed on, emerging all at once upon a human habitation.

It was a lean-to, rather than a cabin. Some logs had been used in its construction, but mostly its walls were merely frames, thatched heavily with spruce boughs. A fire smoldered in front. And his heart leaped with indescribable relief when he saw that neither of the two men that were squatted in the lean-to mouth was the stranger that had passed his camp six years before.

Bill had old acquaintance with the type of man that confronted him now. One of them was Joe Robinson,—an Indian who had wintered in Bradleyburg a few years before. Bill recognized him at once; he came of a breed that outwardly, at least, changes little before the march of time. There was nothing about him to indicate his age. He might be thirty—perhaps ten years older. Bill felt fairly certain, however, that he was not greatly older. In spite of legend to the contrary, a forty-year old Indian is among the patriarchs, and pneumonia or some other evil child of the northern winter, claims him quickly.

Joe's blood, he remembered, was about three-fourths pure. His mother had been a full-blooded squaw, his father a breed from the lake region to the east. He was slovenly as were most of his kind; unclean; and the most distinguished traits about him were not to his credit,—a certain quality of craft and treachery in his lupine face. His yellow eyes were too close together; his mouth was brutal. His companion, a half-breed with a dangerous mixture of French, was a man unknown to Bill,—but the latter did not desire a closer acquaintance. He was a boon companion and a mate for Joe.

Yet both of them possessed something of that strange aloofness and dignity that is a quality of all their people. They showed no surprise at Bill's appearance. In these mighty forests human beings were as rare a sight as would be an aeroplane to African savages, yet they glanced at him seemingly with little interest. It was true, however, that these men knew of his residence in this immediate section of Clearwater. The loss of his father's mine was a legend known all over that particular part of the province; they knew that he sought it yearly, clear up to the trapping season. When the snows were deep, they were well aware that he ran trap lines down the Grizzly River. Human inhabitants of the North are not so many but that they keep good track of one another's business.

But they had a better reason still for knowing that he was near. The prevailing winds blew down toward them from Bill's camp, and sometimes, through the unfathomable silence of the snowy forest, they had heard the faint report of his loud-mouthed gun.

It is doubtful that a white man—even a resident of the forest such as Bill—could ever have heard as much. He was a woodsman, but he did not inherit, straight from a thousand woodsman ancestors, perceptions almost as keen as those of the animals themselves. As it was, he hadn't had a chance to guess their presence. The wind always carried the sound of their rifles away from him rather than toward him; besides, their guns were of smaller caliber and had a less violent report.

Last of all, they had been careful about shooting. For a certain very good reason they had no desire for Bill to discover their presence. There are certain laws, among the northern men, as to trapping rights. Nothing can be learned in the provincial statute books concerning these laws. Mostly they are unwritten; but their influence is felt clear beyond the Arctic Circle. They state quite clearly that when a man lays down a line of traps, for a certain distance on each side of him the district is his, and no one shall poach on his preserves. And these Indians had lately been partners in an undertaking to clear the whole region of its furs.

They had no idea but that Bill had discovered their trap lines and had come to make trouble. For all that they sat so still and aloof, Joe's mind had flashed to his rifle in the corner of the lean-to, six feet away. He rather wished it was nearer. His friend Pete the Breed was considerably reassured by the feel of his long, keen-bladed knife against his thigh. Knives, after all, were very effective at close work. The two of them could really afford to be insolent.

And they were considerably amazed at Bill's first question. He had left the snowshoe trail that evidently passed in front of the shelter and had crossed the snow crust to the mouth of the lean-to. "Did one of you make those tracks out there?" he asked. He felt certain that one of them had. He only asked to make sure.

There was a quality in Bill's voice that usually, even from such gentry as this, won him a quick response. Joe's mind gave over the insolence it had planned. But for all that Bill's inner triumph was doomed to be short-lived.

"No," Joe grunted. "Our partner made it. Follow it down—pretty soon find another cabin."

XIV

Bill only had to turn to see the snowy roof of the cabin, two hundred yards away down the glade. Ordinarily his sharp eyes would have discerned it long before: perhaps the same inner spirit, encountered before this eventful day, was trying to protect him still. He turned without a word, and no man could have read the expression on his wind-tanned face. He munched slowly on to his journey's end.

It was a new cabin, just erected, and smoke drifted faintly from its chimney. Bill rapped on the door.

"Come along in," some one answered gruffly. Bill removed his snowshoes, and the door opened before his hand.

He did not have to glance twice at the bearded face to know in whose presence he stood. His inner senses told him all too plainly. Changed as he was, there was no chance in heaven or earth for a mistake. This was Harold Lounsbury, the same man who had passed his camp years before, the same lost lover that Virginia had come to find.

Even now, Bill thought, it was not too late to withdraw. He could pretend that he had come to quarrel in regard to his trapping rights. After one glance he knew that, from the standard of good sense, there was a full reason for withdrawal. In the years he might even reconcile his own conscience to the act. Harold leaned forward, but he didn't get up to meet him.

Bill scarcely noticed the man's furtive preparations for self-defense. His rifle lay across his knees, and ostensibly he was in the act of cleaning it, but in reality he was holding it ready for Bill's first offensive move. He had known of Bill of old; in the circle in which he moved—lost utterly to the sight of the men of Bradleyburg—there were stories in plenty about this stalwart woodsman. For days—ever since he had come here with his Indians and laid down his trap line—he had dreaded just such a visit. The real reason for Bill's coming did not even occur to him.

Bill saw that the man was frightened. His lips were loose, his eyes nervous and bright, his hands did not hold quite steady. But all these observations were at once obliterated and forgotten in the face of a greater, more profound discovery. In one scrutinizing glance the truth swept him like a flood. Here was one that the wilderness had crushed in its brutal grasp. As far as Bill's standards were concerned, it had broken and destroyed him.

This did not mean that his health was wasted. His body was strong and trim: except for a suspicious network of red lines in his cheeks and a yellow tinge to the whites of his eyes, he

would have seemed in superb physical condition. The evidence lay rather in the expression of his face, and most of all in the surroundings in which he lived.

He had been, to some extent at least, a man of refinement and culture when he had passed through Bill's camp so long ago. He had been clean-shaven except for a small mustache; courteous, rather patronizing but still friendly. Now he was like a surly beast. His eyes were narrow and greedy,—weasel eyes that at once Bill mistrusted and disliked. A scowl was at his lips, no more were they in a firm, straight line. The light and glory of upright manhood, if indeed he had ever possessed it, had gone from him now. He was a friend and a companion of Joe and Pete: in a measure at least he was of their own kind.

When the white man chooses to descend, even the savages of the forest cannot keep pace with him. Bill knew now why Harold had never written home. The wilderness had seized him body and soul, but not in the embrace of love with which it held Bill. Obviously he had taken the line of least resistance to perdition. He had forgotten the world of men; in reality he was no longer of it. Bill read the truth—a familiar truth in the North—in his crafty, stealthy, yet savage face.

He was utterly unkempt and slovenly. His coarse beard covered his lips, his matted hair was dull with dirt, his skin was scarcely less dark than that of the Indians themselves. The nails on his hands were foul; the floor of the house was cluttered with rubbish and filth. It was a worthy place, this new-built cabin! Even the desolate wastes outside were not comparable with this.

Yet leering through his degeneracy, his identity could not be mistaken. Here was the man Virginia had pierced the North to seek.

Harold removed his pipe. "What do you want?" he asked.

For a moment Bill did not answer. His thoughts were wandering afar. He remembered, when Harold had passed his camp, there had been something vaguely familiar, a haunting resemblance to a face seen long before. The same familiarity recurred to him now. But he pushed it away and bent his mind to the subject in hand. "You're Lounsbury, of course," he said.

"Sure." This man had not forgotten his name, in the years that he was lost to men. "I ask you again—what do you want?"

"You've been living on the Yuga. You came up here to trap in my territory."

The man's hands stirred, ever so little, and the rifle moved on his knees. "You don't own this whole country." Then he seemed to take courage from Bill's impassive face. He remembered his staunch allies—Pete and Joe. "And what if I did?"

"You knew I trapped here. You brought up Joe Robinson and a breed with you. You meant to clean up this winter—all the furs in the country."

Harold's face drew in a scowl. "And what are you goin' to do about it?"

"The queer thing is——" and Bill spoke quietly, slowly, "I'm not going to do anything about it—now."

Harold's crafty eyes searched his face. He wondered if Bill was afraid—some way it didn't fit into the stories that he had heard of him that this woodsman should be afraid. But he might as well go on that supposition as any other. "Maybe it's a good thing," he said. And for an instant, something of his lost suavity of speech came back to him. "Then to what—do I owe the honor of this visit?"

Bill sighed and straightened. The struggle within himself had, an instant before, waged more furiously than ever. Why should he not leave this man to his filthy cabin and his degeneracy and never let Virginia know of their meeting? He wondered if such had been his secret plan, concealed in the further recesses of his mind, when he had told her to-day's expedition concerned his mine,—so that he could withdraw if he wished. In this course most likely lay the girl's ultimate happiness, certainly his own. He could steal back; no one would ever know the truth. The man had sunk beneath her; even he, Bill, was more worthy of her than this degenerate son of cities and culture.

Yet who was he to dare to take into his own hands the question of Virginia's destiny? He had promised to bring her lost lover back to her; the fact that he was no longer the man she had known could be only a subterfuge to quiet his own conscience. Besides, the last sentence that the man had spoken had been singularly portentous. For the instant he had fallen into his own native speech, and the fact offered tremendous possibilities. Could it be that the old days were not entirely forgotten, that some of the virtues that Virginia had loved in him still dwelt in his degenerate hulk, ready to be awakened again? He had heard of men being redeemed. And all at once he knew his course.

So intent was he upon his thoughts that he scarcely heard the sound of steps in the snow outside the cabin door, then the noise of some one on the threshold in the act of removing snowshoes.

The task that confronted him now was that, no more and no less, to which he had consecrated his life,—to bring happiness to the girl he loved. There was work to do with this man. But even yet he might be redeemed; with Bill's aid his manhood might return to him. His own love for the girl tore at his heart, the image of his life stretched lonely and drear before him, yet he could not turn aside.

"I didn't come to see you about trapping. I came—about Virginia Tremont."

His eyes were on Harold's face, and he saw the man start. He had not forgotten the name. Just for an instant his face was stark pale and devoid of expression. "Virginia!" he cried. "My God, what do you know about her?"

But he didn't wait the answer. All at once he looked, with an annoyance and anxiety that at first Bill could not understand, toward the door of the cabin. The door knob slightly turned.

Bill wheeled, with a sense of vast and impending drama. Harold swore, a single brutal oath, then laughed nervously. An Indian squaw—for all her filth and untidiness a fair representative of her breed—pushed through the door and came stolidly inside. She walked to the back of the cabin and began upon some household task.

Bill's face was stern as the gray cliffs of the Selkirks when he turned again to Harold. "Is that your woman?" he asked simply.

Harold did not reply. He had not wished this man, emissary from his old acquaintances of his native city, to know about Sindy. He retained that much pride, at least. But the answer to Bill's question was too self-evident for him to attempt denial. He nodded, shrugging his shoulders.

Bill waited an instant; and his voice when he spoke again was singularly low and flat. "Did you marry her?"

Harold shrugged again. "One doesn't marry squaws," he replied.

Once more the silence was poignant in the wretched cabin. "I came to find Harold Lounsbury, a gentleman," Bill went on in the same strange, flat voice, "and I find—a squaw man."

Bill realized at once that this new development did not in the least affect his own duty. His job had been to find Harold and return him to Virginia's arms. It was not for him to settle the girl's destiny. For all he had spent his days in the great solitudes of nature he knew enough of life to know that women do not give their love to angels. Rather they love their men as much for their weaknesses as for their virtues. This smirch in Harold's life was a question for the two of them to settle between them.

It did, however, complicate the work of regeneration. Bill had known squaw men before, and few of them had ever regenerated. Usually they were men that could not stand the test of existence by their own toil: either from failure or weakness they took this sordid line of least resistance. From thence on they did not struggle down the trap line in the bitter winter days. They laid comfortably in their cabins and their squaws tended to such small matters. It was true that the squaws wore out quickly; sometimes they needed beating, and at about forty they withered and died, or else the blizzard caught them unprotected in the forest,—and then it became necessary to select another. This was an annoyance, but not a tragedy. One was usually as faithful and as industrious as another.

It was perfectly evident that Sindy had been at work setting out traps. Bill stared at the woman and for the moment he did not see the little sparks growing to flame in Harold's eyes.

"What did you say?" he asked, menacing. He had caught a word that has come to be an epithet in the North.

But by taking it up Harold made a severe strategical error. Bill had never hesitated, by the light of an ancient idiom, to call a spade a spade. Also he always had good reasons before he took back his words. "I said," he repeated clearly, "that I'd found—a squaw man."

Harold's muscles set but immediately relaxed again. He shrugged once. "And is it anybody's business but my own?" he asked.

"It hadn't ought to be, but it is," was the answer. "It's my business, and somebody else's too." he turned to the woman. "Listen, Sindy, and give me a polite answer. You're Joe Robinson's sister, aren't you?"

The Indian looked up, nodded, then went back to her work.

"Then you left Buckshot Dan—to come here and live with this white man?"

Harold turned to her with a snarl. "Don't answer him, Sindy. It's none of his business." Then his smoldering eyes met Bill's. "Now we've talked enough. You can go."

"Wait!" Something in the grave face and set features silenced the squaw man. "But it's true—"

we have talked just about enough. I've got one question. Lounsbury—do you think, by any chance—you've got any manhood left? Do you think you're rotten clear through?"

Harold leaped then, savage as a wolf, and his rifle swung in his arms. Instantly Bill's form, impassive before, seemed simply to waken with life. There was no rage in his face, only determination; but his arm drove out fast as a serpent's head. Seemingly with one motion he wrenched the gun from the man's hand and sent him spinning against the wall.

Before even his body crashed against the logs, Bill had whirled to face the squaw. He knew these savage women. It would be wholly in character for her whip a gleaming knife from her dress and spring to her man's aid. But she looked up as if with indifference, and once more went back to her work.

Bill was considerably heartened. At least he didn't have to deal with the savage love that sometimes the Indian women bore the whites. Sindy was evidently wholly indifferent to Harold's fate. The match obviously had not been a great success.

For an instant Harold lay still, crumpled on the floor; then his bleeding hands fumbled at his belt. Once more Bill sprang and snatched him to his feet. The holster, however, was empty.

"No more of that," Bill cautioned. The man's eyes smoldered with resentment, but for the moment he was cowed. "Before you start anything more, hear what I've got to offer you." His voice lowered, and the words came rather painfully. "It's your one chance, Lounsbury—to come back. Virginia Tremont has come into the North, looking for you. She's at my camp. She wants to take you back with her."

Lounsbury's breath caught with a strange, sobbing sound. "Virginia—up here?" he cried. "Does she know about—this—?" He indicated the cabin interior, and all it meant, with one sweep of his arm.

"Of course not. How could she? Whether you tell her or not is a matter for you and she to decide. She's come to find you—and bring you back."

"My God! To the States?"

"Of course."

For the instant the black wrath had left his face, and his thought swung backward to his own youth,—to the days he had known Virginia in a far-off city. He was more than a little awed at this manifestation of her love. He supposed that she had forgotten him long since and had never dreamed that she would search for him here.

Once more the expression of his face changed, and Bill couldn't have explained the wave of revulsion that surged through him. He only knew a blind desire to tear with his strong fingers those leering lips before him. Harold was lost in insidious speculations. He remembered the girl's beauty, the grace and liveness of her form, the holy miracle of her kisses. Opposite him sat his squaw,—swarthy, unclean, shapeless, comely as squaws go but as far from Virginia as night was from day. Perhaps it wasn't too late yet—

But at that instant he heard the East Wind on the roof, and he recalled that the old problem of existence faced him still. He had solved it up here. His cabin was warm, he was full-fed; the squaw grubbed his living for him out of the frozen forests. He did not want to be forced to face the competition of civilized existence again. He was dirty, care-free; his furs supplied food and clothes for him and certain rags for her, and filled his cupboard with strong drink. He remembered that the girl had had no money, and that he had come first to the North to find gold. If he had succeeded, if his poke were heavy with the yellow metal, he could go back to his city and take up his old life anew, but he couldn't begin at the bottom. With wealth at his command he might even find a more desirable woman than Virginia: perhaps the years had changed her even as himself. There was no need of dreaming further about the matter. Only one course, considering the circumstances, lay before him.

"You're very kind," he said at last. "But I won't go. Tell her you didn't find me."

Bill straightened and sighed. "Make no mistake about that, Lounsbury," he answered. "You're going with me—" and then he spoke softly, a pause between each word—"if I have to drag you there through the snow. I was told to bring you back, and I'm going to do it."

"You are, eh?" Harold scowled and tried to find courage to attack this man again. Yet his muscles hung limp, and he couldn't even raise his eyes to meet those that looked so steadfastly at him now.

"Sindy can go home to Buckshot Dan. He'll take her back—you stole her from him. And you, Lounsbury, rotten as you are, are coming with me. God knows I hope she'll drive you from her door; but I'm going to bring you, just the same."

Harold's eyes glowed, and for the moment his brain was too busy with other considerations openly to resent the words. Then his face grew cunning. It was all plain enough: Bill loved

Virginia himself. Through some code of ethics that was almost incredible to Harold, he was willing to sacrifice his own happiness for hers. And the way to pay for the rough treatment he had just had, treatment that he couldn't, at present at least, avenge in kind, was to win the girl away from him. The thing was already done. She loved him enough to search even the frozen realms of the North for him: simply by a little tenderness, a little care, he could command her to love to the full again. The fact that Bill wanted her made her infinitely more desirable to him.

"You won't tell her—about Sindy?"

"Not as long as you're decent. That's for you to settle for yourself—whether she finds out about her."

Harold believed him. While he himself would have used the smirch as a weapon against his rival, he knew that Bill meant what he said. "I'll go," he announced. "If she's at the Gray Lake cabin, we've got plenty of time to make it before dark."

XV

Harold Lounsbury found to his surprise that they were not to start at once. It soon became evident that Bill had certain other matters on his mind.

"Build a fire and put on some water to heat—fill up every pan you have," he instructed Sindy. He himself began to cram their little stove with wood. Harold watched with ill-concealed anxiety.

"What's that for?" he asked at last.

Bill straightened up and faced him. "You didn't think I was going to take you looking like you do, do you—into Virginia's presence? The first thing on the program is—a bath."

Harold flushed: the red glow was evident even through the sooty accumulation on his face. "It seems to me you're going a little outside your authority as Miss Tremont's representative. I don't know that I need to have any hillbilly tell me when I need a bath."

"Yes?" Bill's eyes twinkled—for the first time during their talk. "Hillbilly is right—in contrast to a cultured gentleman of cities. But let me correct you. You may not know it, but I do. And you need one now." He turned once more to Sindy. "And see what you can do about this gentleman's clothes, too; if he's got any clean underwear or any other togs, load 'em out."

"Anything else?" Harold asked sarcastically.

"Several things. Have you got any kind of a razor?"

"No. I don't want one either."

"Better look around and find one. If you don't, I'll be obliged to shave you with my jackknife—and it will be inclined to pull. It's sharp enough for skinning grizzlies but not for that growth of yours. And I'll try to trim your hair up for you a little, too. When you bathe, bathe all over—don't spare your face or your hair. Water may seem strange at first, but you'll get used to it. And I'll go over and sit with Joe Robinson and his friend until you are ready. The surroundings are more appetizing. If you can polish yourself well in an hour, we'll make it through to-night."

Harold's heart burned, but he acquiesced. Then Bill turned and left him to his ablutions.

Less than an hour later Harold came mushing up the lean-to where Bill waited. And the hour had wrought a profound and amazing change in the man's appearance. He had conscientiously gone to work to cleanse himself, and he had succeeded. His hair, dull before, was a glossy dark-brown now; he had shaved off the matted growth about his lips, leaving only a small, neat mustache; his hair was trimmed and carefully parted. The man's skin had also resumed its natural shade.

For the first time Bill realized that Harold was really a rather handsome man. His features were much more regular than Bill's own. The lips were fine,—just a little too fine, in fact, giving an intangible but unmistakable hint of cruelty. The only thing that had not changed was his eyes. They were as smoldering and wolfish as ever.

By Bill's instructions he had loaded his back with blankets, his pistol was at his belt, and he carried a thirty-five rifle in the hollow of his arm.

"I'm ready," he said gruffly.

"I'm glad to hear it." Bill glanced at his watch. "It's late, but by mushing fast we can make it in by dark. I told Virginia that I'd likely need an extra day at least—she'll think I've worked fast."

She'd know it—if she had seen how you looked an hour ago. I was counting on finding you somewhere along the Yuga."

"We moved up—a few weeks ago."

"There's one other thing, before we start. I want you to tell these understrappers of yours to take that squaw and clear out of Clearwater. Tell 'em to take her back where she belongs—to Buckshot Dan. He'll take her in, all right. I've been working in Miss Tremont's interests until now—now I'm working in my own. This happens to be my trapping country. If I come back in a few weeks and find them still here there's apt to be some considerable shedding of a bad mixture of bad blood. In other words—skin out while you yet can."

The half-breeds, understanding perfectly, looked to Harold for confirmation. The latter had already learned several lessons of importance this day, and he didn't really care to learn any more. His answer was swift.

"Go, as he says," Harold directed.

Their dark faces grew sullen. The idea was evidently not to their favor. Then one asked a question in the Indian vernacular.

Bill was alert at once. Here was a situation that he couldn't handle. Harold glanced once at his face, saw by his expression that he was baffled, and answered in the same language. From the tone of his voice Bill would have said that he uttered a promise.

Once more the Indian questioned, and Harold hesitated an instant, as if seeking an answer. It seemed to the other white man that his eye fell to the rifle that Bill carried. Then he spoke again, gesturing. The gesture that he made was four fingers, as if in an instinctive motion, held before the Indian's eyes. Then he announced that he was ready to go.

The afternoon was almost done when they started out. The distant trees were already dim; phantoms were gathered in the spaces between the trunks. The two mused swiftly through the snow.

Bill had enough memory of that glance to his rifle to prefer to walk behind, keeping a close eye on Harold. Yet he could see no reason on earth why the man should make any attempt upon his life. The trip was to Harold's own advantage.

He had plenty of time to think in the long walk to his cabin. Only the snowy forest lay about him: the only sound was the crunch of their shoes in the snow, and there was nothing to distract him. Now that it was evident that Harold had no designs upon his life, he walked with bowed head, a dark luster in his eyes.

He had fulfilled his contract and found the missing man. Even now he was showing him the way to Virginia. He wondered if he had been a fool to have sacrificed his own happiness for an unworthy rival. The world grew dreary and dark about him.

He had tried to hide his own tragedy by a mask of brusqueness, even a grim humor when he had given his orders to Harold. But he hadn't deceived himself. His heart had been leading within him. Now he even felt the beginnings of bitterness, but he crushed them down with all the power of his will. He mustn't let himself grow bitter, at least,—black and hating and jealous. Rather he must follow his star, believe yet in its beauty and its fidelity, and never look at it through glasses darkly. He must take what fate had given him and be content,—a few wonderful weeks that could never come again. He had had his fling of happiness; the day was at an end.

It was true. As if by a grim symbolism, darkness fell over Clearwater. The form in front of him grew dim, ghostly, yet well he knew its reality. The distant trunks blurred, faded, and were obliterated; the trees, swept and hidden by the snow, were like silent ghosts that faded; the whole vista was like a scene in a strange and tragic dream.

The silence seemed to press him down like a malignant weight. The mysterious and eerie sorrow of the northern night went home to him as never before.

He knew all too well the outcome of this day's work. There would be a few little moments of gratitude from Virginia; perhaps in the joy of the reunion she would even forget to give him this. He would try to smile at her, to wish her happiness; he would fight to make his voice sound like his own. She would take Harold to her heart the same as ever. He had not the least hope of any other consummation. Now that Harold was shaved and clean he was a handsome youth, and all the full sweep of her old love would go to him in an instant. In fact, her love had already gone to him—across thousands of miles of weary wasteland—and through that love she had come clear up to these terrible wilds to find him.

His speech, his bearing seemed already changed. He was remembering that he was a gentleman, one of Virginia's own kind. He already looked the part. Perhaps he was already on the way toward true regeneration. It was better that he should be, for Virginia's happiness. Her happiness—this had been the motive and the theme of Bill's work clear through: it was his one consolation now. In a few days the snow crust would be firm enough to trust, and hand in hand

they would go down toward Bradleyburg. He would see the joy in their faces, the old luster of which he himself had dreamed in Virginia's eyes. But it would not flow out to him. The holy miracle would not raise him from the dead. He would serve her to the last, and when at length they saw the roofs and tottering chimneys of Bradleyburg she would go out of his work and out of his life, never to return. In their native city Harold Lounsbury would take his old place. He's have his uncle's fortune to aid him in is struggle for success. The test of existence was not so hard down there; he might be wholly able to hold Virginia's respect and love, and make her happy. Such was Bill's last prayer.

They were nearing the cabin now. They saw the candlelight, like a pale ghost, in the window. Virginia was still up, reading, perhaps, before the fire. She didn't guess what happiness Bill was bringing her across the snow.

Bill could fancy her, bright eyes intent, face a little thoughtful, perhaps, but tender as the eyes of angels. He could see her hair burnished in the candlelight, the soft, gracious beauty of her face. Her lips, too,—he couldn't forget those lips of hers. A shudder of cold passed over his frame.

He strode forward and put his hand on Harold's arm. "Wait," he commanded. "There's one thing more."

Harold paused, and the darkness was not so dense but that this face was vaguely revealed, sullen and questioning.

"There's one thing more," Bill repeated again. "I've brought you here. I've given you your chance—for redemption. God knows if I had my choice I'd have killed you first. She's not going to know about the squaw, unless you tell her. These matters are all for you to decide, I won't interfere."

He paused, and Harold waited. And his eager ears caught the faint throb of feeling in the low, almost muttered notes.

"But don't forget I'm there," he went on. "I work for her—until she goes out of my charge and I'm her guide, her protector, the guardian of her happiness. That's all I care about—her happiness. I don't know whether or not I did wrong to bring a squaw man to her—but if you're man enough to hold her love and make her happy, it doesn't matter. But I give—one warning."

His voice changed. It took on a quality of infinite and immutable prophecy In the darkness and the silence, the voice might have come from some higher realm, speaking the irrevocable will of the forest gods.

"She'll be more or less in your power at times, up here. I won't be with you every minute. But if you take one jot of advantage of that fact—either in word or deed—I'll break you and smash you and kill you in my hands!"

He waited an instant for the words to go home. Harold shivered as if with cold. And because in his mind already lay the vision of their meeting, he uttered one more sentence of instructions. He was a strong man, this son of the forest—and no man dared deny the trait—but he could not steel himself to see that first kiss. The sight of the girl, fluttering and enraptured in Harold's arms, the soft loveliness of her lips on his, was more than he could bear.

