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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PRESCOTT OF SASKATCHEWAN ***

PRESCOTT OF SASKATCHEWAN



"IT SEEMED PRUDENT TO PLACE AS LONG A DISTANCE
AS POSSIBLE
BETWEEN THEM AND THE SETTLEMENT"—Page 158

PRESCOTT OF SASKATCHEWAN

BY
HAROLD BINDLOSS

AUTHOR OF
THE LONG PORTAGE,
RANCHING FOR SYLVIA,
WINSTON OF THE PRAIRIE, ETC.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR BY
W. HERBERT DUNTON



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JERNYNGHAM'S HAPPY THOUGHT

The air was cooling down toward evening at Sebastian, where an unpicturesque collection of wooden houses stand upon a branch line on the Canadian prairie. The place is not attractive during the earlier portion of the short northern summer, when for the greater part of every week it lies sweltering in heat, in spite of the strong west winds that drive dust-clouds through its rutted streets. As a rule, during the remaining day or two the temperature sharply falls, thunder crashes between downpours of heavy rain, and the wet plank sidewalks provide a badly-needed refuge from the cement-like "gumbo" mire.

The day, however, had been cloudless and unusually hot. Prescott had driven in from his wheat farm at some distance from the settlement, and he now walked toward the hotel. He was twenty-eight years old, of average height and rather spare figure; his face, which had been deeply bronzed by frost and sun, was what is called open, his gray eyes were clear and steady, the set of his lips and mould of chin firm. He looked honest and good-natured, but one who could, when necessary, sturdily hold his own. His attire was simple: a wide gray hat, a saffron-colored shirt with flannel collar, and a light tweed suit, something the worse for wear.

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As he passed along the sidewalk he looked about. The small, frame houses were destitute of paint and any pretense of beauty, a number of them had raised, square fronts which hid the shingled roofs; but beyond the end of the street there was the prairie stretching back to the horizon. In the foreground it was a sweep of fading green and pale ocher; farther off it was tinged with gray and purple; and where it cut the glow of green and pink on the skyline a long birch bluff ran in a cold blue smear. To the left of the opening rose three grain elevators: huge wooden towers with their tops narrowed in and devices of stars and flour-bags painted on them. At their feet ran the railroad track, encumbered with a string of freight-cars; a tall water-tank, a grimy stage for unloading coal, and a small office shack marked the station.

Prescott, however, did not notice much of this; he was more interested in the signs of conflict on the persons of the men he met. Some looked as if they had been violently rolled in the dust; others wore torn jackets; and the faces of several were disfigured by bruises. Empty bottles, which make handy clubs, were suggestively scattered about the road. All this was unusual, but Prescott supposed some allowance must be made for the fact that it was the anniversary of the famous victory of the Boyne. Moreover, there was a community of foreign immigrants, mixed with some Irishmen and French Canadians, but all professing the Romish faith, engaged in some railroad work not far away.

In front of the hotel ran a veranda supported on wooden pillars, and a row of chairs was set out on the match-strewn sidewalk beneath it. Most of them were occupied by after-supper loungers, and several of the men bore scars. Prescott stopped and lighted his pipe.

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"Things seem to have been pretty lively here," he remarked. "I came in to see the implement man and found he couldn't talk straight, with half his teeth knocked out. It's lucky the Northwest troopers have stopped your carrying pistols."

One of the men laughed.

"We've had a great day, sure. Quite a few of the Dagos had knives, and Jernyngham had a sword. Guess he'd be in trouble now, only it wasn't one you could cut with."

"How did he get the sword?"

"It was King Billy's," explained another man. "Fellow who was acting him got knocked out with a bottle in his eye. Jernyngham got up on the horse instead and led the last charge, when we whipped them across the track."

"Where's the Protestant Old Guard now?"

"Some of it's in Clayton's surgery; rest's gone home. When it looked as if the stores would be wrecked, Reeve Marvin butted in. Telephoned the railroad boss to send up gravel cars for his boys; told the other crowd he'd bring the troopers in if they didn't quit. Ordered all strangers off on the West-bound, and now we're simmering down."

"Where's Jernyngham?"

The man jerked his hand toward the hotel.

"In his room, a bit the worse for wear. Mrs. Jernyngham's nursing him."