"Go on in," he said. "She's waiting for you."

And she was. She had waited six years, dreaming all the while of his return. Harold went in, and left his savior to the doubtful mercy of the winter forest, the darkness that had crept into his heart, and the hush that might have been the utter silence of death itself had it not been for the image of a faint, enraptured cry, the utterance of dreams come true, within the cabin door.

XVI

When Virginia heard the tramp of feet on her threshold she didn't dream but that Bill had returned a day earlier than he had planned. Her heart gave a queer little flutter of relief. The cabin had been lonely to-night, the silence had oppressed her; most of all she had dreaded the long night without the comforting reassurance of his presence. She wouldn't have admitted, even to herself, that her comfort was so dependent upon this man. And she sprang up, joyously as a bird springing from a bough, to welcome him.

The next instant she stopped, appalled. The door did not open, the steps did not cross her threshold. Instead, knuckles rapped feebly on the door.

Even in a city, it is a rather discomfoting experience for a girl, alone in a home at night, to

answer a tap on the door. Here in this awful silence and solitude she was simply and wholly terrified. She hadn't dreamed that there was a stranger within many miles of the cabin. For an instant she didn't know what to do. The knock sounded again.

But Virginia had acquired a certain measure of self-discipline in these weary weeks, and her mind at once flashed to her pistol. Fortunately she had not taken it from her belt, and she had full confidence in her ability to shoot it quickly and well. Besides, she remembered that her door was securely bolted.

"Who's there?" she asked. "Is it you, Bill?"

"It's not Bill," the answer came. "But he's here."

The first thought that came to her was that Bill had been injured, hurt in some adventure in the snow, and men had brought him back to the cabin. Something that was like a sickness surged through her frame. But an instant more she knew that, had he been injured, there would have been no wayfarers to find him and bring him in. There was only one remaining possibility: that this man was one whom Bill had gone out to find and who had returned with him.

The thought was so startling, so fraught with tremendous possibilities that for a moment she seemed to lose all power of speech or action.

"Who is it?" she asked again, steadily as she could.

And the answer came strange and stirring through the heavy door. "It's I—Harold Lounsbury. Bill told me to come."

Virginia was oppressed and baffled as if in a mysterious dream. For the moment she stood still, trying to quiet her leaping heart and her fluttering nerves. Yet she knew she had to make answer. She knew that she must find out whether this voice spoke true—whether or not it was her lost lover, returned to her at last.

Yet there could be no mistake. The voice was the same that she remembered of old. It was as if it had spoken out of the dead years. Her hands clasped at her breast, then she walked to the threshold and opened the door.

Harold Lounsbury stepped through, blinking in the candlelight. Instinctively the girl flung back, giving him full right of way and staring as if he were a ghost. He turned to her, half apologetic. "Bill told me to come," he said.

The man stood with arms limp at his side, and a great surge of mingled emotions swept the girl as in a flood. She was pale as a ghost, and her hands trembled when she stretched them out. "Harold," she murmured unsteadily. She tried to smile. "Is it really you, Harold?"

"It's I," he answered. "We've come together—at last."

The words seemed to rally her scattered faculties. The dreamlike quality of the scene at once dissolved. Utter and bewildering surprise is never an emotion that can long endure; its very quality makes for brevity. Already some leveling, cool sense within her had begun to accept the fact of his presence.

Instinctively her eyes swept his face and form. All doubt was past: this man was unquestionably Harold. Yet she was secretly and vaguely shocked. Her first impression was one of change: that the years had some way altered him,—other than the natural changes that no living creature may escape.

In reality his face had aged but little. He had worn just such a mustache when he went away. Perhaps his eyes were changed: for the moment she thought that they were, and the change repelled her and estranged her. His mouth was not quite right, either; his form, though powerful, had lost some of its youthful trimness.

It seemed to her, for one fleeting instant, that there was a brutality in his expression that she had never seen before. But at once the reaction came. Of course these northern forests had changed him. He had fought with the cold and the snow, with all the primeval forces of nature: he had simply hardened and matured. It was true that the calm strength of Bill's face was not to be seen in his. Nevertheless he was clean, stalwart, and his embarrassment was a credit to him rather than a discredit.

This thought was the beginning of the reaction that in a moment grasped her and held her. The truth suddenly flamed clear and bright: that Harold Lounsbury had returned to her arms. Her search was over. She had won. He stood before her, alive and well. He had come back to her. Her effort had been crowned with success.

He was her old lover, in the flesh. Of course she would experience some shock on first meeting him, see some changes; but they were nothing that should keep her from him. He seized her hands in both of his. "Virginia," he cried. "My God, I can't believe it's you!"

She remained singularly cool in the ardor of this cry. "Why didn't you write?" she asked. "Why

didn't you come home?"

The questions, instead of embarrassing him further, put Harold at his ease. He was on safe grounds now. He had prepared for just these queries, on the long walk to the cabin.

"I did write," he cried. "Why didn't you answer?"

The words came glib to his lips. She stared at him in amazement. "You did—you say you wrote to me?" she asked him, deeply moved.

"Wrote? I wrote a dozen times. And I never received a word—except from Jules Nathan."

"But Jules Nathan—Jules Nathan is dead!"

"He is?" But Harold's surprise was feigned. This was one piece of news that had trickled through the wastes to him,—of the death of Jules Nathan, a man known to them both. It was safe to have heard from him. The contents of the letter could never be verified. "He told me—after I'd written many times, and never got an answer—that you were engaged to be married—to a Chicago man. I thought you'd forgotten me. I thought you'd been untrue."

Virginia held hard on her faculties and balanced his words. She had known Chicago men during the six years that she had moved in the most exalted social circles of her own city. The story held water, even if she had been inclined to doubt it. She knew it was always easy for an engagement rumor to start and be carried far, when a prominent girl was involved. "I didn't get your letters," she told him. "Are you sure you addressed them right—"

"I thought so——"

"And you didn't get mine——"

"No—not after the first few days. I changed my address—but I told you of the change in a letter. I never heard from you after that."

"Then it's all been a misunderstanding—a cruel mistake. And you thought I had forgotten——"

"I thought you'd married some one else. I couldn't believe it when Bill came to my cabin to-day and told me you were here—I've been trapping over toward the Yuga. And now—we're together at last."

But curiously these last words cost her her self-possession. Instantly she was ill at ease. The reestablishment of their old relation could only come gradually: although she had not anticipated it, the six years of separation had wrought their changes. She felt that she needed time to become adjusted to him—just as a man who has been blind needs time to become adjusted to his vision. And at once their proximity, in this lonely cabin, was oddly embarrassing.

"Where's Bill?" she asked. She turned to the door and called. "Bill, where are you?"

His voice seemed quite his own when he answered from the stillness of the night. "I'll be in in a moment—I was just getting a load of wood."

It wasn't true. He had been standing dumb and inert in the darkness, his thoughts wandering afar. But he began hastily to fill his arms with fuel. Virginia turned back to her new-found lover.

She was a little frightened by the expression on his face. His eyes were glowing, the color had risen in his cheeks, he was curiously eager and breathless. "Before he comes," he urged. "We've been apart so long——"

His hands reached out and seized hers. He drew her toward him. She didn't resist: she felt a deep self-annoyance that she didn't crave his kiss. She fought away her unwonted fear; perhaps when his lips met hers everything would be the same again, and her long-awaited happiness would be complete. He crushed her to him, and his kiss was greedy.

Yet it was cold upon her lips. She struggled from his arms, and he looked at her in startled amazement. In fact, she was amazed at herself. When she had time to think it over, alone in her bed at night, she decided that her desperate struggle had been merely an attempt to free herself from his arms before Bill came in and saw them. She only knew that she didn't want this comrade of hers, this stalwart forester, to see her in Harold's embrace. But in the second of the act she had known a blind fear, almost a repulsion, and an overwhelming desire to escape.

She turned with a radiant smile to welcome the tall form that strode in, looking neither to the right nor left, arms heaped with wood. She found, much to her surprise, that she felt more at ease after Bill came in. She asked him how he had happened to get trace of the missing man; he answered in an even, almost expressionless tone that somehow puzzled her. Then she launched desperately into that old life-saver in moments of embarrassment,—a discussion of the fates and fortunes of mutual acquaintances.

"But I'm tired, Harold," she told him in an hour. "The surprise of seeing you has been—well, too much for me. I believe I'll go to my room. It's behind that curtain."

Harold rose eagerly as if something was due him in the moment of parting; Bill got up in respect to her. But her glance was impartial. A moment later she was gone.

The first night Bill and Harold made bunks on the floor of the cabin, but health and propriety decreed that such an arrangement could only be temporary. They could not put their trust in an immediate deliverance. They might be imprisoned for weeks to come. And Bill solved the problem with a single suggestion.

They would build a small cabin for the two men to sleep in. Many times he had erected such a structure by his own efforts; the two of them could push it up in a few hours' work.

Harold had no fondness for toil of this kind, but he couldn't see how he could well avoid it. His indifference to his own fate was quite past by now. The single moment before Bill had entered the cabin door had thoroughly wakened his keenest interests and desires; already, he thought, he had entirely re-established his relations with Virginia. He was as anxious to make good now as she was to have him. Already he thought himself once more a man and a gentleman of the great outside world. His vanity was heightened; the girl's beauty had increased, if anything, since his departure; and he was more than ready to go through the adventure to its end. And he didn't dare run the risk of displeasing Virginia so soon after their meeting.

He knew how she stood on the matter. He had ventured to make one protest,—and one had been quite enough. "I'm really not much good at cabin building," he had said. "But I don't see why Bill shouldn't go work at it. I suppose you hired him for all camp work."

For an instant Virginia had stared at him in utter wonder, and then a swift look of grave displeasure had come into her face. "You forget, Harold, that it was Bill that brought you back. The thirty days he was hired for were gone long ago." But she had softened at once. "It's your duty to help him, and I'll help him too, if I can."

They had cut short logs, cleaned away the snow, and with the strength of their shoulders lifted the logs one upon another. With his ax Bill cunningly cut the saddles, carving them down so that the rainfall would drain down the corners rather than lie in the cavities and thus rot the timbers. Planks were cut for the roof, and tree boughs laid down for the floor.

The floor space was only seven feet long by eight wide—just enough for two bunks—and the walls were about as high as a sleeping-car berth. The work was done at the day's end.

In the next few days Bill mostly left the two together, trying to find his consolation in the wild life of the forest world outside the cabin. Harold had taken advantage of his absence and had made good progress: Virginia's period of readjustment was almost complete. She was prepared to make the joys of the future atone for the sorrows of the past.

Harold was still good-looking, she thought; his speech, though breaking careless at times, was attractive and charming; and most of all his love-making was more arduous than ever. In the city life that they planned he would fit in well; his uncle would help him to get on his feet. Fortunately for their peace of mind, they did not know the real truth,—that Kenly Lounsbury himself was at that moment struggling with financial problems that were about to overwhelm him. She told herself, again and again, that her life would be all that she had dreamed, that her fondest hopes had come true. A few weeks more of the snow and the waste places,—and then they could start life anew.

Yet there was something vaguely sinister, something amiss in the fact that she found herself repeating the thought so many times. It was almost as if she were trying to reassure herself, to drown out some whispering inner voice of doubt and fear. She couldn't get away from a haunting feeling that, in an indescribable way, her relations with Harold had changed.

His ardent speeches didn't seem to waken sufficient response in her own breast. She lacked the ecstasy, the wonder that she had known when, as a girl, she had first become engaged to Harold. They embarrassed her rather than thrilled her; they didn't seem quite real. Perhaps she had simply grown older. That was it: some of her girlish romance had died a natural death. She would give his man her love, would take his in return, and they would have the usual, normal happiness of marriage. All would come out well, once they got away from the silence and the snows.

Perhaps his large and extravagant speeches were merely out of place in the stark reality of the wilderness; they could thrill her as ever when she returned to her native city. Likely he could dance, after a little practice, as well as ever; fill his niche in society and give her all the happiness that woman has a right to expect upon this imperfect earth. There was certainly nothing to be distressed over now. They had been brought together as if by a miracle; any haunting doubt and fear, too subtle and intangible to put into words or even concrete thought, would quickly pass away.

She did not, however, go frequently into his arms. Someway, an embarrassment, a sense of inappropriateness and unrest always assailed her when he tried to claim the caresses that he felt

were his due. And at first she could not find a plausible explanation for her reserve. Perhaps these tendernesses were also out of place in the grim reality of the North; more likely, she decided, it was a subtle sense, the guardian angel of her own integrity, warning her that too intimate relations with that man must be avoided, isolated and exiled as they were. "Not now, Harold," she would tell him. "Not until we're established again—at home."

Finally his habits and his actions did not quite meet with her approval. The first of these was only a little thing,—a failure to keep shaved. Shaving in these surroundings, without a mirror, with a battered old razor that had lain long in the cabin and had to be sharpened on a whetstone, where every drop of hot water used had to be laboriously heated on the stove, was an annoying chore at best: besides, there was no one to see him except Virginia and the guide. The stubble matted and grew on his lips and jowls. Bill, in contrast, shaved with greatest care every evening. A more important point was that his avoidance of his proper share of Bill's daily toil. He neither hewed wood nor drew water, nor made any apologies for the omission. Rather he gave the idea that Bill's services were due him by rights.

There was a little explosion, one afternoon, when he ventured to advise her in regard to her relations with Bill. The forester himself was cutting wood outside the cabin: they heard the mighty ring of his ax against the tough spruce. Virginia was at work preparing their simple evening meal; Harold was stretched on her own cot, the curtain drawn back, his arms under his head, his unshaven face curiously dark and unprepossessing.

"You must begin to keep on your own ground—with Bill, Virginia," he began in the silence.

Virginia turned to him, a wave of hot resentment flowing clear to her finger tips. If he had seen her flushed, intent face he would have backed ground quickly. Unfortunately he was gazing quietly out the window.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Wholly aware of her own displeasure, wondering at it and anxious to hide it, she was able to control her voice. Its tone gave no key to her thoughts. Harold answered her, still unwarned:

"I mean—keep him at his distance. He's a different sort from you and I. I don't mean he isn't all right, as far as his kind goes—but he hasn't had the advantages." Harold spoke tolerantly, patronizingly. "Those fellows are apt to take advantage of any familiarity. They're all right if you keep 'em in their place—but they're mighty likely to break lose from it any minute. I'm sorry you ever let him call you Virginia."

Virginia's eyes blazed. If it is one of the precepts of good breeding ever to let anger control the spirit, Virginia had made a breach indeed. Her little hands clenched, and she had a fierce and insane desire to beat those babbling lips with her fists. Then she struggled to regain her composure.

"Listen, Harold," she began at last coldly. "I don't care to hear any more such talk as that."

The man looked up then. He saw the righteous indignation in her face. He felt the rising tide of his own anger. "I'm only trying to warn you——" he began weakly.

"And I don't need or want any such warnings. I don't care what you think of Bill—for that matter, you can be sure that Bill doesn't care at all either—but I'll ask you to keep your thoughts to yourself. Oh, if you only knew—how good, how strong, how true he has been—how tender he has been to me——"

Harold was torn with jealous rage, and in his fury and malice he made the worst mistake of all. "I hope he hasn't been *too* tender——" he suggested viciously.

But at once he was on his feet, begging her pardon. He knew that he had made a dangerous and regrettable mistake. She forgave him—forgiveness was as much a part of her as her graciousness or her loyalty—but she didn't immediately forget. And Harold sat long hours with smoldering eyes and clenched hands, a climbing fire and fury in his brain, while the malice and resentment and jealousy that he held toward Bill grew to hatred, bitter and black.

XVII

The addition of Harold to their number did not influence, for long, Virginia's old relations with Bill. They were comrades as ever; they talked and chatted around the little stove in the hushed nights; they played their favorite melodies on the battered phonograph, and they took the same joyous, exciting expeditions into the wild. These latter diversions were looked upon with no favor by Harold, but he couldn't see how he could reasonably interfere. Nor did he care, at first, to accompany them. He had no love for the snow-swept wastes.

The crust on the snow was steadily strengthening; most the days were clear and excessively cold. The journey could be undertaken soon. Only a few more days of the adventure remained.

Their excursions at first were a matter of pleasure only, but by one unexpected stroke from the sinister powers of the wild they were suddenly made necessary. Her first knowledge of the blow came when Bill entered her cabin to build the morning fire.

She had not yet risen. It had always been her practice to wait till the room was snug and warm before she dressed. She was asleep when Bill came in, and aroused by his footsteps, she was aware of the fleeting memory of unhappy dreams. She couldn't have told just what they were. It seemed to her that some unseen danger had been menacing her security,—that evil and dangerous forces were conspiring and making war against her. Hidden foes were in ambush, ready to pounce forth.

The danger seemed different and beyond that which she had faced every day: snow and cold and the other inanimate forces of the wild. And she was vastly relieved to hear Bill's voice calling her from sleep.

But the next instant her fears returned—not the ghastly fear of evil dreams but of actual and real disaster. It wasn't Bill's usual custom to waken her. He wanted her to spend as many as possible of the monotonous hours in sleep. There was a subdued quality in his voice, too, that once or twice she had heard before. She drew aside the curtain, far enough to see his face. There was no paleness, however, nor no fear, for all that his eyes were sober.

"You'd better get up as soon as you can, Virginia," he said. "We've got to take a real hunt to-day."

"Hunt? After meat?"

"Yes. We're face to face with a new problem. The pack came by last night—the wolf pack. As usual, when men are near, they didn't make a sound. I didn't hear them at all. And they got away with the big moose ham, hanging on the spruce. Stripped the bone clean."

"Then we're out of meat?"

"All except the little piece outside the door. We've been going through it pretty fast."

Bill spoke true. Their meat consumption had practically doubled since Harold had come. For all his lack of physical exercise, the latter was an unusually heavy eater.

"But we won't be able to find any now. The moose are gone——"

"We're not very likely to, that's certain; but it won't be a tragedy if we don't. It would only be an annoyance. It's true that we've got to have more supplies to start down—I don't believe we could make it through with what we have, considering the loss of this ham—but if it's necessary I can mush over to me Twenty-three Mile cabin and get the supplies I left over there. Harold tells me he hasn't a thing in his old place. However, I can do it, if we don't happen to pick up some meat to-day."

"We might track down the wolves, and get one of those——"

"Wolf meat hasn't a flavor you'd care for, I'm afraid. The Indians have been known to eat it, but they can but away beaver and tough old grizzly bear. Those things are starvation meats only. But if you care to, we can dash out and see if we can pick up a young caribou or a left-over moose. It's pleasant out to-day, anyway. It's rather warm—I believe there's going to be a change of weather."

"Good or bad?" the girl asked.

"Haven't had any government bulletins on that point, this morning. Probably bad. The weather in the North, Virginia, goes along the way it is a while, and then it gets worse."

She dressed, and at breakfast their exultation over their trip grew painful to Harold's ears. He announced his intention of going along.

Curiously, even Virginia did not receive this announcement with particular enthusiasm. It was not that her regard for Bill was any kin to that she held for Harold. Rather, it was a fear that Harold's presence might blunt the edge of the fine companionship she enjoyed with the woodsman. It would throw a personal element into an otherwise care-free and adventurous day. But she smiled at him, rather fondly.

"Just as you like, Harold."

They put on their snowshoes, their warmest wraps, and started gayly forth. Bill took rather a new course to-day. He bent his steps toward a stream that he called Creek Despair,—named for the fact that he had once held high hopes of finding his lost mine along its waters, only to meet an utter and hopeless failure. From the map he had judged that the lost claim lay somewhere along its course, but he had washed it from its mother springs clear to its mouth, finding scarcely

the faintest traces in the pan. Because he had made such a tireless search in this particular section in previous years he had completely avoided it in the present adventure. Even on his pleasure trips with Virginia he had never forgotten his search: thus he had led her into more favorable regions where he might reasonably keep his eyes over for clues. Now that he had given up finding the claim—for this season, at least, and perhaps forever—one way was as good as another. And he remembered that an old caribou trail lay just beyond the stream on the steep hillside.

Bill led the way, mushing quietly and swiftly, and Virginia sped after him. The cold had brought a high color to her cheeks and a luster to her eyes; her nerves and muscles tingled with life. She was in wonderful spirits. Never she took a hundred paces without experiencing some sort of a little, heart-gladdening adventure.

Every manifestation of the forest life about her filled her with delight. The beauty of the winter woods, the absorbing record that the wild creatures had left in the snow, the long sweep of range and valley that she could glimpse from a still hilltop, all had their joy for her. With Bill she found something to delight her, something to make her laugh and quicken her blood, in every hundred yards of their course. Sometimes when the snow record was obscure, Bill stopped and explained, usually with a graphic story and unconscious humor that made the woods tingle and ring with her joyous, rippling laughter. More than often, however, she was able to piece out the mystery by herself.

Bill had a long and highly fanciful conversation with a little, black-tailed ermine that tried to run under his feet; he imitated—to Virginia's delight, the spectacle of a large and stiff cow moose pulling herself through the mud; he repeated for her the demented cries of the loons that they had sometimes heard from the still waters of Gray Lake. But he didn't forget that the main purpose of their expedition was to hunt. When at last they reached the caribou range he commanded silence.

Harold, silent in the others' gayety, immediately evinced a decided inclination to talk. He had not particularly enjoyed the excursion so far. In the first place he had no love either for the winter forest or the creatures that inhabited it; he would have been much more comfortable and at ease beside the cabin stove. He couldn't much with comfort at Bill's regular pace: he was rather out of breath and irritated after the first two hundred rods. Most of all, he was savagely conscious of the fact that Virginia was not giving him a rightful share of her attention. For the time being she seemed to have forgotten his presence. He was resentful, wishing disaster upon the hunt, eager to turn back.

"The rule is silence, from now on," Virginia answered his first remark. "Bill says we're in a game country."

The answer didn't satisfy him. But his heart suddenly leaped when Bill glanced back in warning and pointed to an entrancing wilderness picture, a hundred yards in front.

In a little glade and framed by the forest stood a large bull caribou, flashing and incredibly vivid against the snow. There is no animal in all North American fauna, even the bull elk, that presents a more splendid figure than that huge member of the deer family, Osburn's caribou. His mane is snow white, his back and sides a glossy brown, his eye flashes, and his antlers—in the season that he carries them—stream back like young trees. The bull did not stir out of his tracks, yet he gave the impression of infinite movement and pulsing, quivering vitality. He shook and threw his head, he lifted his fore foot nervously, and framed by the winter forest he was a sight never to forget. Incidentally he made a first-class target,—one that seemed impossible to miss.

"I'll take him," Harold shouted. "Let me take him."

In a flash Harold realized that here was his opportunity: in one stroke, one easy shot, he could turn the day's ignominy into triumph. He could focus Virginia's admiration upon himself. But the impulse had even deeper significances. It was not the way of sportsmen, wandering in file on mountain trails, to clamor for the first shot at game. Whatever is said is usually in solicitation to a companion to shoot; and Virginia felt oddly embarrassed. Harold's gun leaped to his shoulder.

But in the fields of sport there is always a penalty for extreme eagerness. There is a retributive justice for those that attempt to grasp opportunities. Harold was afraid that Bill might raise and shoot, thus rubbing him of his triumph, and he pressed back against the trigger just a fifth of a second too soon. The target looked too big to miss, but his bullet flung up the snow behind the animal.

The caribou's powerful limbs pushed out a mighty leap. Frenzied, Harold shot again; but his nerve was broken and his self-control blown to the four winds. The animal had gained the shelter of the thickets by now, and Harold's third and fourth shots went wild. Then he lowered his weapon with a curse.

It is part of the creed of a certain type of hunter to never admit a clean miss. "My sights are off," Harold shouted. "They didn't shoot within three feet of where I aimed. Damn such a gun—but I think I wounded him the third shot. You'll find him dead if you follow him long enough."

Bill answered nothing, but went to see. In the firing he hadn't even raised his own gun to his shoulder. There is a certain code among hunters in regard to shooting another's game: an unwritten law that, except in a case of life and death, one hunter does not interfere with another's shooting. It was through no desire to embarrass Harold that he didn't assist him in putting down his trophy. He was simply giving the man full play. Bill stared at the caribou tracks in the snow, followed them a hundred feet, and then came mushing back.

"You didn't seem to have put one in," he reported simply.

"I didn't, eh?" Harold answered angrily. "How could you tell, so soon? I suppose you're woodsman enough to know that a wounded animal doesn't always show blood. I'd be ready to bet that if we followed him far enough we'd find him dead."

"We'd have to follow him till he died naturally of old age," was the good-humored reply. "We can't always hit, Lounsbury. He began to trot when he got into the trees—a perfectly normal gait. I think we'd better look for something else."

"Then I want you to carry my gun awhile, and let me take yours. The sights are off a mile. It's all ready, and here's a handful of extra shells. You ought to be willing to do that, at least."

Harold had forgotten that this man was not his personal guide, subject to his every wish. He held out gun and shells; and, smiling, Bill received them, giving his own weapon in exchange. They mushed on down the trail.

But Harold's miss had not been his greater sin. To miss is human; no true sportsman holds it against his fellow. The omission that followed, however, was by all the codes of the hunting trails unpardonable. He supposed that he had refilled his rifle magazine with shells before he put it in Bill's hands. In his confusion and anger, he had forgotten to do so; and the only load that the gun contained was that in the barrel, thrown in automatically when the last empty shell was ejected.

XVIII

Several seasons before there had been a fatality on the hillside above Creek Despair. An ancient spruce tree, one that had watched the forest drama for uncounted years, whose tall head lifted above all the surrounding forest and who had known the silence and the snow of a hundred winters, had languished, withered and died from sheer old age. For some seasons it had stood in its place, silent and grim and majestic in death. On the day that the three hunters emerged on their snowshoes in search of meat for their depleted larder, the wind pressed gently against it. Because its trunk was rotted away it swayed and fell heavily.

There was nothing particularly memorable in this. All trees die; all of them fall at last. Its particular significance lay in the fact that as it shattered down, sliding a distance on the steep hillside, it scraped the snow from the mouth of a winter lair of a scarcely less venerable forest inhabitant,—a savage, long-clawed, gray-furred grizzly bear.

The creature had gone into hibernation weeks before: he was deep in the cold-trance—that mysterious coma of which the wisest naturalists have no real knowledge—when the tree fell. He hadn't in the least counted on being disturbed until the leaves budded out in spring. He had filled his belly well, crawled into a long, narrow cavern in the rock, the snow had sifted down and sealed him in, his bodily heat had warmed to a sufficient degree the little alcove in the cavern that he occupied, his blood temperature had dropped down and his breathing had almost ceased, and he had lain in a deep, strange stupor, oblivious to the passage of time. And he felt the rage known to all sleepy men on being awakened.

The grizzly is a particularly crafty, intelligent animal—on the intellectual plane of the dog and elephant—and he had chosen his winter lair with special purpose in mind of a long and uninterrupted sleep. The cavern mouth was so well concealed that even the sharp eyes of the wild creatures, passing up and down the creek hardly a hundred feet away, never guessed its existence. The cavern maw had been large once, for all to see, but an avalanche had passed over it. Tons of snow, picking up a great cargo of rocks and dirt that no stream dredge in the world could lift, had roared and bellowed down the slope, narrowly missing the trunk of the great spruce, changing the contour of the creek bed and concealing its landmarks, and only a square yard of the original entrance was left. This opening was concealed by a little cluster of young spruce that had sprung up in the fallen earth. Yes, old Ephraim had had every reason to believe that no one would find him or break his sleep, and he was all the more angry at the interruption.

The falling tree had made a frightful crash just over his head, and even the deep coma in which the grizzly lay was abruptly dissolved. He sprang up, ready to fight. A little gleam of sunlight ventured through the spruce thicket, down into the mouth of the cavern, and lay like a patch of gold on the cavern floor. It served to waken some slight degree of interest in the snowy

world without. It might be well to look around a moment, at least, before he lay down to sleep again. At least he had to scrape more snow over the cabin mouth. And in the meantime he might be lucky enough to find the dearest delight in his life,—a good, smashing, well-matched fight to cool the growing anger in his great veins.

Ephraim was an old bear, used to every hunting wile, and his disposition hadn't improved with years. He was the undisputed master of the forest, and he couldn't think of any particular enemy that he would not encounter with a roar of joy. As often, in the case of the old, his teeth were rotting away; and the pain was a darting, stabbing devil in his gums. His little, fierce eyes burned and smoldered with wrath, he grunted deep in his throat, and he pushed out savagely through the cavern maw. It was only a step farther through the spruce thicket into the sunlight. And at the first glance he knew that his wish was coming true.

Three figures, two abreast and one behind, came mushing through the little pass where the creek flowed. He knew them well enough. There were plenty of grizzly traditions concerned with them. He recognized them in an instant as his hereditary foes,—the one breed that had not yet learned to give him right-of-way on the trail. They were tall, fearful forms, and something in their eyes sent a shudder of cold clear to his heart, yet he was not in the humor to give ground. His nerves were jumpy and unstrung from the fall of the tree, his jaw wracked him; a turn of the hair might decide whether he would merely stand and let them pass, or whether he would launch into that terrible, death-dealing charge that most grizzly hunters, sooner or later, come to know. His mental processes did not go far enough to disassociate these enemies with the stabbing foe in his gums. For the same reason he blamed them for disruption of his sleep. His ears laid back, and he uttered a deep growl.

There was no more magnificent creature in all of the breadth of the forest than this, the grizzly of the Selkirks. He was old and savage and wise; but for all his years, in the highest pinnacle of his strength. No man need to glance twice at him to know his glory. No tenderfoot could look at him and again wonder why, in the talk round the camp fire, the tried woodsmen always spoke of the grizzly with respect.

It was true that in the far corners of the earth there were creatures that could master him. The elephant could crush the life from his mighty body with the power of his knees; Kobaoba the rhino, most surly of all game, could have pierced his heart with his horn; perhaps even the Cape buffalo—that savage explosive old gentleman of the African marshes, most famous for his deadly propensity to charge on sight—could have given him a fair battle. But woe to the lion that should be obliged to face that terrible strength! Even the tiger, sinuous and terrible—armed with fangs like cruel knives and dreadful, raking, rending claws—could not have faced him in a fair fight.

But these were folk of the tropics, and his superiority was unquestioned among the northern animals. Even the bull moose had no wish to engage in a stand-up-and-take, close-range, death fight with a grizzly. The bull caribou left his trail at the sound of his heavy body in the thicket; the wolf pack, most deadly of fighting organizations, were glad to avoid him in the snow. His first cousins, the Alaskan bears, were more mighty than he, but they were less agile and, probably, less cunning. Such lesser creatures as wished to continue to enjoy the winter sunlight stepped softly when they journeyed past his lair.

He was a peculiar gray in color,—like brown hair that has silvered in many winters. His huge head was lowered between his high, rocking shoulders, his forelegs were simply great, knotty, cast-iron bunches of fiber and tendons; his long claws—worn down by digging in the rocks for marmots—were like great, curved fingers. As he stepped, his forefeet swung out, giving to his carriage an arrogance and a swagger that would have been amusing if it hadn't been terrible. His wicked teeth gleamed white in foam, and the hair stood stiff at his shoulders.

There is no forest crisis that presents such a test to human nerves as the charge of a grizzly. There is no forest voice more fraught with ferocity and savagery of the beasts of prey than his low, deep, reverberating growl. Human beings have not yet reached such perfection of self-mastery that they can hear such a sound, leaping suddenly like a thing of substance through the bush, and disregard it. It was to be that these three foes, journeying toward him along Creek Despair, did not disregard it now. For all the depth of the snow, he pushed through the spruce thicket into the sunlight.

Thus the three hunters met him—in all his strength and glory—not fifty feet distant at the base of the hill. He seemed to be poised to charge.

Bill's keen eyes saw the bear first. All at once its huge outline against the snow leaped to his vision. At the same instant the bear growled, a sound that halted halted Virginia and Harold in their tracks. For an instant all four figures stood in indescribable tableau: the bear poised, the three staring, the snowy wastes silent and changeless and unreal.

It was the last sight in the world that Bill had expected. He had supposed that the grizzlies were all in hibernation now; he hadn't conceived of the possibilities whereby the great creature had been called from his sleep. And he knew in one glance the full peril of the situation.

Often in his forest travels Bill had met grizzlies, and nearly always he had passed them by. Usually the latter were glad to make their escape; and Bill would hasten their departure with

shouts of glee. Yet this man knew the grizzly, his power and his wrath, and most of all he knew his utter unreliability. It is not the grizzly way to stand impassive when he is at bay, and neither does he like to flee up hill. If the animal did think his escape was cut off—a delusion to which the bear family seem particularly subject—he would charge them with a fury and might that had no equal in the North American animal world. And a grizzly charge is a difficult thing to stop in a distance of fifty feet.

The presence of Virginia in their party had its influence in Bill's decision. In times past he had been willing enough to take a small measure of risk to his own life, but the life of every grizzly in the North could not pay for one jot of risk to hers. Lastly he realized at the first sight of those glowing, angry eyes, the ears back, and the stiff hairs on the shoulder that the grizzly was in a fighting mood.

For all the complexity of his thought, his decision did not take an instant. There was no waiting to offer the sporting opportunity to Harold. Virginia was not aware of a lapse in time between the instant that Bill caught sight of the bear and that in which his gun came leaping to his shoulder. He had full confidence in the hard-hitting vicious bullet in Harold's thirty-five, and most of all he relied on the four reserve shots that he supposed lay in the rifle magazine. The grizzly dies hard: he felt that all four of them would be needed to arrest the charge that would likely follow his first shot.

He didn't wait for those great muscles to get into action. The animal was standing broadside to him, his head turned and red eyes watching; if Bill had his own gun, he would have aimed straight for the space between the eyes. This is never a sportsman's shot; but for an absolute marksman, in a moment of crisis, it is the surest shot of all. But he did not know Harold's gun well enough to trust such a shot. Indeed, he aimed for the great shoulder, the region of the lungs and heart. The gun cracked in the silence.

The bullet went straight home, ripping through the lungs, tearing the great arteries about the heart, shivering even a portion of the heart itself. And yet the grizzly sprang like a demon through the deep snow, straight towards him.

It is no easy thing to face a grizzly's charge. The teeth gleam in red foam, the eyes flash, the great shoulders rock. For all the deep snow that he bounded through, the beast approached at an unbelievable pace. He bawled as he came—awful, reverberating sounds that froze the blood in the veins. If the course had been open, likely he would have been upon him before Bill could send home another shot. There could only be one result to such a meeting as this. One blow would strike the life from Bill's body as the lightning strikes it from a tree. But the snow impeded the bear, and it seemed to Virginia's horrified eyes that Bill would have time to empty the magazine. She saw his fingers race as he worked the lever action of the gun: she saw his eyes lower again to the sights. The bear seemed almost upon him. And she screamed when she heard the impotent click of the hammer against the breech. Bill had fired the single shot that was in the gun.

Before ever he heard the sound Harold remembered. In one wave of horror he recalled that he had forgotten to refill the magazine with shells. Yet leaping fast—red and deadly and terrible upon the heels of his remorse—there came an emotion that seared him like a wall of fire. He saw Bill's fate. By no circumstance of which he could conceive could the man escape. A shudder passed over his frame, but it was not of revulsion. Rather it was an emotion known well to the beasts of prey, though to human beings it comes but rarely. Here was his enemy, the man he hated above all living creatures, and the blood lust surged through him like a madness. In one wave of ecstasy he felt that he was about to see the gratification of his hatred.

In the hands of a brave and loyal man, the rifle Harold carried might yet have been Bill's salvation. It was a large-caliber, close-range gun of stupendous striking power. Yet Harold didn't lift it to his shoulder. Part of it was willful omission, mostly it was the paralysis of terror. Yet he would have need enough for the gun if the bear turned on him. He saw that Bill's had was groping, hopeless though the effort was, for one of the shells that Harold had given him and which he carried in his pocket.

But there was no time to find it, to open his gun and insert it, and to fire before the ravening enemy would be upon him. He made the effort simply because it was his creed: to struggle as long as his life blood pulsed in his veins. He knew there was no chance to run or dodge. The bear could go at thrice his own pace in the deep snow. His last hope had been that Harold would come to his aid: that the man would stop the bear's charge with Bill's own heavy rifle; but now he knew that Harold's enmity of cowardice had betrayed him.

But at that instant aid came from an unexpected quarter. Virginia was not one to stand helpless or to turn and flee. She remembered the pistol at her belt, and she drew it in a flash of blue steel. True and straight she aimed toward the glowing eyes of the grizzly.

At the angle that they struck, her bullets did not penetrate the brain, but they did give Bill an instant's reprieve. The bear struck at the wounds they made, then halted, bawling, in the snow. His roving eye caught sight of Virginia's form. With a roar he bounded toward her.

The next instant was one of drama, of incredible stress and movement. For all his mortal wounds, the short distance between the bear and the girl seemed to recede with tragic swiftness.

The animal's cries rang through the silent forest: near and far the wild creatures paused in their occupations to listen. Virginia also stood her ground. There was no use to flee; she merely stood straight, her eyes gazing along her pistol barrel, firing shot after shot into the animal's head. Because it was an automatic, she was able to send home the loads in rapid succession.

But they were little, futile things, with never the shocking power to stop that blasting charge. Her safety still lay in that in which she had always trusted, the same that had been her fort and her stronghold in all their past adventures. Bill saw the grizzly change in direction; his response was instinctive and instantaneous. He came leaping through the snow as if a great hand had hurled him, all of his muscles contracting in response to the swift, immutable command of his will. For all the burden of his snowshoes and the depths of the drifts, his leap was almost as fast as the grizzly's own. He had but one realization: that the girl's tender flesh must never know those rending claws and fangs. He leaped to intercept the rending charge with his own body.

But his hand had found the shell by now, dropped it into the gun, and as a last instinctive effort, pulled back the lever that slid the cartridge into the barrel. There was no time to raise the gun to his shoulder. He pointed it instinctively toward the gray throat. And the end of the barrel was against the bear's flesh as he pressed the trigger.

No human eye could follow the lightning events of the next fraction of a second. All that occurred was over and done in the duration of one heart-beat,—before the shudder and explosion in the air from the rifle's report had passed away. One instant, and the three figures seemed all together; Bill crouched with rifle held pointed in his arms, Virginia behind him, the grizzly full upon them both. The next, and Harold stood alone in the snow and the silence,—awed, terrified, and estranged as if in a dream.

Except for the three forms that lay still, half-buried and concealed in the drifts, it was as if the adventure never occurred. The spruce trees stood straight and aloof as ever. The silence stretched unbroken; its immensity had swallowed and smothered the last echo of the rifle report and the grizzly's roar. There was no movement, seemingly no life,—only the drifts and the winter forest and the futile sun, shining down between the snow-laden trees.

Yet he knew vaguely what had occurred. The bullet had gone true. It had pierced the animal's neck, breaking the vertebrae of the spinal column, and life had gone out of him as a flame goes out in the wind. But it had come too late to destroy the full force of the charge. Bill had been struck with some portion of the bear's body as he fell and had been hurled like a lifeless doll into the drifts. Virginia, too, had received some echo of that shock, probably from Bill's body as he shattered down. Now all three lay half-hidden in the snow. Which of them lived and which were dead Harold dared not guess.

But he had no time to go forward and investigate before Bill had sprung to his feet. He had received only a glancing blow; the drifts into which he had fallen were soft as pillows. In reality he had never even lost consciousness. Still subject to the one thought that guided and shaped his actions throughout the adventure, he crawled over to Virginia's side.

No living man had ever seen his face as white as it was now. His eyes were wide with the image of horror; he didn't know what wounds the dying bear might have inflicted on the girl. There was no rend in her white flesh, however; and his eye kindled and his face blazed when he saw that she yet lived.

He didn't waste even a small part of his energies by futile pleadings for her to waken. He seized her shoulders and shook her gently.

Instantly her eyes opened. Her full consciousness returned to her with a rush. She was not scratched, not even shocked by the fall, and she reached up for Bill's hands. And instantly, with a laugh on her lips, she sprang to her feet.

"You killed him?" she asked.

It was the first breath she had wasted, and no man might hold it against her. She had only to look at the huge gray form in the drifts to know her answer. Bill, because he was a woodsman first, last, and always, slipped additional shells into Harold's rifle; then walked over to the bear. He gazed down at its filming eyes.

"Bear's all dead," he answered cheerfully. And Virginia's heart raced and thrilled, and a delicious exaltation swept through her, when she glanced down at this woodsman's hands. Big and strong and brown, there was not a tremor in their fingers.

The both of them whirled in real and superlative astonishment. Some one was speaking to them. Some one was asking them if they were both all right. It was a strange voice,—one that they scarcely remembered ever hearing before.

But they saw at once that the speaker was Harold. He had come with them to-day, quite true. Both of them had almost forgotten his existence.

XIX

In the weeks they had been together, Bill had always been careful never to try to show Harold in a bad light. It was simply an expression of the inherent decency of the man: he knew that Virginia loved him, that she had plighted her troth to him, and as long as that love endured and the engagement stood, he would never try to shatter her ideals in regard to him. He knew it meant only heartbreak for her to love and wed a man she couldn't respect. He knew enough of human nature to realize that love often lives when respect is dead, and no possible good could come of showing up the unworthiness that he beheld in Harold. He had never tried to embarrass him or smirch his name. For all his indignation now, his voice was wholly cheerful and friendly when he answered.

"We're quite all right, thanks," he said. "The only casualty was the bear. A little snow on our clothes, but it will brush off. And by the way——"

He paused, and for all his even tones, Harold had a sickening and ghastly fear of the sober query in Bill's eyes. "Why did you give me an unloaded gun and tell me it was full?" he went on. "Except for a good deal of luck there'd been a smile on the face of the grizzly—but no Bill!"

He thought it only just that, in spite of Virginia's presence, Harold explain this grave omission. He felt that Virginia was entitled to an explanation too, and Harold knew, from her earnest eyes, that she was waiting his answer. He might have been arrogant and insulting to Bill, but he cared enough for Virginia's respect to wish to justify himself. He studied their faces; it was plain that they did not accuse him, even in their most secret thoughts, of evil intent in handing Bill an almost empty gun. But by the stern code of the North sins of carelessness are no less damning than intentional ones and Harold knew that he had a great deal to answer for.

"And by the way," Bill went on, as he waited for his reply, "I don't remember hearing my gun off during the fray. You might explain that, too."

"I didn't shoot because I couldn't," Harold replied earnestly. "At first you were between me and the bear—and then Virginia was. It all happened so quickly that there was nothing I could do. I can't imagine why I forgot to reload the rifle. A man can't always remember—everything. I thought I had. Thank God that it didn't turn out any worse than it did."

Bill nodded; the girl's face showed unspeakable relief. She was glad that this lover of hers had logical and acceptable reasons for his omissions. The incident was past, the issue dead. They gathered about the gray grizzled form in the snow.

"Does this—help our food problem any?" Virginia asked.

"Except in an emergency—no. Virginia, you ought to try to cut that foreleg muscle." He lifted one of the front feet of the bear in his hands. "You'd see what it would be like to try to bite it. He's an old, tough brute—worse eating than a wolf. Strong as mink and hard as rock. If we were starving, we'd cut off one of those hams in a minute; but we can wait a while at least. If we don't pick up some more game during the day, I'll hike over to my Twenty-three Mile cabin and get the supplies I've left over there. There's a smoked caribou ham, among other things. I'll bring back a backload, anyway." Then his voice changed, and he looked earnestly into Virginia's eyes. "But you won't want to hunt any more to-day. I forgot—what a shock this experience would be to you."

She smiled, and the paleness about her lips was almost gone. "I'm getting used to shocks. I feel a little shaky—but it doesn't amount to anything. I want to climb up and look at the caribou trail, at least."

"Sure enough—if you feel you can stand it. It's only a hundred yards or so up the hill. I'd like to take old Bruin's hide, but I don't see how we could handle it. I believe we'd better leave him with all his clothes on, in the snow. And Heaven knows I'd like to find out what the old boy was doing out—at a time when all the other bears are hibernating."

They continued on up the creek until the grade of the hill was less, then clambered slowly up. Fifty yards up the slope they encountered the old caribou trail, but none of these wilderness creatures had been along in recent days. They followed it a short distance, however, back in the direction they had come and above the scene of their battle with the bear.

"No profit here," Bill said at last. "We might as well go down to the creek bed and find better walking."

They turned, and in an instant more came back to their own tracks. And suddenly Bill stopped and stared at them in dumb amazement.

He looked so astonished, so inexpressibly baffled, that for a moment his two companions were stricken silent. Virginia's heart leaped in her throat. Yet the tracks contained no message for her.

"What's the matter?" Harold asked. "What do you see?"

Bill caught himself and looked up. "Nothing very important—but mighty astonishing at that. We've just walked in a two-hundred-yard circle, up the creek to where we climbed the hill, back along the hill in this direction, and then down. And we haven't crossed that grizzly's tracks anywhere."

"Well, what of it?"

"Man, this snow has been here for weeks, with very little change. Do you mean to tell me that a lively, hungry bear is going to stay that long in one place unless he's asleep? Virginia, as sure as you live we—or somethin'—wakened that bear out of hibernation. And his den is somewhere in that two-hundred-yard circle."

"There's probably a cave in the rock," Harold suggested. "And I'm more interested in the cabin and dinner than I am in it."

"Nevertheless, I've never looked into a den of hibernation, and I've always wanted to know what they're like. It will only take a minute. Come on—it will be worth seeing."

But Harold had very special and particular reasons why such a course appealed to him not at all. "Yes—and maybe find a couple of other bears in there, in the dark and no chance to fight. I'm not interested, anyway. Go and look, if you like."

"I will, if you don't mind. Do you want to come too, Virginia? There's no danger—really there isn't. If this had been an old she-bear we might have found some cubs, but these old males travel around by themselves."

"I certainly wouldn't stay away," the girl replied. And her interest was real: the study of the forest life about her had been an ever increasing delight. She felt that she would greatly like to peer into one of those dark, mysterious dens where that most mysterious American animal, the grizzly, lies in deep coma through the long, winter months.

"It will only take a minute. We haven't got to back-track him more than a hundred yards at most. We'll be back in a minute, Harold. And if you don't mind—I'll take my own gun."

They exchanged rifles, and Virginia and Bill started back toward the fallen grizzly. But the exploration of the winter lair had not been the only thing Bill had in view. He also had certain words to say to Virginia,—words that he could scarcely longer repress, and which he couldn't have spoken with ease in Harold's presence. But now that they were alone, the sentences wouldn't shape on his lips.

He mused a while in silence. "I suppose I haven't got to tell you, Virginia," he said at last. "That you—your own courage—saved my life."

She looked up to him with lustrous eyes. The man thrilled to the last little nerve. In her comradeship for him their luster was almost like that of which he had dreamed so often. "I know it's true," she answered frankly. "And I'm glad that—that it was mine, and not somebody else's." She too seemed to be having difficulty in shaping her thoughts. "I've never been happier about any other thing. To pay—just a little bit of debt. But in paying it, I incurred another—so the obligation is just as big as ever. You know—you saved my life, too."

He nodded. This was no time for deception, for pretty lies.

"I saw you throw yourself in front of me," she went on. "I can never forget it. I'll see that picture, over and over again, till I die—how you plunged through the snow and got in front. So since we each did for the other—the only thing we could do—there's nothing more to be said about it. Isn't that so, Bill?"

The man agreed, but his lips trembled as they never did during the charge of the grizzly.

"I've learned a lesson up here—that words aren't much good and don't seem to get anywhere." The girl spoke softly. "Only deeds count. After they're done, there is nothing much—that one can say."

So they did not speak of the matter again. They came to the bear's body and back-tracked him through the snow. They pushed through the young spruce from whose limbs the grizzly had knocked the snow. They they came out upon the cavern mouth.

Instantly Bill understood how the fall of the tree had knocked away the snow from the maw. "There's been a landslide here too, or a snowslide," he said. "You see—only the top of the cave mouth is left open. The dirt's piled around the bottom."

He crawled up over the pile of rocks and dirt and, stooping, stepped within the cavern. The girl was immediately behind him. Back five feet from the opening the interior was dark as night: the cavern walls, gray at the mouth, slowly paled and faded and were obliterated in the gloom. But there was no stir of life in the darkness, no sign of any other habitant. But the walls themselves, where the light from without revealed them, held Bill's fascinated gaze.

The girl stood behind him, silent, wondering what was in his mind. "This cave—I've never seen a cave just like this. Virginia—"

The man stepped forward and scratched a match on the stone. It flared; the shadows raced away. Then Bill's breath caught in a half-sob.

Instantly he smothered the match. The darkness dropped around them like a curtain. But in that instant of light Bill beheld a scene that tore at his heart. Against the cavern wall, lost in the irremediable darkness, he had seen a strange, white shape—a ghostly thing that lay still and caught the match's gleam—a grim relic of dead years.

He turned to the girl, and his voice was almost steady when he spoke. "You'd better go out, Virginia—into the light," he advised.

"Why? Is it—*danger*?"

"Not danger." His voice in the silence thrilled her and moved her. "Only wickedness. But it isn't anything you'd like to see."

The single match-flare had revealed him the truth. For one little fraction of an instant he had thought that the white form, so grim and silent against the stone, revealed some forest tragedy of years ago,—a human prey dragged to a wild beast's lair. But the shape of the cavern, the character of its walls, and a thousand other clues told the story plainly. The thing he had seen was a naked skeleton, flesh and garments having dropped away in the years; and the grizzly had simply made his lair in the old shaft of his father's mine. Bill had found his father's sepulcher at last!

For a moment he stood dreaming in the gloom. He understood, now, why his previous search had never revealed the mine. He had supposed that his father had operated along some stream, washing the gold from its gravel: it had never occurred to him that he had dug a shaft. In all probability, considering the richness of their content, they had burrowed into the hill and had found an old bed of the stream, had carried the gravel to the water's edge in buckets, and washed it out. He had never looked for tunnels and shafts: if he had done so, it was doubtful if he could have found the hidden cavern. The snowslide of some years before had covered up all outward signs of their work, struck down the trees they had blazed, and covered the ashes of their own camp fires. The girl's voice in the darkness called him from his musings.

"I believe I understand," she said. "You've found your mine—and your father's body."

"Yes. Just a skeleton."

"I'm not afraid. Do you want me to stay?"

"I'd love to have you, if you will. Some way—it takes away a lot of my bitterness—to have you here."

It was true. It seemed wholly fitting that she should be with him as he explored the cavern. It was almost as if the tragedy of his father's death concerned her, too.

"I can hold matches," she told him. She came up close, and for a moment her hand, groping, closed on his,—a soft, dear pressure that spoke more than any words. When it was released he lighted another match.

They stood together, looking down at the skeleton. But she wasn't quite prepared for what she saw. A little cry of horror rang strangely in the dark shaft.

This had been no natural death. Undoubtedly the elder Bronson had been struck down from behind, as he worked, and he lay just as he fell. There was one wound in the skull, round and ghastly, and in a moment they saw the weapon that made it. A rusted pick, such as miners use, lay beside the body.

"I won't try to do much to-day," the man told her, "except to see up one of my cornerposts and erect a claim notice. My father's notice has of course rotted away in the years and the monument that probably stood out there beyond the creek bed was covered in snowslide. You see, a claim is made by putting up four stone monuments—one at each corner of the area claimed. We'll be starting down in a day or two, and I'll register the claim. Then I'll come back—and give these poor bones decent burial."

From there he walked back to the end of the shaft, scratching another match. It was wholly evident that the mine was only scratched. He held the light close, studying the rear wall of the cave. It was simply a gravel bed, verifying his guess that here lay an old bed of the creek. In the first handful of stone he scraped out he found a half-ounce nugget.

"It's rich?" she asked.

"Beyond what I ever dreamed. But there's nothing more we can do now. I've made my find at least—but it doesn't seem to make me—as happy as it ought to. Of course that man—there

against the wall—would naturally keep a man from being very happy. Of, if I could only find and kill the devil who did it!"

His voice in the gloom was charged with immeasurable feeling. She had never seen this side of him before. Here was primeval emotion, the desired for vengeance, filial obligation, hate that knew no mercy and could never be forgotten. She understood, now, the savage feuds that sometimes spring up among the mountain people, unable to forget a blow or an injury. She had the first inkling of how deeply his father's murder had influenced him.

But his face was calm when they emerged into the light. They walked over to the creek, and beneath its overhanging banks there were the snow had not swept, he found enough rocks for his monument. He gathered them, carried them in armfuls to a place fifty yards beyond the creek and down it, level with such a turn in the hillside above, beyond which the old creek bed obviously could not lie; then heaped them into a mound. Then he drew an old letter from his coat pocket, and searching farther, found a stub of a pencil. Virginia looked over his shoulders as he wrote.

One hundred yards up the stream Harold watched them, dumbfounded as to what they were doing. He saw Bill finish the writing, then place the larger on the monument, fastening it down with a large stone. Then he came mushing toward them.

So intent were they upon their work that they didn't notice him until he was almost up to them. But both of them would have paused in wonder if they had observed the curious mixture of emotions upon his lips. His lips hung loose, his eyes protruded, and something that might have been greed, or might have been jealousy or some other unguessed emotion drew and harshened his features.

"You've found a mine?" he asked.

Virginia looked up, joyful at Bill's good fortune. "We've found his father's mine—the old shaft where the bear was been sleeping. But there's a dreadful side of it too."

"Show me where it is. I want to see it. Take me into it, Virginia—right away—"

Bill had a distinct sensation of revulsion at the thought of this man going into his father's sepulcher, and he didn't know why. It was an instinct too deeply buried for him to trace. But he tried to force it down. There was no reason why Virginia's fiance shouldn't view his mine. Already, Virginia was pointing out the way.