Pushing open the wire-mesh mosquito door, Prescott entered the building. Its interior was shadowy and filled with cigar smoke; flies buzzed everywhere, and the smell of warm resinous boards pervaded the rank atmosphere. The place was destitute of floor covering or drapery, and the passage Prescott walked down was sloppy with soap and water from a row of wash-basins, near which hung one small wet towel. Ascending the stairs, he entered a little and very scantily furnished room with walls of uncovered pine. It contained a bed with a ragged quilt and a couple of plain wooden chairs, in one of which a man leaned back. He was about thirty years old and he roughly resembled Prescott, only that his face, which was a rather handsome one, bore

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the stamp of indulgence. His forehead was covered by a dirty bandage, there was dust on his clothes, and Prescott thought he was not quite sober. In the other chair sat a young woman with fine dark eyes and glossy black hair, whose appearance would have been prepossessing had it not been spoiled by her slatternliness and cheap finery. She smiled at the visitor as he walked in.

"If you'd come sooner, we might have kep' him out o' trouble," she said. "He got away from me when things begun to hum."

Her slight accent suggested the French Canadian strain, though Prescott imagined that there was a trace of Indian blood in her. Her manners were unfinished, her character was primitive, but Prescott thought she was as good a consort as Jernyngham deserved. The latter had a small wheat farm lying back on the prairie, but his erratic temperament prevented his successfully working it. Prescott was not a censorious person, and he had a liking and some pity for the man.

"Well," he said, in answer to the woman's remark, "that was certainly foolish of him. But what had he to do with the row, anyway?"

"Have a drink, and I'll try to explain," said Jernyngham. "A big cool drink might clear my head, and I feel it needs it."

"You kin have soda, but nothin' else!" the woman broke in. "I'll send it up; and now that I kin leave you, I'm goin' to the store." She turned to Prescott. "Nothin' but soda; and see he don't git out!"

She left them and Jernyngham laughed.

"Ellice's a good sort; I sometimes wonder how she puts up with me. Anyhow, I'm glad you came, because I'm in what might be called a dilemma."

As this was not a novelty to his companion, Prescott made no comment, and by and by two tumblers containing iced liquid were brought in. Jernyngham drained his thirstily and looked up with a grin.

"It isn't exhilarating, but it's cool," he said. "Now, however, you're curious about my honorable scars—I got them from a bottle. It broke, you see, but there's some satisfaction in remembering that I knocked out the other fellow with the flat of the Immortal William's sword."

"You'll get worse hurt some day," Prescott rebuked him severely.

"It's possible, but you're wandering from the point. I'm trying to remember what led me into the fray in the incongruous company of certain Hardshell Baptists, Ontario Methodists, and Belfast Presbyterians. As a young man, my sympathies were with the advanced Anglicans, perhaps because my people were sternly Evangelical. Then the whole thing's unreasonable—what have I to do, for instance, with the Protestant succession?"

"It isn't very plain," said Prescott. "Still, everybody knows what kind of fool you are."

"I live," declared Jernyngham. "You steady, industrious fellows grow. The row began at the ball-game—disputed base, I think—and our lot had got badly whipped at the first round when I stood on the veranda and sang them, 'No Surrender.' That was enough for the Ulster boys, and three or four of them go a long way in this kind of scrimmage."

Prescott had no sympathy with Jernyngham's vagaries, but one could not be angry with him: the man was irresponsible. In a few moments, however, Jernyngham's face grew graver.

"Jack," he resumed, "I'm in a hole. Never troubled to ask for my letters until late in the afternoon, and now I don't know what to do unless you can help me."

"You had better tell me what the trouble is."

"To make you understand, I'll have to go back some time. Everybody round this place knows what I am now, but I believe I was rather a promising youngster before I left the old country, a bit of a rebel though, and inclined to kick against the ultra-conventional. In fact, I think honesty was my ruin, Jack; I kicked openly."

"Is there any other way? I can't see that there's much use in kicking unless the opposition feels it."

"Don't interrupt," scowled Jernyngham. "This is rather deep for you, but I'll try to explain. If you want to get on in the old country, you must conform to the standard; though you can do what you like at times and places where people of your proper circle aren't supposed to see you. I didn't recognize the benefits of the system then—and I suffered for it."

He paused with a curious, half-tender look in his face.

"There was a girl, Jack, good as they're made, I still believe, though not in our station. Well, I meant to marry her—thought I was strong enough to defy the system—and she, not knowing what manner of life I was meant for, was fond of me."

"What manner of life were you meant for?"

Jernyngham laughed harshly.