"You can claim half to it," he was whispering into her ear. "You were the one with him when he found it."

"I can—but I won't," she replied coldly. "He asked me to go with him. The thought's unworthy of you, Harold."

But he was in no mood to be humbled by her disapproval. Curiously, he was intensely excited. He mushed away toward the cavern mouth.

Two minutes later he stood in the darkness of the funnel, fumbling for a match. "Gold, gold, gold," he whispered. "Heaps and heaps of it—what I've always hunted. And Bill had to find it. That devil had to walk right into it."

He was sickened by the thought that except for his own cowardice he would have accompanied them into the den. At least he should have done that much, he told himself, to atone for his conduct during the bear's charge. Then he would have been in a position to claim half the mine—and get it too. Dark thoughts, curiously engrossing and lustful, thronged his mind.

He found a match at least and it flared in the darkness. And the white skeleton lay just at his feet.

He drew back, startled, but instantly recognized his poise. He knelt with unexplicable intentness. He too saw the ghastly wound and its grim connection with the rusted pick. And he bent, slowly, like a man who is trying to control an unwonted eagerness, lifted the pick in his arms.

His fingers seemed to curl around it, like those of a miser around his gold. Some way, his grasp seemed caressing. Oh, it was easy to handle and lift! How naturally it swung in his arms! What a deadly blow the cruel point could inflict! Just one little tap had been needed. Bronson had rocked and fallen, no longer to hold his share in the mine's gold. If there were an enemy before him now, one tap, and one alone was all that would be needed.

He could picture the scene of some twenty years before; the flickering candles, the gray walls covered with dancing shadows, the yellow gold,—beautiful in the light. He could see Bronson working,—always the plodder, always the fool! Behind him Rutheford, his partner, the pick in his arms and his brave intent in his brain. Then one swift stroke—

Harold did not know that at the thought his muscles made involuntary response. He swung

the pick down, imagining the blow, with a ferocity and viciousness that would have been terrible to see.

In the darkness his face was drawn and savage, and ugly fires glowed and smoldered and flamed in his eyes.

XX

Bill made plans for an early start to his Twenty-three Mile cabin. The hike would have been easy enough, considering the firm snow that covered the underbrush, but the hours of daylight were few and swift. And he had no desire to try to find his way in that trackless country in the darkness.

"I'll leave before dawn—as soon as it gets gray," he told Virginia as he bade her good night. "I'll come back the next day, with a backload of supplies. And with the little we have left, we will have enough to go on. We can start for Bradleyburg the day after that."

Virginia took no pleasure in bidding him good-by. She had already learned that this winter forest was a bleak and fearful place when her woodsman was away. Curiously, she could find little consolation in the thought that she and Harold could have a full day together, alone. And before the night was half over, it seemed to her, she heard his stealing feet on the cabin floor outside her curtain.

He seemed to be moving quietly, almost stealthily. She heard the stove door open, and the subdued crack of a match scratched gently. A warm glow flooded her being when she understood.

For all the arduous day's toil that waited him, Bill hadn't forgotten to build her fire. The cabin would still be warm for her to dress. She didn't know that her eyes were shining in the gloom. She drew aside the curtain.

"I'm awake, Bill. I want to tell you good-by again," she said.

"I don't see what makes me so clumsy," Bill returned impatiently. "I thought I could get this fire going without waking you up. But I'm glad enough to have another good-by."

"And you'll be—awfully careful?" Her voice did not hold quite steadily. "So many—many things can happen in those awful woods—when you are alone. I never realized before how they're always waiting, always holding a sword over your head, ready to cut you down. I'm afraid to have you go—"

He laughed gently, but the deathless delight he felt at her words rippled through the laugh like flowing water. "There's nothing to be afraid of, Virginia. You'll see me back to-morrow night. I've wandered these woods by myself a thousand times—"

"And the thousandth and first time you might fall into their trap! But why can't we take some of that grizzly meat—"

"Virginia, you'd break your pretty teeth on it. Of course we could in a pinch—but this is no march, to-day. Good-by."

"Good-by." Her voice sank almost to a whisper, and her tones were sober and earnest. "I'll pray for you, Bill—the kind of prayers you told me about—entreating prayer to a God that can hear—and understand—and help. A real God, not just an Idea such as I used to believe in. Here's my hand, Bill."

He groped for it as a plant gropes for sunlight, as the blind grope to find their way. He found it at last: it was swallowed in his own palm, and the heart of the man raced and thrilled and burned. She couldn't see what he did with it in the darkness. It seemed to her she felt a warmth, a throbbing, a pressure that was somehow significant and portentous above any experience of her life. Yet she didn't know that he had dropped to his knees outside the curtain and pressed the hand to his lips. The door closed slowly behind him.

The last stars were fading, slipping away like ghosts into the further recesses of the sky, as he pushed away from the cabin door. He didn't need the full light of morning to find his way the first few miles. He need only head toward the peak of a familiar mountain, now a shadow against the paling sky.

The night was not so cold as it had a right to be. He had expected a temperature far below zero: in reality it seemed not far below freezing. Some weather change impended, and at first he felt vaguely uneasy. But he munched on, the long miles gliding slowly, steadily beneath him. Only

once he missed his course, but by back-tracking one hundred yards he found it again.

Morning came out, the trees emerged from the gloom, the shadows faded. He kept his direction by the landmarks learned while following his trap lines. The day was surprisingly warm. His heavy woolens began to oppress him.

As always the wilderness was silent and vaguely sinister, but after a few hours it suddenly occurred to him that the air was preternaturally still. A few minutes later, when he struck a match to light his pipe, this impression was vividly confirmed. As is the habit with all woodsmen he watched the match-smoke to detect the direction of the wind. The blue strands, with hardly a waver or tremor, streamed straight up. He was somewhat reassured, however, when he remembered that he had not yet emerged from a great valley between low ranges that ordinarily prevented free passage of the winds.

He mushed on, his snowshoes crunching on the white crust. The powers of the wilderness gave him good speed—almost to the noon hour. Then they began to show him what they could do.

He was suddenly aware that the fine edge of the wilderness silence had been dulled. There was a faint stir at his ear drums, to dim to name or identify or even to accept as a reality. He stopped, listening intently.

The stir grew to a faint and distant murmur, the murmur to a long swish like a million rustling garments. A tree fell, with a crash, far away. Then the wind smote him.

In itself it was nothing to fear. It was not a hurricane, not even a particularly violent storm, but only a brisk gale that struck him from the side and more or less impeded his progress. Trees that were tottering and ready to fall went down with reverberating reports; the snowdust whirled through the forest, changing the contour of the drifts, and filling up the tracks of the wild creatures. But for Bill the wind held a real menace. It was from the southeast, and warm as a girl's hand against his face.

No man of the Northwest Provinces is unacquainted with this wind. It is prayed for in the spring because its breath melts the drifts swiftly, but it is hated to death by the traveler caught far from his cabin on snowshoes. The wind was the far-famed Chinook, the southeast gale that softens the snow as a child's breath melts the frost on a window pane.

It did not occur to Bill to turn back. Already he was nearly halfway to his destination. The food supplies had to be secured, sooner or later; and when the Chinook comes no man knows when it will go away. He mushed on through the softening snow.

Within an hour the crust was noticeably softer. One hour thereafter and the snow was soft and yielding as when it had first fallen in early winter. Mushing was no longer a pleasant pursuit. Henceforth it was simply toil, rigorous and exhausting. The snowshoe sank deep, the snow itself clung to the webs and frame until it was almost impossible to lift.

A musher in the soft wet snow can only go at a certain pace. There is no way to hurry the operation and get speedily over the difficulties. Any attempt to quicken the pace results only in a fall. The shoe cannot be pushed ahead as when the snow is well-packed or crusted. It has to be deliberately lifted, putting the leg tendons to an unnatural strain.

It was too far to turn back. As many miles of weary snow stretched behind him as before him. At Twenty-three Mile cabin he could pass a night as comfortable as at home: there were food and blankets in plenty, and the well-built hut contained a stove. Once there, he could wait for a hard freeze that would be certain to harden the half-thawed snow and make it fit for travel. His only course was to push on step by step.

The truth suddenly dawned upon him that he was face to face with one of the most uncomfortable situations of all his years in the forest. He didn't believe he would be able to make the cabin before the fall of night; if indeed he were able to complete the weary miles, it would only be by dint of the most cruel and exhausting labor. He carried no blankets, and although with the aid of his camp ax he could keep some sort of a fire, a night out in the snow and the cold was not an experience to think of lightly.

Bill knew very well just what capabilities for effort the human body holds. It has certain definite limits. After a few hours of such labor as this the body is tired,—tired clear through and aching in its muscles. Despondency takes the place of hope, the step is somewhat faltering, hunger assails and is forgotten, even the solace of tobacco is denied because the hand is too tired to grope for and fill the pipe. Thereafter comes a deeper stage of fatigue, one in which every separate step requires a distinct and tragic effort of will. The perceptions are blunted, the uncertainty of footfall is more pronounced, the stark reality of the winter woods partakes of a dreamlike quality. Then comes utter and complete exhaustion.

In its first stages there can still be a few dragging or staggering steps, a last effort of a brave and commanding will. Perhaps there is even a distance of creeping. But then the march is done! There is no comeback, no rallying. The absolute limit has been reached. But fortunately, lying still in the snow, the wanderer no longer cares. He wonders why he did not yield to this tranquil comfort long since.

Bill began to realize that he was approaching his own limit. The weary miles crept by, but with a tragic languor that was like a nightmare. But time flew; only a little space of daylight remained.

Bill's leg muscles were aching and burning now, and he had to force himself on by sheer power of his will. He would count twenty-five painful steps, then halt. The wind had taken a more westerly course by now, and the snow was no longer melting. The air was more crisp: probably one night would serve to recrystallize the snow. But the fact became ever more evident that the darkness would overtake him before he could reach the cabin.

But now, curiously, he dreaded the thought of pausing and making a fire. Partly he feared—with the age-old fear that lay buried deep in every cell—the long, bitter night without shelter, food or blankets; but even the labor of fire-building appalled his spirit. It would be a mighty task, fatigued as he was: first to clear away the snow, cut down trees, hew them into lengths and split them—all with a light camp ax that only dealt a sparrow blow—then to kneel and stoop and nurse the fire.

His woodsman's senses predicted a bitter night, in spite of the warmth of the day. It would harden the snow again, but it would also wage war against his life. All night long he would have to fight off sleep so that he could mend the fire and cut fuel. It mustn't be a feeble, flickering fire. The cold could get in then. All night long the flame must not be allowed to flag. In his fatigue it would be so easy to doze off,—just for a moment, and the fire would burn out. In that case the fire of his spirit would burn out too,—just as certain, just as soon.

Late afternoon: already the shadows lay strange and heavy in the distant tree aisles. And all at once he paused, thrilled, in his tracks.

A little way to the east, on the bank of a small creek, his father and his traitorous partner had once had a mining claim,—a mine they had tried unsuccessfully to operate before Bronson had made his big strike. They had built a small cabin, and for nearly thirty years it had stood moldering and forgotten. Twice in his life Bill had seen it,—once as a boy, when his father had taken him there on some joyous, holiday excursion, and once in his travels Bill had beheld it at a distance. Its stove had rotted away years since; it contained neither food nor blankets nor furniture, yet it was a shelter against the night and the cold. And even now it was within half a mile of where he stood.

Exultant and thankful, Bill turned in his tracks and mushed over toward it.

XXI

There was plenty of heart-breaking work to do when Bill finally reached the little cabin. The snow had banked up to the depth of several feet around it and had blown and packed against the door. He took off one of his snowshoes to use as a shovel and stolidly began the work of removing the barricade. There was no opening the door against the pressure of the snow. Besides, the bolt was solidly rusted.

But after a few weary strokes it occurred to him that the easiest way would be to cut some sort of an opening in the top of the door, just large enough for his body to crawl through. As the cabin was abandoned there would be no possible disadvantage to such an opening: and since the fire had to be built outside the cabin, against the backlogs, the door would have to be left open anyway, to admit the heat. With a few strokes of his sharp little camp ax he cut away the planks, leaving a black hole in the door. He lighted a match and peered in.

The interior was unchanged since his previous visit, years before. The cabin had no floor, not the least vestige of furniture, and rodents had littered the ground with leaves.

He turned to his toil of making a fire. First he cut down a spruce—a heart-breaking task with his little ax—then laboriously hacked it into lengths. These he bore to the cabin, staggering with the load. He split the logs, cutting some of them into firewood for kindling. Then he made a pile of shavings.

He tested the wind and found it blowing straight west and away from the cabin. He felt oddly tired and dull, much too tired to strain and listen for some whispered message of an inner voice that seemed to be trying hard to get his attention, a few little, vague misgivings that haunted him. His comfort depended, he told himself, on the heat of the fire beating in through the little opening of the cabin door, so he placed the backlog just as close as he dared in front. Then he laid down split pieces for frame of his fire and erected his heap of kindling.

He entered through the opening and stood on the ground below to light the fire. He didn't desire to crawl through the flames to enter the cabin. Reaching as far as he could, he was just able to insert the candle. The wind caught it, the kindling flames. Then he stood shivering,

waiting for the room to warm.

He had a sweeping flood of thoughts as he watched the leaping flame. Its cheerful crackle, its bright color in the gloom was almost too good to be true. In these dark forests he had learned to be wary and on guard at too great fortune. Quite often it was only a prank of perverse forest gods, before they smote him with some black disaster. It seemed to him that there was a wild laughter, a Satanic mocking in the joyous crackle that was vaguely but fearfully ominous. The promise in the rainbow, the siren's song to the mariners, the little dancing light in the marsh—promising warmth and safety but only luring the weary traveler to this death—had this same quality: the cheer, the hope, the beauty only to be blasted by misfortune.

The warmth flooded in, and he looked about for something to sit on. He wished he had brought in one of the spruce logs he had cut. But it was too late to procure one now. The flames leaped at the opening of the cabin: he would be obliged to crawl laboriously through them to get into the open. Tired out, he lay down in the dry dirt, putting his arm under his head. He would soon go to sleep.

But his ragged, exhausted nerves would not find rest in sleep at once. His thoughts were troubling and unpleasant. The pale firelight filled the cabin, dancing against the walls. The glare reflected wanly on the ground where he lay.

All at once he was aware that his eyes were fastened upon an old cigar box on a shelf against the wall. He seemed to have a remembered interest in it,—as if long ago he had examined its contents with boyish speculations. But he couldn't remember what it contained. Likely enough it was empty.

The hours were long, and the wind wailed and crept like a housebreaker about the cabin; and at last—rather more to pass the time than for any other reason—he climbed to his feet and stepped to the shelf on which the box lay.

As he reached to seize it, he had a distinct premonition of misfortune. It was as if some subtle consciousness within him, knowing and remembering every detail of his past and its infinite and exact relations with his present, was warning him that to open the box was to receive knowledge that would be hateful to him. Yet he would not be cowed by such a visionary danger. He was tired out, his nerves were torn, and he was prey to his own dark imaginings. Likely enough the box was empty.

It was not, however. It contained a single photograph.

His eye leaped over it. He remembered now; he had looked at it during his former visit to the cabin, years before. It was a typical old-fashioned photograph—two men standing in stiff and awkward poses in an old-fashioned picture gallery—printed in the time-worn way. No modern photographer, however, could have caught a better likeness or made a more distinct picture. It had obviously been one of his father's possessions and had been left in the cabin.

One of the men was his own father. He had seen his photograph often enough to recognize it; besides, he remembered the man in the flesh. And he stared at the other face—a rather handsome, thin-lipped, sardonic-eyed face—as if he were looking at a ghost.

"Great God," he cried. "It's Harold Lounsbury!"

But instantly he knew it could not be Harold Lounsbury. The picture was fully twenty-five years old and the face was that of a mature man, probably aged thirty. Harold Lounsbury himself was only thirty. And now, looking closer, he saw that the features were not quite the same. There was more breeding, more sensitiveness in Harold's face. And there was also, dim and haunting, some slight resemblance to Kenly Lounsbury, whom he had brought up into Clearwater and who had gone back with Vosper.

Yet already his inner consciousness was screaming in his ear the identity of this man. Already he knew. It was no other than Rutheford, the man who later, in the cavern darkness, had struck his father down.

His deductions followed with deadly and remorseless certainty. He knew now why Harold Lounsbury had come into Clearwater. Virginia had told Bill that her lover seemed to have some definite place in view for his prospecting: he had simply come to search for the same lost mine that Bill had discovered the previous day. He knew now why Kenly Lounsbury had been willing to finance Virginia's trip into the North,—not in hopes of finding his lost nephew, but to find the mine of which he also had some knowledge and thus repair the broken remnants of his fortune. In the same sweep of realization he knew why Harold Lounsbury's face had always haunted him and filled him with hazy, uncertain memories. He had never seen Harold before; but he had seen this photograph in his own boyhood, and Harold's face had so resembled the one in the picture that it had haunted and disturbed him.

Only too well he knew the truth. Harold Lounsbury was Rutheford's son,—the son of his father's murderer. Kenly Lounsbury was Rutheford's brother. Both had come to Clearwater to repair their broken fortunes from the mine of which they both had knowledge. Whether it was guilty knowledge or not no man could tell.

Such directions as Rutheford had given his son had been unavailing because of the snowslide that had changed the contour of the little valley where the mine lay. He understood now Harold's disappointment and emotion when Bill had discovered the mine. Likely his own name was Harold Rutheford, or else Rutheford's true name had been Lounsbury. Bill stood shivering all over with rage and hate.

Now he knew the road of vengeance! He had only to trace Harold Lounsbury back to his city—there to find his father's murderer. His eyes were glittering and terrible to see at the potentialities of that finding. Yet in an instant he knew that death had likely already claimed the elder Rutheford. Otherwise he himself would have come back, long since, to recover the mine. He would be financing the expedition, rather than his brother Kenly.

But by that stern old law, the law that goes down to the roots of the earth and whose justice lies in mystic balances beyond the sight of men, has it not been written that the sins of the father shall be visited upon the son? It wasn't too late yet to command some measure of payment. In Virginia's own city lived the Lounsburies,—a proud and wealthy family, moving in the most haughty circles, patronizing the humble, flattered and honored and exalted. But oh, he could break them down! He could stamp their name with shame. He could not pay eye for eye and tooth for tooth, because Rutheford was likely already dead. He could not pay for his father's murder by striking down his murderer. But he could make Harold pay for his own wrongs. He could make him atone for the bitter moments of his youth and manhood, that irremediable loss of his boyhood. If Rutheford had left a widow he could make her pay for his own mother's sufferings.

As he stood in that bleak and lonely cabin, lost in the desolate wastes of snow, he was simply the clansman—the feudist—the primitive avenger. Virginia too should know the crime, and the haunting sight of those pitiful bones in the dark cavern would rise before her eyes whenever she sought Harold's arms. He would show her the picture; she could see the murderer's face in her own lover's. She could never yield to him then—

Virginia! Soft above the wail and complaint of the wind, he spoke her name. His star, his universe, the gracious, beautiful girl whose happiness had been his one aim! And could he change that aim now?

The wind wept, the snow was swept before it in great, unearthly clouds of white, the fire crackled and leaped at the opening in the cabin door. The northern winter night closed down, ever deeper, ever darker, ever more fraught with those mighty passions of the human soul. But he responded no more to the wild music of the wind. The wilderness passions no longer found an echo in his own heart. He had suddenly remembered Virginia.

His face was like clay in the dancing light. His eyes were sunken and were dark as night. He knew now where his course would lie. All at once he knew by a knowledge true as life that this dark cabin, in the dark forest, must keep its secrets.

He could not wreak vengeance upon the man Virginia loved. He could not take payment from her. The same law that had governed him before was still the immutable voice of his being, the basic and irrevocable law of his life. He could not blast her happiness with such a revelation as this. His boyhood dream of vengeance would go the way of all his other dreams,—like the smoke of a camp fire lost in the unmeasured spaces of the forest. The shadow that the dark woods had cast upon his spirit seemed to grow and deepen.

But he must act now, while his strength was upon him. To look again into Harold's face might cost him his own resolve. To think of Virginia in his arms, her lips against his, the wicked blood of the man pulsing so close that she could thrill at it and hear it, might set him on fire again. He must destroy the evidence. The night might bring his own death—he had a vague presentiment of disaster—and this photograph must never be found beside his body. She knew his father's story; her quick mind would leap to the truth at once. Besides, the destruction of the photograph—so that he could never look at it again—might lessen his own bitterness and give him a little peace. He crumpled it in his hand, and turning, gave it to the flames at the cabin mouth.

And from the savage powers of Nature there came a strange and incredible response. The wind shrieked, then seemed to ship about in the sky, completely changing direction. And all at once the smoke from the fire began to pour in upon him, choking his lungs and filling his eyes with tears.

XXII

For a full moment Bill gave little attention to the deepening clouds of pungent, biting wood smoke that the wind whipped in through the hole he had cut in the door. Likely it was just a momentary gust, a shifting in the air currents, and the wind would soon resume its normal

direction. Besides, the discovery that he had just made seemed to hold and occupy all the territory of his thought: he was scarcely aware of the burning pain that the acrid, resinous green-wood smoke brought to his eyes. This was the most bitter moment of his life, and he was lost and remote in his dark broodings. The smoke didn't matter.

He began really to wonder about it when the room grew so smoky that it no longer received the firelight. The hole in the door was like a flue: the smoke—that deadly green-wood smoke known of old to the woodsman—streamed through in great clouds. He had shut his eyes at first; now he found it impossible to keep them open. The pungent smoke crept into his lungs and throat, burning like fire. He knew that it could no longer be disregarded.

It had been part of his wilderness training to respond like lightning in a crisis. Many times on the forest trails life itself had depended upon an instantaneous decision, then immediate effort to carry the decision out. The fawn that does not leap like a serpent's head at the first crack of a twig as the wolf steals toward him in the thicket never lives to grow antlers. The power to act, to summon and focus the full might of the muscles in the wink of an eye, then to hurl them into a breach had been Bill's salvation many times. But to-night the power seemed gone. For long seconds his muscles hung inert. He didn't know what to do.

The capacity for mighty and instantaneous effort seemed gone from his body. His mind was slow too,—blunted. He could make no decisions. He only seemed bewildered and impotent.

The truth was that Bill had been near the point of utter exhaustion from his day's toil in the snow and his labor of building the fire. The vital nervous fluids no longer sprang forth to his muscles at the command of his brain: they came tardily, if at all. The fountain of his nervous energy had simply run down as the battery runs down in a motor, and it could only be recharged by a rest. But there was a deeper reason behind this strange apathy. The last blow—the sight of the photograph of his father's murderer and its new connection with his life—had for the time being at least crushed the fighting spirit within the man. The fight for life no longer seemed worth while. In his bitterness he had lost the power to care.

The smoke deepened in the cabin. It seemed to be affecting his power to stand erect. He tried to think of some way to save himself; his mind was slow and dull.

He knew that he couldn't get out of the cabin. There was only a little hole in the door; to crawl through it, inch by inch as he had entered, would subject him to the full fury of the flames. Oh, they would sear and destroy him quickly if he tried to creep through them! All night they had been mocking him with their cheerful crackle; they had only been waiting for this chance to torture him. He had to spring high to enter the little hole at all; there was no way to dodge the flames outside. But he might knock the logs apart and put the fire out.

There was only a distance of two paces between him and the door, but he seemed to have difficulty in making these. He reeled against the wall. But when he tried to thrust his arms through to reach the burning logs, the cruel tongues stabbed at his hands.

But in spite of the pain, he reached again. The skin blistered on his hands, and for a long, horrible instant he groped impotently. The flame was raging by now, two or three pitch-laden spruce chunks blazing fiercely at once, and it seemed wholly likely that the cabin itself would catch fire. But he couldn't reach the logs.

He remembered his gloves then and fumbled for them in his pocket. The smoke could only be endured a few seconds more. He caught hold the edge of the opening and tried to spring up. But the flames beat into his face and drove him down again.

For a moment he stood reeling, trying to think, trying to remember some resource, some avenue of escape. There was no furniture to stand on. If he could cover his face he might be able to leap part way through the opening and knock the burning logs apart. He tried to open his smarting eyes, but the lids were wracked with pain and would not at once respond. He made it at last, but the dense smoke was impervious to his vision. The firelight gave it a ghastly pallor.

His ax! With his ax he could chop the door away. His hand fumbled at his belt. But he remembered now; he had left his ax outside the cabin, its blade thrust into the spruce log that had supplied his fuel.

Suddenly he saw himself face to face with seemingly certain death. It was curious that he did not feel more fear, greater revulsion. It was almost as if it didn't matter. While the steady sinking of the burning logs lessened, in some degree, the danger of the cabin igniting—a few inches of snow against the door remaining unmelted—the smoke clouds were swiftly and surely strangling him. Already his consciousness was departing. He leaped for the opening again and fell sprawling on the dirt floor. He started to spring up—

But he suddenly grew inert, breathing deeply. There was still air close to the ground. Strange he hadn't thought of it before,—just to lie still, face close to the dirt. It pained him to breathe; his eyes throbbed and burned, but at least it was life. He pressed his face to the cool earth.

Yet unconsciousness was sweeping him again. He would feel himself drifting, then with all the faltering power of his will he would struggle back. But perhaps this sweet oblivion was only

sleep. His nerves were crying for rest. Once more he floated, and the hours of night crept by.

When Bill awakened again, the last pale glimmer of the lighted smoke was gone. He was bewildered at first, confusing reality with his dreams, but soon the full memory of the night's events swept back to him. His faculties had rallied now, his thought was clearer. The few hours that he had rested had been his salvation.

Yet it was still night. He raised his hands before his eyes but could not see even their outline. And the cabin was still full of smoke. But it seemed somewhat less dense now, less pungent. But the smarting in his eyes was more intense.

The fire had evidently burned down and out. He struggled to open his eyes, then gazed around the walls in search of the opening in the door. But he could not see the reflection of an ember. He fought his way to his feet.

His fumbling hands encountered the log walls; he then groped about till he found the plank door. His gloved hands smarted, but their sense of touch did not seem blunted. He had never known a darker night! Now that he found the hole in the door, it was curious that he could not see one star gleaming through. But perhaps clouds had overspread.

A measure of heat against his face told him that coals were still glowing under the ashes, yet he might be able to creep through. It was worth a trial: the smoke in the cabin was still almost unbearable. His muscles were more at his command now; with a great lurch he sprang up and thrust head and shoulders through the opening.

The hot ashes punished his face, and his hand encountered hot coals as he thrust them through. Yet with a mighty effort he pushed on until his wrists touched the icy snow. He knew that he was safe.

He stood erect, scarcely believing in his deliverance. And the snow had crusted during the night; it would almost hold him up without snowshoes. As soon as the light came, he could mush on toward his Twenty-three Mile cabin. It would be a cold and exhausting march, but he could make it. The night was bitter now, assailing him like a scourge the moment he left the warm cabin; and the temperature would continue to fall until after dawn. The wind still blew the snow dust—a stinging lash from the north and west—and it had brought the cold from the Bering Sea.

It was curious that a cloudy night could be so cold. Yet when he opened his eyes he could not see the gleam of a star. The red coals of the fire, too, were smothered and obscured in ashes. He stepped toward them, intending to rake them up for such heat as they could yield. Presently he halted, gazing with fascinated horror at the ground.

He was suddenly struck with a ghastly and terrible possibility. He could not give it credence, yet the thought seemed to seize and chill him like a great cold. But he would know the truth in a moment. It was always his creed: not to spare himself the truth. Surely it would simply be an interesting story—this of his great fear—when he returned with his backload of supplies to Virginia. Something to talk about, in the painful and embarrassed moments that remained before Virginia and her lover went out of his sight forever.

His hand groped for a match. In his eagerness it broke off at his fingers as he tried to strike it. But soon he found another.

He heard it crack in the silence, but evidently it was a dud! The darkness before his eyes remained unbroken.

Filled with a sick fear, he removed his glove and passed his hand over the upheld match. There was no longer a possibility for doubt. The tiny flame smarted his flesh.

"Blind!" he cried. "Out here in the snow and the forest—blind!"

It was true. The pungent wood smoke had done a cruel work. Until time should heal the wounds of the tortured lenses, Bill was blind.

XXIII

Standing motionless in the dreadful gloom of blindness, insensible to the growing cold, Bill made himself look his situation in the face. His mind was no longer blunt and dull. It was cool, analytic; he balanced one thing against another; he judged the per cent. of his chance. At present it did not occur to him to give up. It is never the way of the sons of the wilderness to yield without a fight. They know life in all its travail and pain, but also they know the Cold and Darkness and Fear that is death. No matter how long the odds are, the wilderness creature fights to his last breath. Bill had always fought; his life had been a great war of which birth was the reveille and

death would be retreat.

He was wholly self-contained, his mind under perfect discipline. He would figure it all out and seek the best way through. Long, weary miles of trackless forest stretched between him and safety. There was no food in this cabin, no blankets; and the fire was out. His Twenty-three Mile cabin was only slightly less distant than the one he had left. And through those endless drifts and interminable forests the blind, unaided, could not find their way.

He could conceive of no circumstances whereby Virginia and Harold would come to look for him short of another day and night. They did not expect him back until the end of the present day; they could not possibly start forth to seek him until another daylight. And this man knew what the forest and the cold would do to him in twenty-four hours. Already the cold was getting to him.

For all that he had no food, he knew that if he could keep warm he could survive until help came. Yet men cannot fast in these winter woods as they can in the South. The simple matter of inner fuel is a desperate and an essential thing. But he had no blankets, and without a fire he would die, speedily and surely. He didn't deceive himself on this point. He knew the northern winter only too well. A few hours of suffering, then a slow warmth that stole through the veins and was the herald of departure. He had been warmed through in the cabin, but that warmth would soon pass away. He wondered if he could rebuild the fire.

He was suddenly shaken with terror at the thought that already he did not know in what direction the fire and the cabin lay. He had become turned around when he strode out to light the match. Instantly he began to search for the cabin door. He went down on his hands in the snow, groping, then moved in a slow, careful circle. Just one little second's bewilderment, one variation from the circle, and he might lose the cabin altogether. That meant *death!* It could mean no other thing.

But in a moment the smoke blew into his face, and he advanced into the ashes. The next moment, by circling again, he found the cabin door. He leaned against it, breathing hard.

"It won't do, Bill," he told himself. "Hold steady—for one minute more."

A spruce log, the last segment of the tree he had cut, lay somewhere a few feet from his door. But he remembered it had fallen into a thicket of evergreen: could he find it now? The log would not burn until it was cut up with his ax: the ax would be hard to find in the pressing darkness. Even if he found it, even if he could cut kindling with his knife, he couldn't maintain a blaze. Building and mending a fire with green timber is a cruel task even with vision; and he knew as well as he knew the fact of his own life that it would be wholly impossible to the blind.

Then what was left? Only a deeper, colder darkness than this he knew now. Death was left—nothing else. In an hour, perhaps in a half-hour, possibly not until the night had gone and come again with its wind and its chill, the end would be the same. There was no light to guide him home, no landmarks that he could see.

Then his thought seized upon an idea so fantastic, seemingly so impossible of achievement, that at first he could not give it credence. His mind had flashed to those unfortunates that had sometimes lost their way in the dark chambers of an underground cavern and thence to that method by which they guarded against this danger. These men carried strings, unwinding them as they entered the cavern and following them out. He had not carried a string-end here, but he had made a trail! His snowshoe tracks probably were not yet obliterated under the wind-blown snow. Could he feel his way along them back to the cabin?

The miles were many and long, but he wouldn't have to creep on hands and knees all the way. Perhaps he could walk, stooped, touching the depressions in the snow at every step. In his own soul he did not believe that he had one chance in a hundred of making it through to safety. Crawling, creeping, groping from track to track would wear him out quickly. But was there any other course for him? If he didn't try that, would he have any alternative other than to lie still and die? He wasn't sure that he could even find the tracks in the snow, but if he were able to encircle the cabin at a radius of fifty feet he could not miss them. He groped about at the side of the cabin for his snowshoes.

He found them in a minute, then walked straight as he could fifty feet out from the door. Once more he went on hands and feet, groping in the icy snow. He started to make a great circle.

Fifteen feet farther he felt a break in the even surface. The snow had been so soft and his shoes had sunk so deep that the powdered flakes the wind had strewn during the night had only half filled his tracks. He started to follow them down.

He walked stooped, groping with one hand, and after an endless time his fingers dipped into dry, warm ashes.

Only for a fraction of a second did he fail to understand. And in the darkness and the silence the man's breath caught in what was almost a sob. He realized that he had followed the tracks in the wrong direction, and had traced them straight to the cabin door that he had just left.

It was only a matter of a hundred feet, but it was tragedy here. Once more he started on the out-trail.

He soon found that he could not walk in his present stooped position. Human flesh is not build to stand such a strain as that. Before he had gone half a mile sharp pains began to attack him, viciously, in the back and thighs. For all his magnificent strength—largely returned to him in his hours of rest—he could not progress in this position more than half a mile farther.

He took another course. He would walk ahead five paces, then drop down and grope again for the tracks. Sometimes he found them at once, often he had to go on his hands and feet and start to circle. Then, finding the trail, he would mush on for five steps more.

Oh, the way was cruel! He could not see to avoid the stinging lash of the spruce needles, the cruel blows of the branches. Already the attempt began to partake of a quality of nightmare,—a blind and stumbling advance over infinite difficulties through the infinity of time. It was like some torment of an evil Hereafter,—eternal, remorseless, wholly without hope. Many times he sprawled at full length, and always it was harder to force himself to his feet.

Five steps on, halting and groping, then five steps more: thus the lone figure journeyed through the winter forest. The seconds dragged into the minutes, the minutes into hours. The cold deepened; likely it was the bitter hour just after dawn. The hand with which he groped for the tracks had lost all power of feeling.

He could not judge distance or time. Already it seemed to him that he had been upon the journey endless hours. Because of the faint grayness before his eyes he judged it was broad daylight: perhaps already the day was giving over to darkness. He didn't know how far he had come. The only thought he had left was always to count his terrible five steps, and count five more.

Nothing else mattered. He had for the moment at least lost sight of all other things. His thought was not so clear now; it seemed to him that the forest was no longer silent. There were confused murmurings in his ear, a curious confusion and perplexity in his brain. It was hard to remember who he was and where he was going. Just to count his steps, stoop, grope and find the snowshoe trail, then journey on again.

He tried to increase the number of steps between his gropings—first six, then seven. Above seven, however, the trail was so hard to find that time was lost rather than gained. Yes, he thought it was still daylight. Sometimes he seemed to feel the sunlight on his face. He was not cold now, and even the pain was gone from his hips and thighs.

He was mistaken in this, however. The pain still sent its fearful messages to his brain, but in his growing stupor he was no longer aware of them. Even his hand didn't hurt him now. He wondered if it were frozen; yet it was still sensitive to the depressions in the drifts. It could still grope through the snow and find the tracks.

"I can't go on!" his voice suddenly spoke aloud. "I can't go—any more."

The words seemed to come from an inner man, without volition on his part. He was a little amazed to hear them. Yet the time had not yet come to stop and rest. The tracks still led him on.

Always, it seemed to him, he had to grope longer to find the indentations in the snow. The simple reason was that the motor centers of his brain had begun to be impaired by cold and exhaustion, and he could no longer walk in a straight line. He found out, however, that the trail usually lay to the right rather than to his left. He was taking a shorter step with his left than with his right—the same tendency that often makes a tired woodsman walk in a great circle—and he thus bore constantly to the left. Soon it became necessary to drop his formula down to six, then to the original five.

On and on, through the long hours. But the fight was almost done. Exhaustion and hunger, but cold most of all, were swiftly breaking him down. He advanced with staggering steps.

The indentations were more shallow now. The point where he had begun to break through the snow crust, because of the softening snow, was passed long ago: only because he was in a valley sheltered from the wind were the tracks manifest at all.

The time came at last when he could no longer get upon his feet. And now, like a Tithonus who could not die, he crawled along the snowshoe trail on his hands and knees. "I can't go on," he told himself. "I'm through!" Yet always his muscles made one movement more.

Suddenly he missed the trail. His hand groped in vain over the white crust. He crept on a few more feet, then as ever, began to circle. Soon his hand found an indentation in the snow crust, and he started to creep forward again.

But slowly the conviction grew upon him that he was crawling in a small circle,—the very circle he had just made. Some way, he had missed the snowshoe trail. He did not remember how on his journey out he had once been obliged to backtrack a hundred yards and start on at a new angle. He had merely come to that point from which he had turned back. He could not find the

trail because he was at its end.

He could not remember that it was his own trail. How he came here, his purpose and his destination, were all lost and forgotten in the intricate mazes of the past. He had but one purpose, one theme,—to keep to his trail and journey on. He would make a bigger circle. He started to creep forward in the snow.

But as he waited, on hands and knees in the drifts, the Spirit of Mercy came down to him and gave him one moment of lucid thought. All at once full consciousness returned to him in a sweep as of a tide, and he remembered all that had occurred. He saw all things in their exact relations. And now he knew his course.

No longer would he struggle on, slave to the remorseless instinct of self-preservation. Was there any glory, any happiness at his journey's end that would pay him for the agony of one more forward step? He had waged a mighty battle; but now—in a flash—he realized that the spoil for which he had fought was not worth one moment of his hours of pain. He remembered Virginia, Harold, the mind and its revelation: he recalled that his mission had been merely an expedition after provisions so that the two could go out of his life. Was there any reason why he should fight for life, only to find death?

There was nothing in the distant cabin worth having now. He was suddenly crushed with bitterness at the thought that he had made this mighty effort for a goal not worth attaining. If he struggled on, even to success, the only thing that waited him was a moment of farewell with Virginia and the vision of her slipping away from him, into her lover's arms. When she departed only the forest and the darkness would be left, and he had these here.

It would be different if he felt Virginia still needed him. If he could win her any happiness by fighting on, the struggle would still be worth while. But she had Harold to show her the way through the winter woods. It was true that they would have to rely on the fallen grizzly for meat: an uncomfortable experience, but nothing to compare with any further movement through the cruel drifts. Harold would come back and claim the mine; perhaps he would even erect his own notice before his departure, and the Rutheford family would know the full fruits of their crime of long ago. But it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered now was rest and sleep.

Slowly he sank down in the snow.

XXIV

When the Chinook wind, moving northwest at a faster pace than the waterfowl move south, struck the home cabin, Virginia's first thought was for Bill. She heard it come, faint at first, then blustering, just as Bill had heard it; she saw it rock down a few dead trees, and she listened to its raging complaints at the window.

"I'll show you my might," it seemed to say. "You have dared my silent places, come into my fastness, but now I will have revenge. I'll pay you—in secret ways that you don't know."

It so happened that Harold's first thought was also of Bill. It was a curious fact that his heart seemed to leap as if the wind had smitten it. He knew what the Chinook could do to a snow crust. He estimated that Bill was about halfway between the two cabins, and he didn't know about the little, deserted cabin where Bill could find refuge during the night. His eyes gleamed with high anticipations.

Harold's thought was curiously intertwined with the remembrance of the dark cavern he had entered yesterday, the gravel laden with gold. If indeed all things went as it seemed likely that they would go, Bill would never carry the word of his find down to the recorder's office. It was something to think of, something to dream about. Yellow gold,—and no further trouble in seeking it. Such a development would also save the labor of further planning. It was a friend of his, this wind at the window.

"Won't this Chinook melt the snow crust?" Virginia asked him.

He started. He hadn't realized that this newfound sweetheart of his knew the ways of Chinook winds and snow crusts. "Oh, no," he responded. "Why should it? Wind makes crusts, not softens them."

Virginia was satisfied for the moment. Then her mind went back to certain things Bill had told her on one of their little expeditions. Strangely, she took Bill's word rather than Harold's.

"But this is a warm wind, Harold," she objected. "If the crust is melted Bill can't possibly get through to his Twenty-three Mile cabin to-night. What will he do?"

"He'll make it through. The crust won't melt that fast, if it melts at all. He may have a long, hard tramp, though. Don't worry, Virginia, he'll be coming in to-morrow night—with his back loaded with food."

"I only wish I hadn't let him go." The girl's tone was heavy and dull.

"But we have to have supplies——"

"We could have gone out on that grizzly meat. It was so foolish to risk his life, and I had a presentiment too."

He was glad that she had had a presentiment. It tended to verify his fondest dreams. But he laughed at her, and falling into one of his most brilliant moods, tried to entertain her. Her interest was hard to hold to-day. Her mind kept dwelling on Bill, mushing on through the softening snow, and her eyes kept seeking the window.

She cooked lunch and burned every dish. Then, no longer able to deny her own fears, she ventured out in the snow to test its crust. She put on her snowshoes, starting a little way down Bill's trail. She was white-faced and sick of heart when she returned.

"Harold, I'm worried," she cried. "I tried to walk in this snow—and you can talk about Bill making it through all you want, but I won't believe you. A hundred steps has tired me out."

He was beginning to be a little angry with her fears. And he made the mistake of answering rather impatiently.

"Well, what can you do about it? he's gone, hasn't he, and we can't call him back."

"I suppose not. But if I—we—were out there in that soft snow, and he was here, he'd find something to do about it! He'd come racing out there to us—bringing food and blankets——"

"Oh, he'd be a hero!" Harold scorned. "Listen, Virginia—there's nothing in the world to fear. The Chinook sprang up at nine——"

"Oh, it was much later than that."

"I looked at my watch," the man lied. "He was only well started then; he's woodsman enough to turn around and come back if there's danger. You may see him before dark."

"I pray that I will! And if—if—anything has happened to him——"

All at once the tears leaped to her eyes. She couldn't restrain them any more than the earth can constrain the rain. She turned into her own curtained-off portion of the cabin so that Harold could not see.

The afternoon that followed was endlessly long, and lonely. Her heart sank at the every complaint of the wind, and she dreaded the fall of the shadows. Three times she thrilled with inexpressible joy at a sound on the threshold, but always it was just the wind, mocking her distress.

She saw the sinister, northern night growing between the spruce trees, and she dreaded it as never before. She cooked a meager supper—the supplies were almost gone—but she had no heart to sit up and talk with Harold. At last she went behind her curtain, hoping to forget her fears in sleep.

All through the hours of early night she slept only at intervals: dozing, coming to herself in starts and jerks, and dreaming miserably. The hours passed, and still Bill did not return.

Her imagination was only too vivid. In her thoughts she could see this stalwart woodsman of hers camping somewhere in the snowdrifts, blanketless, staying awake through the bitter night to mend the fire, and perhaps in trouble. She knew something of the northern cold that was assailing him, hovering, waiting for the single instant when his fire should go down or when he should drop off to sleep. Oh, it was patient, remorseless. He was likely hungry, too, and despairing.

She wakened before dawn; and the icy, winter stars were peering through the cabin window. Surely Bill had returned by now: yet it would hardly be like him to come in and not let her know of his safe return. He had always seemed so well to understand her fears, he was always so thoughtful. There was no use trying to go back to sleep until she knew for certain. She slipped from her bed onto the floor of the icy cabin.

She missed the cozy warmth of the fire; but, shivering, she slipped quickly into her clothes. Then she lighted a candle and put on her snowshoes. She munched across the little space of snow to the men's cabin.

The east was just beginning to pale: the stars seemed lucid as ever in the sky. There was a labyrinth of them, uncounted millions that gleamed and twinkled in every little rift between the spruce trees. Even the stars of lesser magnitude that through the smoke of her native city had

never revealed themselves were out in full array to-night. And the icy air stabbed like knives the instant she left the cabin door. It was the coldest hour she had ever known.

She knocked on Harold's door, then waited for a reply. But the cabin was ominously silent. Her fears increased: she knew that if Bill were present he would have wakened at her slightest sound. He would have seemed to know instinctively that she was there. She knocked again, louder.

"Who's there?" a sleepy voice answered. Virginia felt a world of impatience at the dull, drowsy tones. Harold had been able to sleep! He wasn't worrying over Bill's safety.

"It's I—Virginia. I'm up and dressed. Did Bill come back?"

"Bill? No—and what in God's earth are you up this early for? Forget about Bill and go back to bed."

"Listen, Harold," she pleaded. "Don't tell me to go back to bed. I feel—I know something's happened to him. He couldn't have gone on clear to the cabin in that awful snow; he either started back or camped. In either case, he's in trouble—freezing or exhausted. And—and—I want you to go out and look for him."

Harold was fully awake now, and he had some difficulty in controlling his voice. In the first place he had no desire to rescue Bill. In the second, he was angry and bitterly jealous at her concern for him. "You do, eh—you'd like to send me out on a bitter night like this on a fool's errand such as that. Where is there a cabin along the way—you'd only kill me without helping him."

"Nonsense, Harold. You could take that big caribou robe and some food, and if you had to camp out it wouldn't kill you. Please get up and go, Harold." Her tone now was one of pleading. "Oh, I want you to—"

"Go back to bed!" But Harold remembered, soon, that he wasn't talking to his squaw, and his voice lost its impatient note. "Don't worry about Bill any more. He'll come in all right. I'm not going out on any wild-goose chase like that—on a day such as to-day will be. You'll see I'm right when you think about it."

"Think!" she replied in scorn. "If it were Bill he wouldn't stop to think. He'd just act. You won't go, then?"

"Don't be foolish, Virginia."

Angry words rose in her throat, but she suppressed them. A daring idea had suddenly filled her with wonder. It came full-grown: that she herself should start forth into the snow deserts to find Bill herself.

Virginia had not been trained to self-reliance. Except for her northern adventure, she had never been obliged to face difficulties, to care for and protect herself, to work with her hands and do everyday tasks. To build a fire, to repair a leaking tap, to take responsibility for anything above such schoolday projects as amateur plays and social gatherings would have seemed tasks impossible of achievement. At first it had never occurred to her that she might herself be of aid to Bill. The old processes of her mind still ran true to form; she had gone to ask a man to carry out her wish. At first she had felt wholly helpless at his refusal. But why should she not go herself?

If indeed Bill had reached the Twenty-three Mile cabin, he would be mushing home by now; she would meet him somewhere on his snowshoe trail. No harm would be done. It might even be a pleasant adventure to mush with him in the snow. The snow itself was perfect for travel; and she had learned that her strong young body was capable of long distances in a day. And if he were in trouble she could help him.

It might mean building a fire in the snow and possibly camping out through the day and night to come. It would be a dreadful and dangerous experience, yet she saw no reason why she couldn't endure it. Bill had showed her how to make the best of such a bad situation as this. He had taught her how to build a fire in the snow; her round, slender arms—made muscular in her weeks in the North—could cut fuel to keep it burning. Besides, she would carry the caribou robe—one of the cot coverings that Bill had stored in his cabin and which, though light as down, was practically impervious to cold. Besides, there was no one else to go.

She went swiftly to her cabin, put on her warmest clothing, and, as Bill had showed her, rolled a compact pack for her back. She took a little package of food—nourishing chocolate and dried meat—the whisky flask that had been her salvation the night of the river experience, and a stub of candle for fire-building, tying them firmly in the caribou robe. The entire package weighed only about ten pounds. She fastened it on her shoulders, hung a camp ax at her belt; and as she waited for the dawn, ate a hearty but cold breakfast. Then, with never a backward look, she started away, down the dim, wind-blown, snowshoe trail.

XXV

Now that the fight was done, Bill lay quite calm and peaceful in the drifts. The pain of the cold and the wrack of exhausted muscles were quite gone.

He was face to face with the flaming truth, and he knew his fate. The North, defied so long, had conquered him at last. It had been waiting for him, lurking, watching its chance; and with its cruel agents, the bitter cold and the unending snow, it had crushed and beaten him down. He felt no resentment. He was glad that the trial was over. He knew a deep, infinite peace.

Sleep was encroaching upon him now. He felt himself drifting, and the tide would never bring him back. He stirred a little, putting his hands in his armpits, his face resting on his elbow. The wind swept by, sobbing: there in the shadow of death he caught its tones and its messages as never before. He was being swept into space. ...

On the trail that he had made on the out-journey, and which he had tried to vainly to follow back, Virginia came mushing toward him. Never before had her muscles responded so obediently to her will; she sped at a pace that she had never traveled before. It was as if some power above herself was bearing her along, swiftly, easily, with never a wasted motion. She tilted the nose of her snowshoes just the right angle, no more or less, and all her muscles seemed to work in perfect unison.

The bitter cold of the early morning hours only made her blood flow faster and gave her added energy. She scarcely felt the pack on her back. The snowshoe trail, however, was so faint as to be almost invisible.

Because the snow had been firm in this part of Bill's journey, his track was not so deep and the drifting snow had almost completely filled it. In a few places the track was entirely obscured; always there were merely dim indentations. If she had started an hour later she could not have followed the trail at all. For all the day was clear, the wind still whirled flurries of dry snow across her path.

But she didn't permit herself to despair. If need be, she told herself, she would follow him clear to the Twenty-three Mile cabin. The tracks were ever more dim, but surely they would be deeper again where Bill had encountered the soft snow.

It became increasingly probable, however, that the tracks would completely fade away before that time. Soon the difficulty of finding the imprints in the snow began to slacken her gait. To lose them completely meant failure: she could not find her way in these snowy stretches unguided. As morning reached its full, the white wastes seemed to stretch unbroken.

Was the wind-blown snow going to defeat her purpose, after all? A great weight of fear and disappointment began to assail her. The truth of the matter was she had come to an exposed slope, and the trail had faded out under the snow dust.

At first there seemed nothing to do but turn back. It might be possible, however, to cross the ridge in front: the valley beyond was more sheltered by the wind and she might pick up the trail again. At least she could follow her own tracks back, if she failed. She sped swiftly on.

She had guessed right. Standing on the ridge top she could see, far off through one of the treeless glades that are found so often in the spruce forest, the long path of a snowshoe trail. Instinctively she followed it with her eyes.

Clear where the trail entered the spruce thicket, her keen eyes made out a curious, black shadow against the snow. For a single second she eyed it calmly, wondering what manner of wild creature it might be. Its outline grew more distinct under her intense gaze, and she cried out. It was only a little sound, half a gasp and half a sob, but it expressed the depths of terror and distress never known to her before.

It seemed to her that she could not move at first. She could only stand and gaze. The heart in her breast turned to ice, her blood seemed to go still in her veins. She recognized this figure now. It was Bill, lying still in the frozen drifts.

For endless hours, it seemed to her, she stood impotent with horror. In reality, the time was not an appreciable fraction of a breath. Then, sobbing, she mushed frantically down toward him. She fairly raced,—with never a misstep. For all the ghastly sickness that swept over her, she held her body in perfect discipline. She had no doubt but that this man was dead. Likely he had lain there for hours, and really only a very short time of such cold as this was needed to take life. Already, she thought, the life had gone from his dark, gentle eyes; the brave heart was still; the brave heart was still; the mighty muscles lifeless clay.

No moment of her life had ever been fraught with such overwhelming bitterness as this. She had never known such fear, even in the grip of the wild waters or during the grizzly's charge.

This was something that went deeper than mere life: it touched realms of her spirit undreamed of, and the blow seemed more cruel and more dreadful than any that the world could deal direct to her. If she had paused for one second of self-analysis, heaven knows what light might have burst upon her spirit—what deep and wondrous realizations of her attitude toward Bill might have come to her; but she did not pause. She only knew that she must reach his side. Her only thought was that Bill was dead, gone from her life as a flame goes from an extinguished candle.

She knelt beside him, and with no knowledge of effort turned him over and lifted his head and shoulders into her arms. His eyes were closed, his face expressionless, his arms dropped limply to his side. At first she dared not dream but that the cold had already taken away his life. The dread Spirit of the North had lain in ambush for him a long time, but it had conquered him at last.

They made an unearthly picture,—these two so silent in the drifts. Endless about them lay the snow; the winter forest was deep in its eternal silence, the little spruce trees stood patient and inert and queer, under their heavy loads of snow. Never a voice in all the wastes, never a tear of pity or a stretching hand of mercy,—only the cold, only the silence, only the dread solitude of a land untamed,—the unconquerable wild. Yet her sorrow, her ineffable despair left no room for resentment against this dreadful land. It was only a lost fight in an eternal war; only a little incident in the vast and inscrutable schemes of a remorseless Nature.

She knew life now, this girl of cities. She knew that in her past life she had never really lived: she had only moved in a gentle dream that an artificial civilization had made possible. The gayeties, the culture, the luxuries and the fashions that had seemed so real and so essential before were revealed in their true light, only as dreams that would pass: deep in them she had never heard the crash of armor in the battlefields without her bower. But she knew now. She saw life as it was, stark and cruel, remorseless, pitiless to the weak, treacherous to the strong, ever waging war against all creatures that dwelt upon the earth.

Yet so easily could it have been redeemed! If this man were standing strong beside her, life would be nothing to fear, nothing to appall her spirit. All the ancient persecutions of the elements, all the pitfalls of life and the exigencies of fortune could never bow their heads. Instead they would know high adventure and the exhilaration of battle; even if at the day's end they should go down into death, it would be with unbroken spirits and brave hearts.

But she couldn't stand alone! She needed the touch of his hand, his shoulder against hers, the communion of his spirit and his strength. Life was an appalling thing to face alone! There was no joy now in the punishing cold and the wastes of forest; only sadness and fear and despair. Sitting in the snow, his head and shoulders in her arms, she knew a fear and a loneliness undreamed of before, a loss that could never be atoned for or redeemed.

She too knew the lesson that Bill had learned in his hour of bitterness,—that one moment of heaven may atone for a whole life of struggle and sorrow. One clasp of arms, one whispered message, one mighty impulse of the soul in which eternity is seized and the stars are gathered might glorify the whole bitter struggle of existence. One little kiss might pay for it all. Yet for all that Harold still lived and waited for her in the cabin, she felt that this one little instant of resurrection was irrevocably lost.