"The Bar, for a beginning; I'd got my degree. The House later—there was strong family influence—to assist in propagating the Imperial idea. Strikes one as amusing, Jack."

Prescott thought his companion would not have spoken so freely had he been wholly sober, but he had long noticed the purity of the man's intonation and the refinement that occasionally

showed in his manners.

"You're making quite a tale of it," he said.

"Well," resumed Jernyngham, "I didn't know what I was up against; the system broke me. When the stress came, I hadn't nerve enough to hold out, and for that I've been punished. My sister—she meant well—got hold of the girl, persuaded her to give me up—for my sake, Jack. Wouldn't see me, sent back my letters, and I came to Canada, beaten."

He paused.

"There's a reason why you must try to realize my father and sister. He's unflinchingly upright, conventional to a degree; Gertrude's a feebler copy, as just, but perhaps not quite so hard. Well, I've never written to either, but I've heard from friends and the conclusion seems to be that as I've never asked for money I must have reformed. There's a desire for a reconciliation; my father's getting old, and I believe, in their reserved way, they were fond of me. Don't be impatient; I'm coming to the point at last. I'd a letter to-day from Colston—though the man's a relative, I haven't seen him since I left school. He and his wife are passing through on their way to British Columbia and the idea seems to be that he should see me and report."

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Prescott made a sign of understanding. Jernyngham, stamped with dissipation and injured in a brawl, and his small homestead where everything was in disorder and out of repair, were hardly likely to create a favorable impression on his English relatives. Besides, there was Mrs. Jernyngham. The effect of her appearance and conversation might be disastrous.

"Now," continued Jernyngham, "you see how I'm fixed. I haven't much to thank my people for, but I want to spare them a shock. If it would make things easier for them, I don't mind their thinking better of me than I deserve."

His companion pondered this. It was crudely put, but it showed a rather fine consideration, Prescott thought, for the people who were in part responsible for the man's downfall; perhaps, too, a certain sense of shame and contrition. Jernyngham's desire could not be found fault with.

"What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Jernyngham with a reckless laugh. "You'll do all that's needed; I mean to leave my friends to you. Strikes me as a brilliant idea, though not exactly novel; made a number of excellent comedies. Did you ever see 'Charley's Aunt'?"

Prescott frowned.

"I don't deal."

"Think! You're not unlike me and we're about the same age; Colston, hasn't seen me for fourteen years; his wife never!"

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"No," objected Prescott. "It can't be done!"

"It's hardly good form to remind you of it, Jack, but there was a time when we took a grading contract on the line and you got into trouble close in front of the ballast train."

Prescott's determined expression changed.

"Yes," he conceded; "it gives you a pull on me—I can't go back on that." He spread out his hands. "Well, if you insist."

"For the old man's sake," said Jernyngham. "I want you to take the Colstons out to your place and entertain them for a day or two; they won't stay long. They're coming in by the West-bound this evening."

"Then," exclaimed Prescott, "they'll be here in half an hour, if the train's on time! If there are any points you can give me about your family history, you had better be quick!"

"In the first place, I was rather a wild youngster, with an original turn of mind and was supposed to be a bit of a rake, though that wasn't correct—my eccentricities were harmless then. Your word 'maverick' describes me pretty well: I didn't belong to the herd; I wouldn't be rounded up with the others and let them put the brand on. That's no doubt why they credited me with vices I didn't possess." Jernyngham laughed. "Still, you mustn't overdo the thing; you want delicately to convey the idea that you're now reformed. The part requires some skill; it's a pity you're not smarter. Jack. But let me think——"

He went into a few details about his family, and then Prescott left him and, after giving an order to have his team ready, proceeded to the station. It was getting dark, but the western sky was still a sheet of wonderful pale green, against which the tall elevators stood out black and sharp. The head-lamp of a freight locomotive flooded track and station with a dazzling electric glare, the rails that ran straight and level across the waste gleaming far back in the silvery radiance. This helped Prescott to overcome his repugnance to his task, as he remembered another summer night when he had attempted to hurry his team across the track before a ballast train came up. Startled by the blaze of the head-lamp and the scream of the whistle, one of the horses plunged and kicked; a wheel of the wagon, sinking in the loose ballast, skidded against a tie; and Prescott stood between the rails, struggling to extricate the beasts, while the great locomotive rushed down on them. There was a vein of stubborn tenacity in him and it looked as if he and the horses would perish together when Jernyngham came running to the rescue. How they escaped neither of them could afterward remember, but a moment later they stood beside the track while the train went banging by, covering them with dust and fragments of gravel. Prescott admitted that he owed Jernyngham something for that.

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Nevertheless there was no doubt that the part he had undertaken to play would be difficult. He could see its humorous side, but he had not been a prodigal; indeed he was by temperament and habit steady-going and industrious. The son of a small business man in Montreal, he had after an excellent education abandoned city life and gone west, where he had prospered by frugality and hard work. He was by no means rich, but he was content and inclined to be optimistic about the future.

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When he reached the station, he found that the usual crowd of loungers had gathered to watch the train come in. Lighting his pipe, he walked up and down the low platform, wondering uneasily how he would get through the next few days. Jernyngham, he felt, had placed him in a singularly embarrassing position.

CHAPTER II

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MURIEL SEES THE WEST

The sunlight was fading off the prairie when a party of three sat in a first-class car as the local train went jolting westward. Henry Colston leaned back in his seat with a Winnipeg paper on his knee; and his appearance stamped him as a well-bred Englishman traveling for pleasure. He was thirty-four; his dress, though dusty, was fastidiously neat; his expression was pleasant, but there was an air of formality about him. One would not have expected him to do anything startling or extravagant, even under stress of emotion. Mrs. Colston resembled him in this respect. She was a handsome woman, a little reserved in manner, and was tastefully dressed in traveling tweed, which she had found too hot for the Canadian summer. Muriel, her sister, was twenty-four, and though the two were alike, the girl's face was fresher, more ingenuous and perhaps more intelligent. It was an attractive face, crowned with red-gold hair; broad brows, straight nose and firm mouth hinted at some force of character, but her eyes of deep violet were unusually merry, and her warm coloring suggested a sanguine temperament.

So far, Muriel Hurst had taken life lightly and had foiled Mrs. Colston's attempts to make a suitable match for her. The daughter of a man of taste who had died in difficulties, she had not a penny beyond the allowance provided by her sister's generosity. Nevertheless, she was happy and had a strong liking and respect for her prosperous brother-in-law, though his restricted views sometimes irritated her.

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She was now trying to arrange her impressions of Canada, which were mixed. She had looked down on Montreal with its great bridge and broad river from the wooded mountain, and from there it had struck her as a beautiful city. Then she had seen the handsome stone houses with their lawns at the foot of the hill, and afterward the magnificent commercial buildings round the postoffice. These could scarcely be equaled in London, but the rest of the town had not impressed her. It was strewn with sand and cement-dust: they seemed to be pulling down and putting up buildings and tearing open the streets all over it.

Afterward the Western Express had swept her through a thousand miles of wilderness, a vast tract of forest filled with rocks and lakes and rivers; and then she had spent two days in Winnipeg on the verge of the prairie. This city she found perplexing. The station hall was palatial, part of wide Main Street and Portage Avenue with their stately banks and offices could hardly be too much admired, and there were pretty wooden houses running back to the river among groves of trees. But apart from this, the place was somehow primitive. There were numerous hard-faced men hanging about the streets, and it jarred on her to see the rows of well-dressed loungers in the hotels lolling in wooden chairs close against the great windows, a foot or two from the street. It gave her a hint of western characteristics; the people were abrupt, good-naturedly so, perhaps, but devoid of delicacy.

Last had come the prairie—the land of promise—which seemed to run on forever, flooded with brilliant sunshine under a sky of dazzling blue. Banded with miles of wheat, flecked with crimson flowers, it stretched back, brightly green, until it grew gray and blue on the far horizon. It was relieved by the neutral purple of poplar bluffs, and little gleaming lakes; its vastness and openness filled the girl with a sense of liberty. Narrow restraints, cramping prejudices, must vanish in this wide country; one's nature could expand and become optimistic here.

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Then Colston began to talk.

"We should arrive in the next half-hour and I'll confess to a keen curiosity about Cyril Jernyngham. He was an amusing and eccentric scapegrace when I last saw him, though that is a very long time ago."

"You object to eccentricity, don't you?" laughed Muriel.

"Oh, no! Call it originality, and I'll admit that a certain amount is useful; but it should be kept in check. Indulged in freely, it's apt to rouse suspicion."

"Which is rather unfair."

"I don't know," Mrs. Colston broke in. "Considered all round, it's an excellent rule that if you won't do what everybody in your station does, you must take the consequences."

Colston nodded.

"I agree. One must think of the results to society as a whole."