It seemed so strange to her that he should be lying here, impotent in her arms. Always he had been so strong, he had stood so straight,—always coming to her aid in a second of need, always strengthening her with his smile and his eyes. She could hardly believe that this was he,—never to cheer her again in their hard tramps, to lend her his mighty strength in a moment of crisis, to laugh with her at some little tragedy. She sobbed softly, and her tears lay on his face. "Bill, oh, Bill, won't you wake up and speak to me?" she cried. She pleaded softly, but he didn't seem to hear.

"Come back to me, Bill—I need you," she told him. He had always been so quick to come when she needed him before now. "Are you *dead*?— Oh, you couldn't be *dead*! It's so cold—and I'm afraid. Oh, please open your eyes—"

She kissed him over and over—on the lips, on his closed eyes. She pressed his head against her soft breast, as if her fluttering heart would give some of its life to him.

Dead? Was that it? All at once she set to work to win back her self-control. It might not yet be too late to help. She gripped herself, dispelling at once all hysteria, all her vagrant thoughts. He would have been hard at work long since. His face was still warm—perhaps life had not yet passed.

She put her head to his breast. His heart was beating—slowly, but steadily and strong.

Bill had not been lying long inert in the snow. Otherwise Virginia would not have heard his heart thumping so steadily in his breast. In fact, she was almost on the top of the ridge when he had given up. He had just drifted off to sleep when she reached his side.

And now he thought he was in the midst of some wonderful, glorious dream. Death was being merciful, after all: in the moment of its descent it was giving him the image of his fondest dream. It seemed to him that soft, warm arms were about him, that his head was pillowed against a tenderness, a holiness passing understanding. He didn't want the dream to end. It would in a moment, the darkness would drop over him; but even for the breath that it endured it almost atoned for the full travail of his life.

There were kisses, too. They came so softly, so warm, just as he had dreamed. "Virginia," he whispered. "Is it you, Virginia—come to me—?"

Then, so clearly that he could no longer retain the delusion of dream, he heard his answer. "Yes—and I've come to save you."

It was true. Her arms were about him; he was nestled against her breast. Yet the kisses must have been only a dream that was worth death to gain. She was at work on him now. He felt her swift motions; now she was putting a flask to his lips. A burning liquid poured into his throat.

There ensued a moment of indescribable peace, and then the flask was put to his lips again. The inner forces of his body, fighting still for his life even after he had given up, seized quickly upon the warming liquor, forced it into his blood, and drove away the frost that was beginning to congeal his life fluids. Already he felt a new stir in his veins. He struggled to speak.

"No yet," the girl whispered. "Don't make any effort yet."

She gave him more of the liquor. He felt strength returning to his muscles. He tried to open his eyes. The sharp pain was a swift reminder of his blindness. "I'm blind——" he told her.

"No matter, I'll save you." Even his blindness would not put a barrier between them. One glance at the inflamed lids, however, told her that in all probability it was just a temporary blindness from some great irritation, soon to be dispelled. "Can you eat?" she asked.

The man nodded.

"It's better to, if you can. The whisky is only a stimulant, and it won't keep you alive." She thrust a fragment of sweet chocolate into his mouth, permitting it to melt. "You'd better get to your feet as soon as you can—and try to get the flood flowing right again. We're only a few miles from the cabin—if you'll just fight we can make it in."

He shook his head. "I can't—I can't go any farther. I can't see the way."

"But I'll lead you." By her intuition she guessed his despair; and she comforted him, his head against her breast. "Don't you know I'll lead you?" she cried, a world of pleading in her tone. "Oh, Bill—you can't give up. You must try. If you die, I'll die too—here beside you. Oh, Bill—don't you know I need you?"

The words stirred and wakened him more than all her first aid. She needed him; she was pleading to him to get up and go on. Could he refuse that appeal? Could any wish of hers, as long as he lived and was able to strive for her, go ungranted? The blood mounted through his veins, awakened. A mysterious strength flowed back into his thews.

There could be no further question of giving up. He struggled with himself, and his voice was almost his own when he spoke. "Give me more food—and more whisky," he commanded. "Take some yourself too—you'll have to help me a lot going home. And give me your hands."

He struggled to his feet. He reeled, nearly fell; but her arms held him up. She gave him more chocolate and a swallow of the burning liquid.

"It's a race against time," she told him. "If I can get you into the cabin before the reaction comes, I can save you. Try with every muscle you've got, Bill—for me!"

She need make no other appeal. She took his hand, and they started mushing over the drifts.

The moose that stands at bay against the wolf pack, the ferocious little ermine in the grasp of the climbing marten never made a harder, more valiant fight than these two waged on the way to the cabin. There was no mercy for them in the biting cold. Bill was frightfully worn and spent from his experience of the day and the previous night, and Virginia had lent her own young strength to him. Often he reeled and faltered, and at such times her arm in his kept him up. The miles seemed innumerable and long.

A might that has its seat higher and beyond the mere energy-giving chemistry of their bodies came to their aid. Virginia had never dreamed that she possessed such power of endurance and unflinching muscles: a spirit born of an unconquerable will rose within her and bore her on. She was aware of no physical pain; the magnificent exertion of her muscles was almost unconscious.

Just as women fight for the lives of their babes she fought for him, as if it were the deepest instinct of her being. The thought of giving up was intolerable, and such spirit is the soul of victory!

They won at last. Without the stimulant and the nutritious food defeat would have been certain. But all these factors would have been unavailing except for the fighting spirit that her appeal to him had awakened and which she had found, full-grown, in her own soul.

They mused up to the cabin, and Harold stared at them like a lifeless thing as Bill reeled through the doorway. Virginia led him to her own cot, then drew the blankets over him. And she was not so exhausted but that she could continue the fight for his recovery.

"Build up the fire, and do it quickly," she ordered Harold. Her tone was terse, commanding, and curiously he leaped to obey her. She removed Bill's snow-covered garments, and as Harold went out to procure more fuel she put water on the stove to heat. Then, procuring snow, she began to rub Bill's right hand, the hand that had been frozen in his effort to grope for the trail. Quick and hard work was needed to save it.

Harold came to her aid, but she put him to other work. She wanted to do this task herself. Then she aroused the woodsman from his half-sleep to give him coffee, cup after cup of it that used up the last of their meager supply.

It is one of the peculiar faculties of the human body to recover quickly from the effects of severe cold. Even coupled with exhaustion his hardships had wrought no lasting organic injury, and the magnificent recuperative powers of Bill's tough body came quickly to his aid. About midnight he wakened from a long sleep, wholly clear-headed and free from pain. Wet bandages were over his eyes.

He groped and in a moment found Virginia's hands. But an instant he held them only; it was enough to know that she was near. He realized that he was out of danger now: such tenderness as she had given him must be forgotten. She was still sitting beside his bed, wrapped in a blanket.

He started to get up so that she could have her own cot; but she wakened at his motions. Gently she pushed him down.

"But I'm all right now," he told her. "I'm sleepy—and sore—but I'm strong as ever. Let me go to my bed, and get some sleep."

"No. I'm not sleepy yet."

But the dull tones of her voice—even though Bill could not see the white fatigue in her face—belied her words. Bill laughed, the same gay laugh that had cheered her so many times, and swung his feet to the floor. "It's my turn to be nurse—now," he told her. "Get in quick."

"But I've had Harold bring some blankets here and spread them on the floor," she objected. "I can go to sleep there, when—I'm—tired."

"And I can go to sleep there right now."

With his strong arms he half-lifted her and laid her in his warm place. She yielded to his strength, sleepily and gratefully, and he drew the blankets about her shoulders. The touch of his hand was in some way wonderful,—so strong, so comforting. Then, reeling only a little, he groped his way to the bed she had made upon the floor.

"Good night," he called, when he had pulled his blankets up. Guided by a hope that flooded his heart with tremulous anticipations, he held out his hand in the darkness toward her.

As if by a miracle, her own hand came stealing into his. No man could tell by what unity of longing they had acted: but neither seemed surprised to find the other's, waiting in the darkness. It was simply the Mystery that all men see and no man understands.

He held the little hand in his for just a breath, as a man might hold a holy thing that a prophet had blessed. Then he let it go.

"Good night, Bill," she told him sleepily.

In the hours of refreshing slumber that lasted full into the next morning there was but one curious circumstance. In the full light of morning it seemed to him that he heard the faint prick of a rifle, far away. The truth was that for all his heavy sleep, some of his guardian senses were awake to receive impressions, and the sound was a reality. It was curiously woven into the fabric of his dreams.

There were four shots, one swiftly upon another. Four,—and the figure four had a puzzling, yet sinister significance to his mind. He didn't know what it was: he had a confused sense of some sort of an inner warning, an impression of impending danger and treachery. Who was it that had held up four fingers somewhere in his experience, and what manner of signal had it been? But Bill didn't fully waken. His dreams ran on, confused and troubled.

XXVII

The same rifle shots that brought bad dreams to Bill had a much more lucid meaning for Joe Robinson and Pete the Breed, the two Indians that were occupying Harold's cabin. The wind bore toward them from Harold's new abode, the rifle was of heavy caliber, and the sound came clear and unmistakable through the stillness. They looked from one to the other.

"Four shots," Pete said at last. "Lounsbury's signal."

Pete stood very still, as if in thought. "Didn't come heap too quick," he observed. "One day more you and me been gone down to Yuga—after supplies."

"Yes—but we can't go now." Joe's face grew crafty. The wolfish character of his eyes was for the moment all the more pronounced. There was a hint of excitement in his swarthy, unclean face.

"That means—big doin's," he pronounced gravely. "We go."

Pete agreed, and they made swift preparations for their departure. Some of these preparations would have been an amazement to the white woodsmen of the region,—for instance, the slow cleaning and oiling of their weapons. The red race—at least such representatives of it as lived in Clearwater—was not greatly given to cleanliness in any form. It was noticeable that Joe looked well to see if his pistol was loaded, and Pete slapped once at the long, cruel blade that he wore in his belt. Then they put on their snowshoes and mushed away.

There was no nervous waiting at the appointed meeting place,—a spring a half-mile from Bill's cabin. Harold Lounsbury was already there. The look on his face confirmed Joe's predictions very nicely. There would, it seemed, be big doings, and very soon.

A stranger to this land might have thought that Harold was drunk. Unfamiliar little fires glittered and glowed in his eyes, his features were drawn, his word of greeting was heavy and strained. His hands, however, were quite steady as he rolled his cigarette.

For all that the North had failed to teach him so many of its lessons Harold knew how to deal with Indians. It was never wise to appear too eager; and he had learned that a certain nonchalance, an indifference, gave prestige to his schemes. The truth was, however, that Harold was seared by inner and raging fires. He had just spent the most black and bitter night of his life. The hatred that had been smoldering a long time in his breast had at last burst into a searing flame.

There was one quality, at least, that he shared with the breeds; hatred was an old lesson soon learned and never forgotten. He had hated Bill from the first moment, not only for what he was and what he stood for—so opposite to Harold in everything—but also for that first mortifying meeting in his own cabin. He felt no gratitude to him for rescuing him from his degenerate life. The fact that Bill's agency, and Bill's alone, had brought Virginia to his arms was no softening factor in his malice. Every day since, it seemed to him, he had further cause for hatred, till now it stung and burned him like strong drink, like live hot steam in his brain. In his inner soul he knew that Bill had endured tests in which he had failed, and he hated him the worse for it. He had sensed Bill's contempt for him, and the absolute fairness with which the woodsman had always treated him brought no remorse. Bill had found the mine for which he sought, to which, by the degenerate code by which he lived, he felt he had an ancestral right.

Ever since he had gone down into that darkened treasure house he had known in his own soul, late or soon, his future course. The gold alone was worth the crime he planned. And as a crowning touch came the events of the day and night just passed.

He had had no desire for Bill to return to the cabin alive. It would have been a simple way out of his difficulties for the woodsman to fall and die in the snow wastes of Clearwater. For him to lie so still and impotent in the drifts would compensate for many things, and in such a case he would never have opportunity to record the finding of his mine. The only imperfection, in this event, was that it deprived Harold of his personal vengeance, and magnanimously he was willing to forgo that. It wouldn't be his pleasure to see the final agony, the last shudder of the frame,—but yet at least he might see much remnants as would be left when the snow had melted in spring.

Every event of the day had pointed to a successful trip, from Harold's point of view. He had known that Bill couldn't make it through to his Twenty-three Mile cabin after the Chinook wind had softened the snow. The bitter night that followed would have likely claimed quickly any one that tried to sleep, without blankets, unsheltered in the snow fields. And when Virginia had gone out to save him and had brought back the blind and reeling man, his first impulse had been to leap upon him, in his helplessness, and drive his hunting knife through his heart!

It wouldn't, however, had been a wise course to pursue. He didn't want to lose Virginia. He flattered himself that he had been cunning and self-mastered. He had watched Virginia's tender services to the woodsman, and once he had seen a luster in her eyes that had seemed to shatter his reason. And he knew that the time had come to strike.

He felt no remorse. The North had stripped him of all the masks with which civilization had disguised him, and he was simply his father's son.

This was a land of savage and primitive passions, and he felt no self-amazement that he should be planning a murderous and an inhuman crime. He had learned certain lessons of cruelty from the wilderness; the savage breeds with whom he had mingled had had their influence too. Bill, born and living in a land of beasts, had kept the glory of manhood; Harold, coming from a land of men, had fallen to the beasts' own level. And even the savage wolf does not slay the pack-brother that frees him from a trap! Besides, his father's wicked blood was prompting his every step.

He threw the cigarette away and glanced critically at the rifles of his two confederates. The breeds waited patiently for him to speak. "Where's Sindy?" he asked at last.

They began to wonder if he had called them here just to ask about Sindy, and for an instant they were sullenly unresponsive. But the heavy lines on their master's face soon reassured them. "Over Buckshot Dan's—just where you said," Joe replied.

"Of course Buckshot took her back?" The Indians nodded. "Well, I'm going to let him keep her. I've got a white squaw now—and soon I'm going out with her—to the Outside. But there's things to do first. Bill has found the mine."

The others nodded gravely. They expected some such development.

"And Bill is as blind as a mole—got caught in a cabin full of green-wood smoke. He'll be able to see again in a day or two. So I sent for you right away."

The breeds nodded again, a trifle less phlegmatically. Perhaps Pete's eyes had begun to gleam,—such a gleam as the ptarmigan sees in the eyes of the little weasel, leaping through the snow.

"The mine's worth millions—more money than you can dream of. Each of you get a sixth—one third divided between you. You'll never get more money for one night's work. More than you can spend, if you live a hundred winters. But you agree first to these terms—or you won't know where the mine is."

"Me—I want a fourth," Joe answered sullenly.

"All right. Turn around and go home. I don't want you."

It was a bluff, but it worked. Joe came to terms at once. Treacherous himself and expecting treachery, Harold wisely decided that he wouldn't divulge the location of the mine, however, until all needed work was done.

"As soon as we've finished what I've planned, we'll tear down his claim notices and put up our own, then go down to the recorder and record the claim," Harold went on. "Then it's ours. No one will ever guess. No one'll make any trouble."

Joe's mind seemed to leap ahead of the story, and he made a very pertinent question. "The white squaw. Maybe she'll tell?"

Harold glared at him. The man inferred that he couldn't master his own woman. "Didn't you hear me say she was *my* squaw? I'll tend to her. Besides—the way I've got it planned, she won't know—at least she won't understand. Now listen, you two, and don't make any mistake. I've got to go back to the cabin now—try to be there before they wake up. They're both tired out from a hard experience yesterday—and, as I told you, Bill's as blind as a gopher.

"Both of you are to come to the cabin, just about dark. You'll tell me you have been over Bald Peak way and are hitting back toward the Yuga village. Bring along a quart of booze—firewater—and maybe two quarts would be better. We'll have supper, and you'd better bring along something in your pocket for yourselves. It will put the girl in a better mood. And now—you see what you've got to do?"

Neither of them answered. They could guess—but they didn't conceive of the real brilliancy of the plan.

"If you can't, you're dummies. It's just this"—and Harold's face drew into an unlovely snarl—"sometime in the early evening give Bill what's coming to him."

"Do him off—?" Joe asked stolidly.

"Stamp him out like I stamp this snow!" He paused, and the two breeds leaned toward him, waiting for the next word. They were not phlegmatic now. They were imbued with Harold's own

passion, and their dark, savage faces told the story. Their features were beginning to draw, even as his; their eyes were lurid slits above the high cheek bones.

"Make it look like a fight," Harold went on. "Insult him—better still, get in a quarrel among yourselves. He'll tell you to shut up, and one of you flame up at him. Then strike the life out of him before he knows what he's about. He's blind and he can't fight. Then go back to my cabin and hide out."

"No food in cabin," Joe objected. "Get some from you?"

For a moment Harold was baffled. This was a singularly unfortunate circumstance. But he soon saw the way out. "So you've used up the supplies, eh? Got any booze—?"

"Still two bottles firewater—"

"Good. The trouble is that there's no food at Bill's cabin, either—not enough to last a day. Bring what you have for your supper to-night, or as much of it as you need—and after you're through with Bill go back to your cabin and get what you have left—"

"There won't be none left—"

"Are you so low as that? Then listen. Do you know where Bill's Twenty-three Mile cabin is?"

Pete nodded. Joe made no response.

"Then you can find it, Pete. I haven't any idea where it is myself. It's only a day's march, and he's got it packed with grub. You hide out there, and the little food we have left in the cabin'll be enough to take us down there too—the woman and I—we'll follow your snowshoes tracks. Then we'll make it through to the Yuga from there. And if we have to, we can go over to a grizzly carcass I know of and cut off a few pounds of meat—but we won't have to. We'll join you at the Twenty-three Mile cabin to-morrow night."

Pete the breed looked doubtful. "Bear over—east?" he asked.

"Somewhere over there," Harold replied.

"Don't guess any bear meat left. Heard coyotes—hundred of 'em—over east. Pack of wolves came through too—sang song over there."

Harold could agree with him. If indeed the wolves and the coyotes had gathered—starving gray skulkers of the forest—the great skeleton would have been stripped clean by now. However, it didn't complicate his own problem. The Indians could get down to the Twenty-three Mile cabin with the morsel of food they had left—he and Virginia could follow their trail with the fragment of supplies remaining in Bill's cabin.

"You can go from there to the Yuga and hide out," Harold went on. "I'll go down to the recorder's office with the woman. Don't worry about her, I'll tell 'em that you were two Indians from the East Selkirks, give 'em a couple of false names and send 'em on a goose chase. It's simple as day and doesn't need any nerve. And if you've got it through your heads, I'm going back to the cabin."

They had it through their heads. The plan, as Harold said, was exceedingly simple. They digested it slowly, then nodded. But Pete had one more question—one that was wholly characteristic of his weasel soul.

"What do you want us to use?" he asked. "This?" He indicated the thin blade at his thigh. "Maybe use rifle?"

Harold's eyes looked drowsy when he answered. Something like a lust, a desire swept over him; this question of Pete's moved him in dark and evil ways. "Oh, I don't know," he replied. "It doesn't much matter—" He spoke in a strained, thick voice that was vaguely exciting to the two breeds. For a few seconds he seemed to stand listening, rather than in thought, and he continued his reply as if he were scarcely aware of his own words. It was as if a voice from the past was speaking through his lips. The words came with no conscious effort; rather were they the dread outpourings of an inherent fester in his soul. His father's blood was in the full ascendancy at last.

"There's an old pick on the table—Bill had it prospecting." he said.

XXVIII

Bill's eyes were considerably better when he awakened—full in the daylight. The warm wet cloths had taken part of the inflammation out of them, and when he strained to open the lids, he

was aware of a little, dim gleam of light. He couldn't make out objects, however, and except for a fleeting shadow he could not discern the hand that he swept before his face. Several days and perhaps weeks would pass before the full strength of his sight returned.

His greatest hope at present was that he could grope his way about the cabin and build a fire for Virginia. Whether she wished to get up or not to-day, the growing chill in the room must be removed. He got up, fumbled on the floor for such of his outer garments as Virginia had removed, and after a world of difficulty managed to get them on. He was amazingly refreshed by the night's sleep and Virginia's nursing. His eyes throbbed, of course; his muscles were lame and painful, his head ached and his arms and legs seemed to be dismembered, yet he knew that complete recovery was only a matter of hours.

Building the fire, however, was a grievous task. He felt it incumbent upon him to move with utmost caution so that Virginia would not waken. By groping about the walls he encountered the stove. It was pleasantly warm to his hands, and when he opened the door he found that hot coals were still glowing in the ashes. Then he fumbled about the floor for such fuel as Harold had provided.

He found a piece at last, and soon a cheery crackle told him that it had ignited. He grinned with delight at the thought that he, almost stone blind, had been able to build a fire in a room with a sleeping girl and not waken her. But his joy was a trifle premature. At that instant he tripped over a piece of firewood and his hands crashed against the logs.

"Oh, blast my clumsiness!" he whispered; then stood still as death to see what had befallen. Virginia stirred behind her curtain.

"Is that you, Harold?" she asked.

She was wide awake, and further deception was unavailing. "No. It's Bill."

"Well, what are you doing, up? Did Harold—do you mean to say you built the fire yourself?"

"That's me, lady——"

"Then you must have your sight again——" The girl snatched aside the curtain and peered into his face.

"No such luck. Coals were still glowing; all I had to do was put in a piece of firewood. But I'm all well otherwise, as far as I can tell. How about you?"

The girl stretched up her arms. "A little stiff—Bill, I've certainly gained recuperative powers since I came up here. But, Heavens, I've had bad dreams. And now—I want you to tell me just how this blindness of yours—is going to affect our getting out."

It was a serious question, one to which Bill had already given much thought. "I don't see how it can affect us a great deal," he answered at last. "I realize you don't know one step of the way down to Bradleyburg, and I can't see the way; but Harold knows it perfectly. Of course if we had plenty of food the sensible thing to do would be to wait—till I get back my sight. But you know—we haven't scarcely any food at all. The last of the meat is gone, except one little piece of jerky. We've got a cup or two of flour and one or two cans. Of course there isn't enough to get down to the settlements on."

"Then we'll have to use the grizzly—after all?"

"Of course. Thank God we had him to fall back on. But even with him, I don't think we ought to wait till I get back my sight. We might have other delays, and perhaps another softening of the crust. It will be pretty annoying—traveling on grizzly flesh—and pretty awkward to have a blind man in the party, but—I'll be some good, anyway. Maybe I can cut fuel."

The girl was deeply touched. It was so characteristic of this man that even in his blindness he wished to make the difficulties of the journey just as light as possible for her.

"I won't let you do a thing," she told him. "Harold and I can do the work of camp."

"There won't be much to do, unfortunately; our camping will have to be exceedingly simple. We'll take the sled full of blankets and grizzly meat and what other little things we need. I don't see why you can't ride on it, too—most of the way; the going is largely downhill and the crust is perfect. We can skim along. At night we'll have to sleep out—and not get much sleep, either—but by going hard, even on snowshoes, we can make it through in three days—sleeping out just two nights. Harold and I can build raging fires—he starting them and helping me with the the fuel cutting. Oh, I know, Virginia, I won't be much good on this trip—and those two nights will be pretty terrible. We'll have to take turns in watching the fire. But with blankets around our shoulders, acting as reflectors for the heat, we can get some rest."

"But you are sure Harold knows the way? I couldn't even get as far as the river, and you are blind——"

"Harold knows the way as well as I do. I can mush all right, by hanging on the gee-pole. It

will be comparatively easy going; the brush is covered with snow. The only thing that remains is to have Harold go over and get a supply of the grizzly meat. Or, better still, since he'll have to take the sled, we can pick it up on the way out. It's frozen hard and won't take harm, and it's only a half mile out of our way."

As if the invocation of his name were a magic summons, Harold opened the door and entered. He carried Bill's loud-mouthed rifle in the hollow of his arm.

"You've been hunting?" Virginia cried. She was pleased that this sweetheart of hers should have risen so early in an attempt to secure fresh meat for their depleted larder. It was wholly the manly thing to do.

"Of course. I figured we needed meat. I carried Bill's rifle because I don't trust the sights of mine. They were a yard off that day I shot at the caribou."

"Did you see any game?"

Harold's eyes met hers and narrowed, ever so slightly. But his answer was apt. "I saw a caribou—about two miles away. There didn't seem a chance in the world to hit it, but considering our scarcity of meat, I took that chance. Of course, I didn't hit within ten feet of him; Bill's gun isn't built for such long ranges. I shot—four times."

Bill did not reply. He was thinking about those same four shots. It was incomprehensible that they should have made such an impression upon him.

"And for all that Bill hasn't got his sight back yet, we're going to start down to-morrow," Virginia went on in a gay voice. She glanced once at Bill, but she did not see the world of despair that came into his face at the delight with which she spoke. "You and I will take turns pulling the sled; Bill will hang on to the gee-pole. And Bill says you know the way. We're going to dash right through—camp out only two nights."

"I know the way all right," Harold answered. "What about food?"

"It's only a half-mile out of the way to Bill's mine. There we're going to load the sled with grizzly meat."

It was in Harold's mind that their journey would be far different—down to the Twenty-three Mile cabin and to the Yuga rather than over Grizzly River. But for certain very good reasons he kept this knowledge to himself. His lips opened to tell them that the wolves and coyotes had already devoured the carcass of the bear; but he caught himself in time. It would be somewhat hard to explain how he had learned that fact, in the first place; and in the second, there was a real danger to his plot if this revelation were made. Likely they would suggest that, to conserve what little food they had, they start at once. The time had not yet come to unfold this knowledge.

He nodded. The day passed like those preceding,—simple meals, a few hours of talk around the fire, such fuel cutting as was necessary to keep the cabin snug and to provide a supply for the night. This was their last day in Clearwater,—and Virginia could hardly accept the truth.

How untrue had been her gayety! In all the white lies of her past, all the little pretenses that are as much a part of life in civilization as buildings and streets, she had never been as false to herself as now. She had never had to act a part more cruel,—that she could feel joy at the prospect of her departure.

She could deceive herself no longer. The events of the previous day had opened her eyes—in a small measure at least—and her thoughts groped in vain for a single anticipation, a single prospect that could lighten the overpowering weight of her sadness. And the one hope that came to her was that strange sister of despair,—that back in her old life, in her own city, full forgetfulness might come to her.

Wasn't it true that she would say good-by to the bitter cold and the snow wastes? Was there no joy in this? Yet these same solitudes had brought her happiness that, though now to be blasted, had been a revelation and a wonder that no words could name or no triumphs of the future could equal. The end of her adventure,—and she felt it might as well be the end of her life. Three little days of bitter hardship, Bill tramping at her side,—and then a long, dark road leading nowhere except to barren old age and death.