"Cyril Jernyngham seems to have taken the consequences," Muriel pointed out. "Isn't there something to be said for the person who does so uncomplainingly? I understand he never recanted or asked for help."

Mrs. Colston shot a quick glance at her. She did not wish her sister's sympathy to be enlisted on the black sheep's behalf.

"I believe that's true," she replied. "Perhaps it's hardly to his credit. His father is an old man who had expected great things of him. If he had come home, he would have been forgiven and reinstated."

"Yes," said Colston, "though Jernyngham seldom shows his feelings, I know he has grieved over his son. There can be no question that Cyril should have returned; I've told him so in my letters."

"I suppose they'd have insisted on a full and abject surrender?"

"Not an abject one," answered Colston. "He would have been expected to fall in with the family ideas and plans."

"And he wouldn't?" suggested Muriel with a mischievous smile. "I think he was right." Reading disapproval in her sister's expression, she continued: "You dear virtuous people are a little narrow in your ideas; you can't understand that there's room for the greatest difference of opinion even in a harmonious family, and that it's very silly to drive the nonconformer into rebellion. Variety's a law of nature and tends to life."

Colston glanced meaningfully at his wife. He was not a hypercritical person, but it did not please him that his sister-in-law, of whom he was fond, should champion Jernyngham.

"I don't wish to be severe on Cyril," he rejoined. "As a matter of fact, I know nothing good or bad about his Canadian life; but he must be regarded as, so to speak, on probation until he has proved that he deserves our confidence."

Muriel made no answer. She was looking out of the window toward the west, and the glow on the vast plain's rim seized her attention. The sunset flush had faded, but the sky shone a transcendent green. The air was very clear; every wavy line of bluff was picked out in a wonderful deep blue. Muriel thought she had never seen such strength and vividness of color. Then she glanced round the long car. It was comfortable except for the jolting; the silvery gray of its cane-backed seats contrasted with the paneling of deep brown. The big lamps and metal fittings gleamed with nickel. All the girl saw connected her with luxurious civilization, and she wondered with a stirring of curiosity what awaited her in the wilds, where man still grappled with nature in primitive fashion.

"Sebastian in three or four minutes!" announced the conductor; and while Muriel and Mrs. Colston gathered together a few odds and ends a scream of the whistle broke out.

Prescott heard it on the station platform and with strong misgivings braced himself for his task. A bright light was speeding down the track, blending with that flung out by a freight locomotive crossing the switches. Then amid the clangor of the bell the long cars rolled in and he saw a man standing on the platform of one. There was no doubt that he was an Englishman and Prescott hurried toward the car.

"Mr. Henry Colston?" he asked.

The man held out his hand.

"I think Harry is sufficient. Come and speak to Florence; she has been looking forward to meeting you with interest." He turned. "My dear, this is Cyril."

Prescott shook hands with the lady on the car platform, and then looked past her in confused surprise. A girl stood in the vestibule, clad in garments of pale lilac tint which fell about her figure in long sweeping lines, emphasizing its fine contour against the dark brown paneling. She had a large hat of the same color, and it enhanced the attractiveness of her face, which wore a friendly smile. She was obviously one of the party, though Jernyngham had not mentioned her, and Prescott pulled himself together when Colston presented him.

"My sister-in-law, Muriel Hurst," he added.

When they had alighted, Prescott asked for the checks and moved toward the baggage car. While he waited, watching the trunks being flung out, Ellice passed him talking to a smartly dressed man. This struck Prescott as curious, but he knew the man as a traveling salesman for an American cream-separator, and as he must have called at Jernyngham's homestead on his round and was no doubt leaving by the train, there was no reason why Ellice should not speak to him. He thought no more of the matter and proceeded to carry several trunks and valises across the platform to his wagon, while his new friends watched him with some surprise. It was a novel experience in their walk of life to see their host carrying their baggage, and when Prescott lifted the heaviest trunk Colston hurried forward to protest.

"Stand aside, please," said the rancher, walking firmly across the boards with the big trunk on his shoulders. When he had placed it in the wagon he turned to the ladies with a smile.

"I had thought of putting you up for the night at the hotel, but they're full, and with good luck we ought to make my place in about three hours. I dare say this isn't the kind of rig you have been accustomed to driving in; and somebody will have to sit on a trunk. There's only room for three on the driving-seat."