Never again would she know the winter forest, the silence and the mystery, and the wolf pack chanting with infinite sadness from the hill. The North Wind, a reality now, would be a forgotten myth: she would forget that she had seen the woodland caribou, quivering with irrepressible vigor against the snowfields. The thrill, the exhilaration of battle, the heat of red blood in her veins would be strangers soon: the whole adventure would seem like some happy, impossible dream. Never to hear a friendly voice wishing her good morning, never a returning step on the threshold, the touch of a strong hand in a moment of fear! She was aghast and crushed at the realization that this man was going out of her life forever. She would leave him to his forests,—their shadows hiding him forever from her gaze.

She found it hard to believe that she could fit into her old niche. Some way, this northern

adventure had changed the very fiber of her soul. She could find no joy at the thought of the old gayeties she had once loved, the beauty and the warmth. Was it not true that Harold would go out beside her, the lover of her girlhood? His uncle would start him in business; her course with him would be smooth. But her hands were cold and her heart sick at the thought.

As the hours passed, the realization of her impending departure seemed to grow, like a horror, in her thoughts. She still made her pathetic effort to be gay. It would not do for these men to know the truth, so she laughed often and her words were joyous. She fought back the tears that burned in her eyelids. She could only play the game; there was no way out.

She could conceive of no circumstances whereby her fate would be altered. She knew now, as well as she knew the fact of her own life, that she had been trapped and snared and cheated by a sardonic destiny. For the moment she wished she had never fought her way back to the cabin with Bill after yesterday's adventure, but that side by side in the drifts, they had yielded to the Shadow and the cold.

Through the dragging hours of afternoon, Harold seemed restless and uneasy. He smoked impatiently and was nervous and abstracted in the hours of talk. But the afternoon died at last. Once more the shadows lengthened over the snow; the dusk grew; the first, bright stars thrust through the gray canopy above them. Virginia went to the work of cooking supper,—the last supper in this little, unforgettable cabin in the snow.

Both Bill and Virginia started with amazement at the sound of tapping knuckles on the door. Harold's eyes were gleaming.

XXIX

Harold saw fit to answer the door himself. He threw it wide open; Virginia's startled glance could just make out two swarthy faces, singularly dark and unprepossessing, in the candlelight. She experienced a swift flood of fear that she couldn't understand: then forced it away as an absurdity.

"We—we mushin' over to Yuga—been over Bald Peak way," Joe said stumblingly. "Didn't know no one was here. Want a bunk here to-night."

"You've got your own blankets?"

"Yes. We got blankets."

"On your way home, eh? Well, I'll have to ask this lady."

Harold seemed strangely nervous as he turned to Virginia. He wondered if this courteous reference to her was a mistake; could it be that she would object to their staying? It would make, at best, an awkward situation. However, he knew this girl and he felt sure. He half-closed the door.

"A couple of Indians, going home toward the settlement on the Yuga," he explained quickly. "They've come from over toward Bald Peak and were counting on putting up here to-night. That's the woods custom, you know—to stay at anybody's cabin. They didn't know we were here and want to stay, anyway. Do you think we can put 'em up?"

"Good Heavens, we can't send them on, on a night like this. It is awkward, though—about food—"

"They've likely got their own food."

"Of course they can stay. Bill can sleep on the floor in here—you can take the two of them with you into the little cabin. It will be pretty tight work, but we can't do anything else. Bring them in."

Harold turned again to the door, and in a moment the Indians strode, blinking, into the candlelight. The brighter light did not reveal them at greater advantage. Virginia shot them a swift glance and was instinctively repelled: but at once she ascribed the evil savagery of their faces to racial traits. She went back to her work.

Bill, sitting against the cabin wall, tried to make sense out of a confused jumble of thoughts and impressions and memories that flooded in one wave to his mind. His few hours of blindness had seemingly sharpened his other senses: and there was a quality of the half-breed's voice that was distinctly familiar. He had assumed at once that the two breeds were Joe and Pete whom he had encountered when he first found Harold. Why, then, had the latter made no sign of recognition? Why should he repeat a manifest lie,—that they had been over toward Bald Peak and

were traveling toward the Yuga, and that they thought the cabin was unoccupied? He remembered that he had given these particular Indians definite orders to stay away from the district. Outwardly he was cool and at ease, his face impassive and grave; in his inner self he was deeply perturbed and suspicious.

Of course, there was a possibility that he was mistaken in the voice. He resolved to know the truth.

"It's Joe and Pete, isn't it?" he asked abruptly in the silence.

There was no reply at first. Virginia did not glance around in time to see the lightning signal of warning from Harold to the Indians; yet she had an inner sense of drama and suspense.

She had never heard quite this tone in Bill's voice before. It was hard, uncompromising, some way menacing. "I say," he repeated slowly, "are you Pete and Joe, or aren't you?"

"Pete—Joe?" Joe answered at last, in a bewildered tune. Harold himself could not have given a better simulation of amazement. "Don't know 'em. I'm Wolfpaw Black—he's Jimmy—Jimmy DuBois."

The names were convincing,—typical breed names, the latter with a touch of French. But Harold's admiration for the resourcefulness of his confederate really was not justified. Joe hadn't originated the two names. He had spoken the first two that had come to his mind,—the names of a pair of worthy breeds from a distant encampment.

Except for a little lingering uneasiness, Bill was satisfied. It would be easy to mistake the voice. He had heard it only a few times in his life. Virginia went on with her supper preparations, and at last the three of them drew chairs around their crude little table. The two breeds took their lunch from their packs and munched it, sitting beside the stove.

The night had fallen now, impenetrably dark, and the Northern Lights were flashing like aerial searchlights in the sky. The five of them were singularly quiet, deep in their own thoughts. Bill heard his watch ticking loudly in his pocket.

All at once Joe grunted in the stillness, and all except Bill whirled to look at him. He went to his pack and fumbled among the blankets. Then, a greedy light in his eyes, he put two dark bottles upon the table.

Bill, unseeing, did not understand. His finer senses, however, told him that the air was suddenly electric, charged with suspense. Virginia was frankly alarmed.

In her past life she had had intimate acquaintance with strong drink. While it was true that she had never partaken of it beyond an occasional cocktail before dinner, it was common enough in the circle in which she had moved. She was used to seeing the men of her acquaintance drink whisky-and-sodas, and many of her intimate girl friends drank enough to harden their eyes and injure their complexions. She herself had always regarded it tolerantly, thinking that much of the hue and cry that had been raised about it was sheer sentimentality and absurdity. She didn't know that evil genii dwelt in the dark waters that could change men into brutes: such mild exhilaration as she had received from an unusually potent cocktail had only seemed harmless and amusing.

But she was not tolerant now. She was suddenly deeply afraid. She looked at Bill, forgetting for the moment that in his blindness he could not see what was occurring and that in his helplessness she could not depend upon him in a crisis. She turned to Harold, hoping that he would refuse this offering at a word. And her fear increased when she saw the craving on his face.

Harold had gone a long time without strong drink. The sight of the dark bottles woke his old passion for it in a flash. His blood leaped, a strange and dreadful eagerness transcended him. Virginia was horrified at the sudden, insane light in his eyes, the drawing of his features.

"Have a drink?" Joe invited.

Bill started then, but he made no response. Harold moved toward the table.

"You're a real life-saver, Wolfpaw," he replied genially. "It's a cold night, and I don't care if I do. Virginia, pass down the cups."

Of course there were not enough cups to go around. There were three of tin, however, counting one that Bill made from an empty can. "You'll drink?" Joe asked Bill.

The woodsman's face was grave. "Wolfpaw, it's against the law of this province to give or receive liquor from Indians," he replied gravely. "I won't drink to-night."

Pete turned with a scowl. His thought had already flashed to the white blade at his belt. "You're damn particular——" he began.

But Joe shook his head, restraining him. The hour to strike had not yet come. They must enjoy

their liquor first and engender fresh courage from its fire. He saw fit, however, to glance about the room and locate the weapon of which Harold had spoken,—the deadly miner's pick that leaned against the wall back of the stove.

Curiously, Virginia's thought had flung to the weapons, too. She had taken off her pistol when she had been nursing Bill and hadn't put it on since. Quietly, so as not to attract attention, she glanced about to locate it. It was hanging on a nail at the opposite end of the table,—and Joe stood just beside it. She had no desire to waken his suspicions of her fear. She knew she must put up a bold front, at least. Nevertheless her fingers longed for the comforting feel of its butt. She resolved to watch for a chance to procure it.

"Have a drink?" Joe asked Virginia.

She didn't like the tone of his voice. He was speaking with entire familiarity, and again she expected interference from Harold. Her fiance, however, was fingering the bottle. She saw Bill straighten, ever so little, and beheld the first signs of rising anger in the set of his lips. But she didn't know the full fierceness of his inward struggle,—an almost resistless desire to spring at once and smite those impertinent tones from the breed's lips. But he knew that he must take care—for Virginia's sake—and avoid a fight as long as it was humanly possible to do so.

"No," the girl responded coldly.

"Then there's enough cups after all," Harold observed. "I was going to take the pitcher, if either Virginia or this conscientious teetotaler cared for a shot." He chuckled unpleasantly. "I thought I could get more that way."

They poured themselves mighty drinks,—staggering portions that more than half-emptied the first of the quarts. Then they threw back their heads and drained the cups.

The liquor was cheap and new, such as reaches the Indian encampments after passing through many hands. It burned like fire in their throats, and almost at once it began to distill its poison into their veins.

Harold and Pete immediately resumed their chairs; Joe still stood at the table end. He, too, had seen the little pistol of blue steel hanging on the nail. At first the three men were sullen and silent, enjoying the first warmth of the liquor. Then the barriers of self-restraint began to break down.

Harold began to grow talkative, launching forth on an amusing anecdote. But there was no laughter at the end of it. The Indians were never given to mirth in their debauches; both Bill and Virginia were far indeed from a receptive humor.

"What's the matter with this crowd—can't you see a joke?" Harold demanded. "Say, Bill, over there—you who wouldn't take a gentleman's drink—what you sitting there like an old marmot for on a rock pile? Why don't you join in the festivities?"

For all the rudeness of Harold's speech, Bill answered quietly. "Not feeling very festive tonight. And if I were you—I'd go easy on too much of that. You're out of practice, you know."

"Yes—thanks to you. At least, before I came here I lived where I could get a drink when I wanted it, not in a Sunday-school."

Virginia suddenly leaned forward. "Where did you live before you came here, Harold?" she asked.

There was a sudden, unmistakable contempt in her voice.

XXX

Harold caught the note of scorn in Virginia's voice, and he had an instant of sobriety. He looked at her with eager eyes. The poison in his veins had enhanced her beauty to him; his eyes leapt quickly over her slender form. It would pay to be careful, he thought. He didn't want to lose her now. But in an instant his reckless mood returned.

"Where I lived? What do you care, as long as I'm here? I suppose Bill has already told you, the dirty——"

"Don't say it," Virginia cautioned quickly. "I wouldn't answer for the consequences."

But for all her brave words, terror swept her. She remembered that Bill was helpless and blind. "Bill has told me nothing. It wouldn't be like him to tell me things—that might make me unhappy."

"Sing another little song about him, why don't you?" Harold scorned. "I haven't heard you talk anything else for a month. But what do I care?" He tried to steady himself, to control his erring tongue. "But, Virginia—that's all right, if he's one of your friends. He's good enough according to his lights—but you can't expect much from some one who's never been outside these tall woods! No wonder he couldn't see a joke, or take a drink with a gentleman. He hasn't the chances, the environment—that's it, environment—that you and I have had. And speaking of drinks——"

He went to the table again and poured his cup half full. Then with unsteady hand he poured an equal portion for the two Indians. They took their cups with burning eyes, and Harold raised his own drink aloft.

"A little toast—and everybody stand up," he cried. "We're going to drink to Virginia! To my future wife, gentleman—the lady who's promised me her hand! Look at her there, you breeds—the most beautiful woman that ever came to the North! Drink her down!"

The burning poison poured into their throats. Virginia glanced again at her pistol, but Joe still stood, half-covering it with his arm. Her face was no longer merely anxious. All color had swept from it; her eyes were wide and pleading. But there was no one to give aid to-night. Bill sat, helpless and blind, against the wall.

She had not dared to resent aloud the bandying of her name, the insult of their searching eyes upon her beauty. It seemed to her that she heard a half-muttered exclamation from Bill, but his face belied it. And in reality the man's thoughts were as busy as never before.

He opened his eyes, struggling for vision. But he could not make out the forms of the men at all, except when they crossed in front of the candles. The candles themselves were mere points of yellow between his lids. One of the candles was sitting just beside him, on a shelf; the other was on the table. He tried to locate the position of all four of his fellow-occupants of the cabin,—Virginia at one end of the table, Joe at the other, Pete opposite him on the other side of the stove, Harold standing in the middle of the room, babbling in his drunkenness.

But the first exhilaration of the drink was dying now, giving way to a more dangerous mood. Even Harold was less talkative: the tones of his voice had harshened. The two Indians, when they spoke at all, were surly and threatening.

The moments passed. For a breath the cabin was still. Only too well Bill knew that matters were approaching the explosive stage. A single word might invoke murderous passions that would turn the cabin into shambles. The men drank the third time, emptying the first quart and beginning upon the second.

"You're a pretty little witch," Harold addressed Virginia. "You're hard to kiss, but your kisses are worth having. What you think about that, Joe? Aren't I tellin' you the truth?"

Joe! Bill's first impression had been right, after all. His face made no sign, but he shifted in his chair. For all the ease and almost inertness with which he sat, his muscles were wholly ready for such command as his mind might give them,—to spring instantly to their full power for a fight to the death. Virginia heard the name too, and her fears increased.

"Joe?" she repeated. "You know him, then?"

"Of course I know Joe. He's an old friend. He's one that Bill told never to show his face in this part of Clearwater again—but you don't see anything happening to him, do you?"

He waited, hoping Bill would make response. But the latter was holding hard, waiting for the moment of crisis, hoping yet that it might be avoided. There was time enough when Virginia was safe and his sight had returned him to answer such speeches as this.

"You see he hasn't anything to say," Harold gloated. "I asked you a question, Joe—about Virginia. Didn't I tell the truth?"

The girl flinched, then caught herself with a half-sob. She resolved to make one more appeal. "Oh Harold—please—please be careful what you say," she pleaded. "You're drunk now—but don't forget you were a gentleman—once. Don't drink any more. Don't let these Indians drink any more, either."

"A gentleman once, eh? So you don't think I'm one any more. But Bill, there—he's one, ain't he? It seems to me you've been getting kind of bossy around here, lately—and the women of we northern men don't behave that way."

"I'm not your woman, thank God—and I ask you to be careful."

"And I repeat that warning." Bill spoke gravely, quietly from his chair. "You're acting like a rotter, Harold, and you know it. Shut up the bottle and try to hold yourself—and then remember what you've been saying. Remember that I'm still here—and if I'm not able to avenge an insult now, the time is coming when I will. And I've got one weapon *now* that I won't hesitate to use. I mean—an answer to a question of a while ago. If you want to keep her love, be careful."

The Indians turned to him, the murder-madness darkening their faces. Pete's hand began to steal toward his hip. He had no ancestral precedent for the use of a miner's pick for such work as faced him now. And he held high regard for the thin, cruel blade.

"Do you think I care?" Harold answered. "Tell her if you want to—all about Sindy and everything else. Do you think I'm ashamed of it? I've heard all I want to from you too—and I'll say and drink what I please."

Bill had no answer at first. He had thought that this threat might bring Harold to time; he had supposed that the man valued Virginia's love as much as he, in a similar position, would have valued it. Harold turned to the girl. "So you're *not* my woman, eh?"

"No, no, no! I never will be!" The girl's eyes were blazing, and she had forgotten her fear in her magnificent wrath. "I suppose—you were a squaw man. These Indians are your own friends."

Harold smiled cruelly. "Yes, a squaw man. And these are my friends. Don't you suppose I've known—for the last week—you were just fooling me along, all the time fondling Bill? Sindy at least was faithful—and her form wouldn't take anything from yours."

Pete, watching Joe, was somewhat amazed at the curious start the man made. His searching gaze had leaped over the girl's form; his dark, smoldering eyes suddenly blazed red. There was no other word than red. They were like two coals of fire.

There ensued a moment of strange and menacing silence. Pete chuckled, already receptive to Joe's thought. Harold turned to stare at him.

Joe put his pipe to his lips, then fumbled at his pocket. He seemed to search in vain. "Will you give me a match, please, lady?" he asked.

The tone was strange, thick and strained, yet Virginia's heart thrilled with hope. The request was a welcome interlude in a quarrel that was already rapidly approaching the fighting stage. Perhaps if these men started to smoke, their blood would cool; she had known of old that tobacco was a wonderful bromide to overstretched nerves. He turned quickly to the shelf above Bill's head and procured half a dozen matches from the box.

As her back was turned she heard Pete laugh again,—one evil syllable that filled her with instinctive horror. Her wide eyes turned to him; he was watching her intently. Then she stepped back to give Joe the matches.

Instinctively her eyes turned to the wall for a reassuring sight of her pistol. It was gone from its place.

For an instant she stared in horrified amazement. The matches dropped idly from her hand. A sob caught in her throat, a sob of hopeless and utter terror, but she fought a brave little fight to suppress it. She knew she must appear to be brave; at least she must do this much. She looked at Joe; his evil, leering face told her only too plainly that his eager hand had seized and secreted her pistol. Pete's face was drawn too; Harold only looked bewildered.

He was her last hope, but in one instant's scrutiny she saw that this had vanished, too. Some terrible thought had sobered and engrossed him. Now he was eyeing her like a witless thing, his features drawn, his eyes burning. The moment was charged with ineffable suspense.

"What is it, Virginia?" Bill asked.

"One of these men—" she answered brokenly—"has taken my pistol. I want him to give it back ___"

The circle laughed then,—a harsh and sinister sound that filled her with inexpressible horror. For a moment she stood motionless in the center of that leering circle, her eyes wide, her face white as death,—a slight figure, trying to hard to stand straight, crushed and defenseless, only her eyes pleading in last appeal. Instinctively her lips whispered a prayer.

Joe spoke then, a single sentence in the vernacular for Harold's ears. With one gesture he indicated Harold, himself, and Pete in turn, then pointed to the girl. His face was hideous with eagerness.

Harold started at the words, but at first made no answer. He had lost her anyway; there was no need of further restraint. The silence, the stress, most of all the burning liquor flung a wild and devastating flame through his veins, a dreadful madness seized his brain. There was no saving grace, no impulse of manhood, no memory of virtue to hold him back.

His degeneracy was complete. He could not go lower. His father's wicked blood pulsed in his veins; the final brutality that the North bestows upon those it conquers was upon him. He answered with a curse.

"Why not?" he said. "The slut's thrown me over. When I'm through you can do what you want. And crack the skull of that mole with the pick and throw him out in the snow."

The two Indians lurched forward at his words. Bill left his chair in a mighty leap.

XXXI

When Bill sprang forward to intercept the attack upon the girl he came with amazing accuracy and power. There was nothing of blindness or misdirection about that leap. It was as if his sight had already returned to him. The real truth was that by means of his acute ear he had located the exact position of every actor in the impending drama.

What was more important, he knew the location of both candles. For all his almost total blindness, he could discern through his watering eyes the faint, yellow gleam of each. The one that burned beside him, on the little shelf, he brushed off with one sweep of his hand as he leaped. He knocked the second from the table; it fell, flickered, filled the room an instant with dancing light, and then went out. The utter darkness dropped down.

The act had been so swift and unexpected that neither Joe, standing nearest to the girl, or Harold across the room could draw their pistols and fire. Seemingly in a flash the darkness was upon them. No more was Bill the blind and helpless mole, to strike down with one careless blow. He was face to face with his enemies in his own dark lair. He had turned the tables; the advantage of vision on which they had presumed had been in an instant removed. They could see no more than he could now. Besides, in the hours since his rescue, he had already learned to find his way around the cabin.

And this was no half-darkness—that which descended as the candles were struck down. It was the infinite, smothering gloom of an underground cave in which no shadow could live, nor the sharpest outline remain visible. Harold cursed in the blackness; as if in a continuation of the leap he had made to upset the candles, Bill seized Virginia in his strong arms. He thrust her to the floor and into the angle between her bunk and the wall, the point that he instinctively realized would be easiest to defend and safest from stray bullets. Then, widening his arms, almost to the width of the little space between the table and the wall, he lunged forward again.

Virginia's pistol was in Joe's hand by now, and he shot in Bill's direction. Two spurts of yellow fire broke for an instant the utter gloom. But there was no time for a third shot. He was the nearest of the three attackers, and Bill's outstretched arms seized him. The woodsman's muscles gave a mighty wrench.

His grasp was about Joe's chest at first, but with a great lurch he slung the man's body out far enough so that he could loop his sinewy arms about the man's knees. Joe was shifted in his arms as workmen are sometimes snatched up by a mighty belt in a machine shop; he seemed simply to snap in the remorseless grasp. Bill himself had no sensation of his enemy's weight. He had him about the knees by now, Joe's body thrust out almost straight from centrifugal force, and with a terrific wrench of his mighty shoulders Bill hurled him against the wall.

It was well for his enemies that none of them were in the road of that human missile. They would have taken no further part in the ensuing battle. Joe's body crushed against the logs with a sound that was strange and horrible in the utter darkness; the pistol spun from his hand and rattled down; then he fell with a crash to the floor. There was no further movement from him thereafter. His neck had been broken like a match. The odds were but two to one.

Harold had taken out his own revolver now and was shooting blindly in the darkness. Ducking low, Bill leaped for him. In that leap there was none of the gentle mercy with which he had dealt with him first, so long ago in Harold's cabin. But a quick movement by Harold saved him from the full force of the leap; in a moment they were grappling in each other's arms.

Bill wrenched him back and forth, and in an instant would have crushed the life out of him if it hadn't been for the interference of Pete. The latter breed leaped on his back, and Bill had to neglect Harold an instant to stretch up his arms and hurl Pete to the floor. Harold still clung to him, trying to seize his throat, but Bill wrenched him down. He flung his own body down on top of him, then seized him by the throat with the deadly intention of hammering his head on the floor; but before he could accomplish his purpose Pete was upon him again.

It was the end of the preliminaries. In that second the fight began in earnest. They were both powerful men, the breed and Harold; and Bill was like a wild beast—quick as a cougar, resistless as a grizzly—a fighting fury that in the darkness was terrible as death. Mighty muscles, stinging blows, striking fists and grasping arms; the rage and glory of battle was upon him as never before.

It was the death fight—in the darkness—and that meant it was a savage, nightmare thing that called forth those most deep and terrible instincts that in the first days of the earth were stored and implanted in the germ plasm. These were no longer men of the twentieth century. They were

simply beasts, fighting to the death in a cave. It was a familiar thing to be warring thus in the darkness: Neither Harold nor Pete missed the light now. They were carried back to no less furious battles, fought in dark caverns under the sea; murder flamed in their hearts and fire ran riot in their blood.

They were no longer conscious of time; already it was as if they had struggled thus through the long roll of the centuries. It was hard to remember what had been the cause of the fight. It didn't matter now, anyway; the only issue left was the life of their adversary. To kill, to tear their enemies' hearts from their warm breasts and their arteries from their throats,—this was all that any of the three could remember now. It was true that Bill kept his adversaries away from Virginia's corner as well as he could, but he did it by instinct rather than by conscious planning. He had not hated Harold in these months past, but had only regarded him with contempt; but hate came to him fast enough in those first moments of battle.

Once, reeling across the cabin, they encountered soft flesh that tried to escape from beneath their feet; at first Bill thought it was Joe, returned to consciousness. But in an instant he knew the truth. "Go back to your corner. Virginia," he commanded.

For some reason that he could not guess, she had seen fit to crawl forth from her shelter; whether or not she returned to it he couldn't tell. There was no chance to warn her again. His foes were upon him.

This was not a silent fight, at first. So that they would not attack each other, Harold and Pete cried out often, to reveal their location and to signal a combined attack against Bill. In the instants that he was free from Bill's arms and he knew that his confederate was out of range, Harold fired blindly with his pistol. Their bodies crashed against the wall, broke the furniture into kindling at their feet; they snarled their hatred and their curses.

Bill fought like a giant, a might of battle upon him never known before. He would hurl away one, then whirl to face the other; his fists would lash out, his mighty shoulders would wrench. More than once their combined attack hurled him to the floor, but always he was able to regain his feet. Once he seized Harold's wrist, and twisting it back forced him to drop the pistol. But Pete's interference prevented him from breaking his arm.

Steadily Harold and Pete were learning to work together. They were used to the darkness now; Pete obeyed the white man's shouts. Two against one was never a fair fight, and they knew that by concerted action they could break him down.

One lucky blow sent Pete spinning to the floor, and Bill's strong arms hurled Harold after him. Just for a fraction of an instant he stood braced and alone in the center of the cabin. For the instant a silence, deep and appalling past all words, fell over the room. But Harold's voice quickly shattered it.

"Up and at him Pete!" he cried, hoarse with fury. They both sprang upon him again.

Both were fortunate in securing good holds, and as they came from opposite sides, Bill found it impossible to hurl them off. Both of his foes recognized their great chance; if they could retain their hold only for a moment they could break him and beat him down. Harold also knew that this was the moment of crisis. All three contestants seemed to sweep to the fray with added fury. Bill was drawing on his reserve strength—the battle could only last a few minutes longer.

They fought in silence now. They did not waste precious breath on shouts or curses. There were no pistol shots, no warnings; only the sound of troubled breathing against the shock of their bodies as they reeled against the walls. Bill was fighting with all his might to keep his feet.

But the tower that was his body fell at last. All three staggered, reeled, then crashed to the floor. Pete had managed to wiggle from underneath and, his hold yet unbroken, struggled at Bill's left side; Harold was on top. But for all that he lay prone, Bill was not conquered yet. With his flailing arms he knocked aside the vicious blows that Harold aimed at his face; he tore Pete's grasp from his throat. He fought with a final, incredible might. And now he was breaking their holds to climb once more upon his feet.

Then—above the sound of their writhing bodies—Virginia heard Pete exclaim. It was a savage, a murderous sound, and anew degree of terror swept through her. But she didn't cry out. She had her own plans.

"Hold him—just one instant!" Pete cried. The breed had remembered his knife. It was curious that he hadn't thought of it before.

He took it rather carefully from his holster. The two men were threshing on the floor by now, Harold in a desperate effort to keep his enemy down, and there was plenty of time. Pete's hand fumbled in his pocket. In his cunning and his savagery he realized that the supreme opportunity for victory was at hand; but he must take infinite pains.

He didn't want to run the risk of slaying his own confederate. His hand found a match; he raised his knife high. The match cracked, then flamed in the darkness.

But it was not to be that that murderous blow should go home. He had forgotten Bill's lone ally,—the girl that had seemed so crushed and helpless a few minutes before. She had not remained in the safe corner where Bill had thrust her, and she had had good reasons. The price that she paid was high, but it didn't matter now. She had crawled out to find her pistol that Joe's hand had let fall, and just before Pete had lighted his match her hand had encountered it on the floor.

It seemed to leap in her hand as the match flamed. It described a blue arc; then rested, utterly motionless, for a fraction of an instant. For that same little time all her nervous forces rallied to her aid; her eyes were remorseless and true over the sights.

The pistol shot rang in the silence. The knife dropped from Pete's hand. She had shot with amazing accuracy, straight for the little hollow in his back that his raised arm had made. He turned with a look of ghastly surprise.

Then he went on his face, creeping like a legless thing toward the door. With a mighty effort Bill rolled Harold beneath him.

The battle was short thereafter. Harold had never been a match for Bill, unaided. The latter's hard fists lashed into his face, blow after blow with grim reports in the silence. Harold's resistance ceased; his body quivered and lay still. Remembering Virginia Bill leaped to his feet.

But Harold was not quite unconscious. But one impulse was left,—to escape; and dumbly he crawled to the door. Pete had managed to open it; but he crawled past Pete's body, strangely huddled and still, just beyond the threshold. Then he paused in the snow for a last, savage expression of his hate.

But it was just words. No weapon remained in his hands. "I'll get you yet, you devil!" he screamed, almost incoherently. "I'll lay in wait and kill you—you can't get away! The wolves have got your grizzly meat—you can't go without food."

His voice was shrill and terrible in the silence of the winter night. Even in the stress and inward tumult that was the reaction of the battle, Bill could not help but hear. He didn't doubt that the words were true: he realized in an instant what the loss of the grizzly flesh would mean. But his only wish was that he had killed the man when he had him helpless in his hands.

He remembered Joe then, and listened for any sound from him. He heard none, and like a man in a dream he felt his way to the lifeless form beside the wall. He seized the shoulders of the breed's coat, dragged him like a sack of straw, and as easily hurled his body through the doorway into the drifts. Two bodies lay there now. But only the coyotes, seekers of the dead, had interest in them.

He turned, then stood swaying slightly, in the doorway. No wind stirred over the desolate wastes without. The cabin was ominously silent. He could hear his own troubled breathing; but where there was no stir, no murmur from the corner where he had left Virginia. A ghastly terror, unknown in the whole stress of the battle, swept over him.

"Virginia," he called. "Where are you?"

From the dark, far end of the cabin he heard the answer,—a voice low and tremulous such as sometimes heard from the lips of a sick child. "Here I am, Bill," she replied. "I'm hit with a stray shot—and I believe—they've killed me."

XXXII

Was this their destiny,—utter and hopeless defeat in the moment of victory? Was this the way of justice that, after all they had endured, they should yet go down to death? They had fought a mighty fight, they had waged a cruel war against cold and hardship, they had known the full terror and punishment of the snow wastes in their dreadful adventure of the past two days; and had it all come to nothing, after all? Was life no more than this,—a cruel master that tortured his slaves only to give them death? These thoughts brought their full bitterness in the instant that Bill groped his way to Virginia's side.

His hands told him she was lying huddled against the wall, a slight, pathetic figure that broke the heart within the man. "Here I am," she said again, her voice not racked with pain but only soft and tender. He knelt beside her, then groped for a match. But whether the injury was small or great he felt that the issue would be the same.

But before he struck the match he remembered his foe without; he would be quick to fire through the window if a light showed him his target. Even now he might be crouched in the snow, his rifle in his arms, waiting for just this chance. Bill snatched a blanket from the cot,

shielded them with it, and lighted the match behind it. "He can't see the light through this," he told her. "If he does—I guess it doesn't much matter."

He groped for the fallen candle, lighted it, and held it close. "You'll have to look and see yourself, Virginia," he told her. "You remember—of course—"

Yes, she remembered his blindness. She looked down at the little stain of red on her left shoulder. "I can't tell," she told him. "It went in right here—give me your hand."

She took his warm hand and rested it against the wound. Someway, it comforted her. "Close to the top of the shoulder, then," he commented. Then he groped till his sensitive fingers told him he had found the egress of the bullet—on her arm just down from her shoulder. "But there's nothing I can do—it's not a wound I can dress. It's cleaner now than anything we've got to clean it with. The only thing is to lie still—so it won't bleed."

"Do you think I'll die?" she asked him quietly. There was no fear—only sorrow—in her tones. "Tell me frankly, Bill."

"I don't think the wound is serious in itself—if we could get you down to a doctor," he told her. "It isn't bleeding much now, because you are lying still, but it has been bleeding pretty freely. It's just a flesh wound, really. But you see—"

Her mind leaped at once to his thought. "You mean—it's the same, either way?" she questioned.

"It doesn't make much difference." The man spoke quietly, just as she might have expected him to speak in such a moment as this. "Oh, Virginia—we've fought so hard—it's bitter to lose now. You see, don't you—you couldn't walk with that wound—you don't know the way, so I could walk and pull you on the sled—and Harold is gone. He won't show us the way or help us now. We haven't any food here—the grizzly has been eaten by wolves. One of us blind and one of us wounded—you see—what chance we've got against the North. If we had the grizzly flesh, we could stay here till my sight returned—and still, perhaps, get you out in time to save you from the injury. If you knew the way to the settlements, I might haul you on the sled—you guiding me—and take a chance of running into some meat on the way down. But none of those things are true."

"Then what"—the girl spoke breathlessly—"does it mean?"

"It means death—that's all it means." There was no sentimentality, no tremor in his voice now. He was looking his fate in the face; he knew he could not spare the girl by keeping the truth from her. "Death as sure as we're here—from hunger and your wound—if Harold or the cold doesn't get us first. We've been cheated, Virginia. We've played with a crooked dealer. I don't care on my own account—"

"Then don't care on mine, either." All at once her hand went up and caressed his face. "Hold me, Bill, won't you?" she asked. "Hold me in your arms."

She asked it simply, like a little child. He shifted his position, then lifted her so that her breast was against his, his arms around her, her soft hair against his shoulder. The candle, dropped from his hand, was extinguished. The cold deepened outside the cabin. The white, icy moon rode in the sky.

The man's arms tightened around her. He lowered his lips close to hers. There in the shadow of death her breast pressed to his, the locks of iron that held his heart's secret were shattered, the veil of his temple was rent. "Virginia," he asked his voice throbbing, "do you want me to tell you something—the truest thing in all my life? I thought I could keep it from you, but I can't. I can't keep it any more—"

Her arm went up and encircled his neck, and she drew his head down to hers. "Yes, Bill," she told him, "I want you to tell me. I think I know what it is."

"I love you. That's it; it never was and it never can be anything else." The words, long pent-up, poured from his lips in a flood. "Virginia, I love you, love you, love you—my little girl, my little, little girl—"

She drew his head down and down until her own lips halted the flow of his words. "And I love you, Bill," she told him. "No one but you."

All the sweetness and tenderness of her glorious and newly wakened love was in the kiss that she gave him. Yet the man could not believe. The human soul, condemned to darkness, can never believe at first when the light breaks through. His heart seemed to halt in his breast in this instant of infinite suspense.

"You do?" he whispered at last, in inexpressible wonder. "Did you say that you loved *me*—you so beautiful, so glorious—Don't tell me that in pity—"

"I love you, Bill," she told him earnestly, then laughed softly at his disbelief. She kissed him again and again, softly as moonlight falls upon meadows. The man's heart leaped and flooded,

but no more words would come to his lips. He could only sit with his strong arms ever holding her closer to his breast, kissing the lips that responded so tenderly and lingeringly, swept with a rapture undreamed of before. Ever her soft, warm arm held his lips to hers, as if she could not let him go.

The seconds, thrilled with a wonder ineffable, passed into minutes. Virginia had no sensation of pain from her wound. The fear of death oppressed her no more. She knew that she had come to her appointed place at last, a haven and shelter no less than that to which the white ship comes in from the tempestuous sea. This was her fate,—happiness and peace at last in her woodsman's arms.

They were no different from other lovers such as cling and kiss in the glory of a summer moon, in gardens far away. Their vows were the same, the mystery and the wonder no less. The savage realm into which they were cast could not oppress them now. They forgot the drifts unending, the winter forests stretching interminably from range to range about them, the pitiless cold, ever waiting just without the cabin door. Even impending death itself, in the glory of this night, could cast no shadow upon their spirit.

In the moment of their victory the North had defeated them, but in the instant of defeat they had found infinite and eternal victory. No blow that life could deal, no weapon that this North should wield against them, could crush them now. They were borne high above the reach of these. They had discovered the great Secret, the eternal Talisman against which no curse can blast or no disaster break the spirit.

They had their secret, whispered exultations, like all lovers the length and breadth of the world. Virginia told him that in her own heart she had loved him almost from the first day but how she had not realized it, in all its completeness, until now. Bill told her of the wakening of his own love, and how he had confessed it to himself the night they had played "Souvenir" in the complaint of the wind.

He tried to explain to her his doubts and fears,—how he had looked at her as a being from another world. "I could imagine my loving you, from the first," he told her, "but never you giving your love to me."

"And who is more worthy of it—of anybody's love—than you?" she replied, utilizing a sweetheart's way, much more effective than words, to stop his lips. Then she told him of his bravery, his tenderness and steadfastness; how there was no feeling of descent in giving her love to him. She told him that in fact his education was as good as hers if not superior, that his natural breeding and gentleness were the equal of that of any man that moved in her own circle. She could find protection and shelter in his strong arms, and in these months in the North she had learned that this was the most important thing of all. He could provide for her, too, with the wealth of his mine,—a point not to be forgotten. Her standards were true and sensible, she was down to the simple, primitive basis of things, and she did not forget that provision for his wife was man's first responsibility and the first duty of love.

Only once did Bill leave her,—to cover the crack of the door and build up the fire. When he returned, her warm little flood of kisses was as if he had been absent for weary hours.

But her thoughts had been busy, even in this moment. All at once she drew his ear close to her lips.

"Bill, will you listen to me a minute?" she asked.

"Listen! I'll listen to every word—"

"Some way—I've taken fresh heart since we—since we found out we loved each other. It seems to me that this love wasn't given to us, only to have us die in a few days—from this awful wound and you from hunger. We're only three days' journey—and there must be some way out."

"God knows I wish you could find one. But I can't see—and you don't know the way—and we have no food."

"But listen—this wound isn't very bad. I know I can't walk—it will start bleeding if I do—but if I can get any attention at all soon, I know it won't be serious. Bill, have you found out—you can trust me, in a pinch?"

Remembering that instant when the match had flared and her pistol had shot so remorselessly and so true, he didn't hesitate over his answer. "Sweetheart, I'd trust you to the last second."

"Then trust me now. Listen to every word I say and do what I tell you. I think I know the way—at least a fighting chance—to life and safety."

XXXIII

Whispering eagerly, Virginia told Bill the plan that would give them their fighting chance. His mind, working clear and true, absorbed every detail. "It depends first," she said, "whether or not you can crawl through the little window of the cabin."

Bill remembered his experience in the smoke-filled hut and he kissed her, smiling. "I've got into smaller places than that, in my time," he told her. "I can take the little window right out. I put it in myself."

They were not so awed by their dilemma that they couldn't have gay words. "You got into my heart, too, Bill—a great dealer smaller place than the window," she whispered. "The next thing—are Harold's snowshoes in this room?"

"So it depends on Harold, does it? I believe his snowshoes are here. Harold left rather hurriedly—and I don't think he took them."

"What everything depends on—is getting out. Getting out quickly. The longer we stay here, without food, the more certain death is. I know I can't walk and you can't see. We have no food—except enough for one meal, perhaps—but we've got to take a chance on that. Bill, Harold is waiting, right now—probably in the little cabin where he sleeps—for a chance to get those shoes. He's helpless without them. When he gets them, he can go to the Yuga—enlist more of his breed friends—and wait in ambush for us, just as he said. He's hoping we've forgotten about them. I am sure he didn't take the shoes. They were behind the stove last night."

To make sure, Bill groped his way across the cabin and found not only Harold's shoes, but his own and Virginia's, bringing them all back to her side.

"What's now, Little Corporal?" he asked.

"As soon as it gets light enough for him to see, I want you to go out the cabin door. Turn at once into the brush at your right, so he can't shoot you with the rifle. Then come around to the side of the cabin and re-enter through the window. You can feel your way, and I can guide you by my voice, but you mustn't go more than a few feet or you'll get bewildered. The moment he thinks you are gone, he'll come—not only to get his snowshoes but to gloat over me. I know him now! I can't understand why I didn't know him before. And then—we've got to take him by surprise."

"And then—?"

Quickly, with few words, she told him the rest of her plot. It was wholly simple, and at least it held a fighting chance. He was not blind to the deadly three-day battle that they would have to wage against starvation and cold, in case this immediate part of their plot was a success. But the slightest chance when death was the only alternative was worth the trial.

Very carefully and softly Bill went to work to loosen the window so that he could take it out. It was secured by nails, but with such tools as he had in the cabin, he soon had it free. Then he lifted out the window, putting it back loosely so that he could remove it in a second's time. There was no wisdom in leaving it open until morning. The bitter cold without was waiting for just that chance.

He secured certain thongs of rawhide—left over from the moose skin that he had used for snowshoe webs—and put them in his coat pocket. Then he made a little bed for the girl, on the floor and against the wall, exactly in front and opposite the doorway. It was noticeable, too, that he restored her pistol to her hand.

"I don't think you'll need it," he told her, "but I want you to have it anyway—in case of an emergency."

There was nothing to do thereafter but to build up the fire and wait for dawn.

In reality, Virginia had guessed the situation just right. In the adjoining cabin, scarcely one hundred yards away, Harold waited and watched his chance to recover his snowshoes. He was wise enough to care to wait for daylight. He wanted no further meeting with Bill in the darkness. But in the light he would have every advantage; he could see to shoot and his blind foe could not return his fire.

After all, he had only to be patient. Vengeance would be swift and sure. When the morning broke he would come into his own again, with never a chance for failure. One little glance along his rifle sights, one quarter-ounce of pressure on the trigger,—and then he could journey down to the Yuga and his squaw in happiness and safety. It would be a hard march, but once there he could get supplies and return to jump Bill's claim. Everything would turn out right for him after all.

The fact that his confederates were slain mattered not one way or another. Pete had gone out with a bullet through his lungs; Virginia had dealt him that. Joe's neck had been broken when Bill

had hurled him against the cabin wall. But in a way, these things were an advantage. There was sufficient food in the cabin for one meal for the three of them, and that meant it was three meals for one. A day's rations, carefully spent, would carry him the two day's march to the Yuga. Besides, the breeds would not be present to claim their third of the mine. He wondered why he hadn't handled the whole matter himself, in the first place. He would have been fully capable, he thought. As to Virginia,—he hadn't decided about Virginia yet. He didn't know of her wound, or his security would have seemed all the more complete. Virginia might yet listen to reason and accompany him down to the Yuga. He had only to wait till dawn.

But Harold's thought was not entirely clear. The fury in his brain and the madness in his blood distorted it,—just a little. Otherwise he might have conceived of some error in his plans. He would have been a little more careful, a little less sure. His insane and devastating longing for vengeance, as well as his late drunkenness, cost him the fine but essential edge of his self-mastery.

Slowly the stars faded, the first ghostly light came stealing from the east. The blood began to leap once more in his veins. Already it was almost light enough to shoot. Then his straining eyes saw Bill emerge from the cabin.

Every nerve in his body seemed to jerk and thrill with renewed excitement. Yet there wasn't a chance to shoot. The light was dim; the shadows of the spruce trees hid the woodsman's figure swiftly. He was gone; the cabin was left unoccupied except for Virginia. And for all that she had shot so straight to save Bill's life, there was nothing to fear from her. Her fury was passed by now; he thought he knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't shoot him in cold blood. And perhaps some of her love for him yet lingered.

He did not try to guess the mission on which Bill had gone. If his thought had been more clear and his fury less, he would have paused and wondered about it; perhaps he would have been somewhat suspicious. Bill was blind; except to procure fuel there was no conceivable reason for an excursion into the snow. But Harold only shivered with hatred and rage, drunk with the realization that his chance had come.

He would go quickly to the cabin, procure his snowshoes, and be ready to meet Bill with loaded rifle when he returned. There was no chance for failure. He plunged and fought his way, floundering in the deep snow, toward Bill's cabin.

He found to his great delight that the door was open,—nothing to do but walk through. At first he was a little amazed at the sight of Virginia lying so still against the opposite wall; it occurred to him for the first time that perhaps she had been wounded in the fight. If so, it made his work all the safer. Yet she opened her eyes and gazed at him as he neared the threshold. He could see her but dimly; mostly the cabin was still dusky with shadows.

"I'm coming for my snowshoes, Virginia," he told her. "Then I'm going to go away." He tried to draw his battered, bloody lips into a smile.

"Come in and get them," she replied. Her voice was low and lifeless. Harold stepped through the door. And then she uttered a curious cry.

"Now!" she called sharply. There was no time for Harold to dart back, even to be alarmed. A mighty force descended upon his body.

Even in that first instant Harold knew only too well what had occurred. Instead of lying in wait himself he had been lured into ambush. Bill had re-entered the window and had stood waiting in the shadow, just beside the open door. Virginia had given him the signal when to leap down.

He leaped with crushing force,—as the grizzly leaps, or the cougar pounces from a tree. There was nothing of human limitations about that attack. Harold tried to struggle, but his attempt was futile as that of a sparrow in the jaws of the little ermine. Only too well he knew the strength of these pitiless arms that clasped him now. He had learned it the night before, and his lust for vengeance gave way to ghastly and blood-curdling terror. What would these two avengers do to him; what justice would they wreak on him, now that they had him in their power? The resistless shoulders hurled him to the floor. Virginia left her bed and came creeping to be of such aid as was needed.

She wholly disregarded her own injury. Her own countrymen, in wars agone, had fought all day with wounds much worse. She crept with her pistol ready in her hands.

Bill's strong fingers were at Harold's throat by now; the man's resistance was swiftly crushed out of him. With his knee Bill held down one of Harold's arms; with his free arm he struck blow after blow into his face. Then as unconsciousness descended upon him, Harold felt his wrists being drawn back and tied.

He struggled for consciousness. Opening his eyes, he saw their sardonic faces. The worst terror of his life descended upon him.

"My god, what are you going to do to me?" he asked.

"Why, Harold, you are going to be our little truck horse," Virginia replied gayly, as she handed Bill more thongs. "You are going to pull the sled and show the way down into Bradleyburg."

XXXIV

When the dawn came full and bright over Clearwater, Bill and his party were ready to start. When Harold had been thoroughly cowed and his full instructions were given him, the thongs had been put about his ankles and removed from his wrists, and he was permitted to do the packing. That procedure was exceedingly simple; all available blankets were piled on the sled and made into a bed for Virginia, and the ax, candles, and such cooking utensils as were needed were packed in front. And then they had a short but decisive interview with Harold.

"I won't go—I'll die first," he cried to Virginia. "Besides, you don't dare to use force on me; you don't know the way and Bill can't see. You know if you kill me you'll die yourself."

"Fair enough," Virginia replied sweetly. "But take this little word of advice. Bill and I were all reconciled to dying when we thought of you—and we don't mind it now if we're sure you are going along. Don't get any false ideas about that point, Harold. We're not going to spare you on any chance of saving ourselves. We are going to give you a little more foot room, and fix up your hands a little, and then you are going to pull the sled. When we camp at night you're going to cut the wood. Don't think for a minute I'm going to be afraid to shoot if you disobey one order—if you take one step against us. You are at our mercy; we are not at yours. And Bill will tell you I can shoot straight. Perhaps you learned that fact last night."

Yes, Harold had learned. He had learned it very well.

"If I think you're trying to cheat us—to lead us out of the way toward your breed friends—you're going to have a chance to learn it better," she went on, never a quaver in her voice. "I won't wait to make sure—I'll shoot you through the neck as easy and as quick as I'd shoot a grouse. I haven't forgotten what you did last night; I'm just eager for a chance to pay you for it." Her voice grew more sober. "This is a warning—the only one and the last one that you will get. I'm going to watch you every minute and tie you up at night. And the fact that we can't go on without you won't have a jot of influence if you take a step against us. We may die ourselves, but you know that you'll also die."

This was not the sheltered, incapable girl of society that addressed him now. These words were those of the woodswoman; the eyes that gazed into his were unwavering and hard. He knew that she was speaking true. The courage for retaliation oozed out of him as mud oozes into a river.

They lengthened the thong that tied his ankles together, giving him room for a full walking step but not enough to leap or run. They put on his hands a pair of awkward mittens that had been stiffened by mud and water, and lashed them to his wrists. Then they slipped the thong of the sled across his shoulders and under his arms like loops of a kyack. They were ready to go.

The forest was laden with the early-morning silence; the trees stood draped in snow. It was cold, too,—the frost gathered quickly on the mufflers that they wore about their lips. All too well they knew what lay before them. Without food to keep their bodies nourished and warm, they could scarcely hope to make the town; their one chance was that somewhere on the trail they would encounter game. How long a chance it was, this late in winter, they knew all too surely. But for all this knowledge Bill and Virginia were cheerful.

"I haven't much hope," Bill told her when she was tucked into the bed on the sled. "But it's the only chance we have."

She smiled at him. "At least, Bill, we'll have done everything we could. Good-by, little cabin—where I found happiness. Sometime perhaps we'll come back to you!"

The man bent and kissed her, and she gave the word for Harold to start.

Slowly they headed toward the river. The crust was perfect; Harold could hardly feel the weight of the sled. Bill munched behind, guided by the gee-pole. The white-draped trees they had known so well spoke no word of farewell.

Could they win through? Were they to know the hardship of the journey, starvation and bitter cold, only to find death in some still, enchanted glen of the forest that stretched in front? Was fate still jesting with them, whispering hope only to shatter them with defeat? Were they to know hunger and exhaustion, pain and travail, until finally their bodies dropped down and yielded to the cold? They could not keep up long without the inner fuel of food.

Their chance of finding game seemed hopelessly small, even at first. Before they reached the frozen river it seemed beyond the possibilities of miracle. Even the tracks of the little people—such ferocious hunters as marten and ermine—were gone from the snow. There were no tracks of caribou or moose; the grouse had seemingly buried in the drifts. The only creatures that had not hidden away from the winter cold were the wolves and the coyotes, furtive people that could not be coaxed into the range of Virginia's pistol. For all her outward optimism her heart grew heavy with despair.

They crossed the river, coming out where the old moose trail had gone down the ford. Here they had seen the last of Kenly Lounsbury and Vosper, almost forgotten now. Virginia told Harold to stop an instant as she recalled those vents of months before.

"So much has happened since then," she said, "If only they had left——"

Her words died away in the middle of the sentence, and for a moment she sat gazing with wide and startled eyes. For all that sight was just beginning to return to him, Bill was strangely and unexplainably startled, too, probably sensing the suspense indicated in the girl's tones. Harold turned, staring.

He could not see what Virginia saw, at first. She pointed, unable to speak. In a little thicket of young spruce there was a curiously shaped heap of snow, capped by a done of snow that extended under the sheltering branches of a young tree. Instantly Harold understood. Some long bundle had been left there before the snow came; when it had been thrown down its end had caught in the branches of a young tree where only a small amount of snow could reach it. "See what it is," Virginia ordered.

The man drew the sled nearer and with desperate energy began to knock away the snow. His first discovery was a linen tent,—one that would have been familiar indeed to Bill. But digging further he found a heavy bundle, tied with a rope and rattling curiously in his arms.

At Virginia's directions he laid it in the snow and pulled the sled up where she could open it. Bill stood beside her, not daring to guess the truth.

"Oh, my darling!" she cried at last, drawing his head down to hers. She couldn't say more. She could only laugh and sob, alternately, as might one whose dearest prayers had been granted.

The bundle was full of food,—dried meat and canned goods and a small sack of flour. They were some of the supplies that to save himself the work of caring for, the faithless Vosper had discarded when, with Kenly, he had turned back from the river.

At the end of three bitter days, Bill Bronson stood once more on the hill that looked down upon the old mining camp. The twilight was growing in the glen beneath; already it had cast shadows in Virginia's eyes. She sat beside him on the sled.

It had been cruel hardship, the three days' journey, but they had made it without mishap. At night they had built great fires at the mouth of their tent, but they had not escaped the curse of the cold. The days had been arduous and long. But they had conquered; even now they were emerging from the dark fringe of the spruce.

Virginia was on the rapid road toward recovery from her wound. It had not been severe; while she was lying still on the sled it had had every chance to heal. A few stitches by the doctor in Bradleyburg, a thorough cleansing and bandaging, and a few more days in bed would avert all serious consequences. Bill's sight had grown steadily better as the days had passed; already the Spirits of Mercy had permitted him, at close range, to behold Virginia's face.

A half-mile back, just before they approached the first fringe of the spruce forest, they had met a trapper just starting out on his line; and he had gladly consented to take Harold the rest of the way into town. It is one of the duties of citizenship in the North, where the population is so scant and the officers so few, to take an active part in law enforcement,—and this trapper was glad of the opportunity to assist them in the care of the prisoner. He was to be lodged in prison at the little mining camp to face a charge of attempted murder,—a crime that in the northwest provinces is never regarded lightly.

"And you weren't drowned!" the trapper marveled, when he had got his breath. "We've been mournin' you for dead—for months."

"Drowned—not a bit of it," Virginia answered gayly. "And don't mourn any more."

The trapper said he wouldn't and hastened off with his prisoner, delighted indeed to be the first to pass the good word of their deliverance through Bradleyburg. Bill was well known and liked through all that portion of the North, and his supposed death had been a real blow to the townspeople.

Bill felt wholly able to follow the broad snowshoe track the half-mile farther into town. The footsteps of the men had grown faint and died away,—and Virginia and he were left together on the hill.

They had nothing to say at first. They simply watched the slow encroachment of the twilight. Lights sprang up one and one over the town. Bill bent, and the girl raised her lips to his.

"We might as well go on," he said. "You're cold—and tired."

"Yes. I can't believe—I'm saying good-by to the spruce."

"And you're not, Virginia!" The man's voice was vibrant and joyful. "We'll have to come back often, to oversee the running of the mine—half of every year at least—and we can stay at the old cabin just the same. The woods are beautiful in summer."

"They're beautiful now."

And they were. She told the truth. For all their savagery, their fearful strength, their beauty could not be denied.

They saw the church spire, tall and ghostly in the twilight, and Bill's strong arms pressed the girl close. She understood and smiled happily. "Of course, Bill," she told him. "There is no need to wait. In a few days I'll be strong enough to stand beside you—at the altar."

So it was decided. They would be married in the quaint, old town of Bradleyburg, in the shadow of the spruce.

They would return, these two. The North had claimed them—but had not mastered them—and they would come back to see again the caribou feeding in the forest, the whirling snows, and the spruce trees lifting their tall heads to the winter stars. They would know the old exultation, the joy of conflict; but no blustering storm or wilderness voice could appall them now. In the security and harbor of their love, no wind was keen enough to chill them, no darkness appall their spirits.

The Northern Lights were beginning their mysterious display in the twilight sky. Far away a coyote howled disconsolately,—a cry that was the voice of the North itself. And the two kissed once more and pushed on down to Bradleyburg.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SNOWSHOE TRAIL ***

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