Mrs. Colston surveyed the vehicle with misgivings. It was a long, shallow box set on four tall and very light wheels, and crossed by a seat raised on springs. Two rough-coated horses were harnessed to it with a pole between them. She saw this by the glare of the freight locomotive's head-lamp when the train moved out, and noticed that her husband was looking at their host in surprise.

"I'll take the trunk," said Colston. "We had dinner down the line not long ago."

Prescott helped the ladies up and seating himself next to the younger started his horses. They set off at a rapid trot and the wagon jolted unpleasantly as it crossed the track. Then the horses broke into a gallop, raising a dust-cloud in the rutted street, while the light vehicle rocked in an alarming fashion, and Prescott had some trouble in restraining them when they ran out on to the dim waste of prairie. Then the wonderful keen air, faintly scented with wild peppermint, reacted upon the girl with a curious exhilarating effect. She felt stirred and excited, expectant of new experiences, perhaps adventures. The wild barley brushed about the wheels with a silky rustle; the beat of hoofs rang in a sharp staccato through the deep silence; and the touch of the faint night wind brought warmth into Muriel's face.

"They're pretty fresh; been in the stable of a farm near here most of the day," Prescott explained. "Not long off the range, anyhow, and they're bad to hold."

There was a shrill scream from a dusky shape flitting through the air as they skirted a marshy pool, and the team again broke into a furious gallop. The trail was grown with short scrub which smashed beneath the hoofs, and the vehicle lurched sharply when the wheels left the ruts and ran through tall, tangled grass. Prescott with some diffidence slipped his arm round Muriel's waist, while Colston jolted up and down with his trunk.

"You have still the same taste in horses, Cyril," he remarked. "I suppose you remember Wildfire?"

"Wildfire?" queried Prescott, and then, having the impression that young English lads were sometimes given a pony, ventured: "Quite a cute little beast."

"Little!" exclaimed Colston. "How many hands make a big horse in this country? I'm speaking of the hunter you cajoled the second groom into saddling when your father was away. Can't you remember how you insisted on putting her at the Newby brook?"

"I don't seem to place it somehow," said Prescott in alarm, seeing that if he were called upon to share any more reminiscences it might lead him into difficulties. "You know I've been out here a while."

"Long enough to forget, it seems."

Prescott made a bold venture.

"That's so; perhaps it's better. This is a brand new country. One starts afresh here, looking forward instead of back."

Muriel considered this. The idea was, she thought, appropriate, but the man's tone and air were not what one would have expected of a reformed rake. There was no hint of contrition; he spoke with optimistic cheerfulness.

"Of course," Colston agreed. "I wonder if I might say that you have grown more Canadian than I expected to find you?"

"More Canadian?" Prescott checked himself in time and laughed. "Is it surprising? You drive and starve out many a good man who dares to be original—I've met a number of them. Can you wonder that when they're welcomed here they're willing to forget you and become one with the people who took them in?"

"In a way, that's a pity," said Mrs. Colston. "We like to think we haven't lost you altogether."

Disregarding his horses, Prescott turned toward her with a bow.

"Face the truth, ma'am. If you're ever in a tight place, we'll send you what help we can, hard men, such as can't be raised in your cities, to keep the flag flying, but we stop there. Don't think we belong to you—we stand firm on our own feet, a new free nation. I"—he paused in an impressive manner—"am a Canadian."

Muriel felt a responsive thrill. His ideas were certainly not English, nor was his mode of expressing them, but his boldness appealed to her. Her companions were frankly astonished and rather hurt, which he seemed to realize, for he resumed with a laugh:

"But we won't talk politics. Things I've heard English people say out here make one tired."

Then he turned toward the girl, adding softly:

"Was that a very bad break I made?"

"I think it could be forgiven," she told him.

"The years you have spent in Canada seem to have had their full effect on you," Colston remarked dryly.

Prescott turned his attention to his team, slightly checking their pace.

"What did you mean when you said we should reach your ranch in three hours, if we had good luck?" Muriel asked.

"Oh," he said, "there are badger burrows about, and a little beast called a gopher makes almost as bad a hole; they're fond of digging up the trail. If a horse steps into one of those holes, it's apt to bring him down. Besides, we trust a good deal to our luck in this country—one has to run risks that can't be estimated: harvest frost, rust, dry seasons, winds that blow destroying sand about. I've lost two crops in the eight years I've been here."

"Can it be eight?" Colston broke in. "If I remember right, you spent three years in Manitoba."

"It's the same kind of country and the same climate," Prescott rejoined, conscious that he had nearly betrayed himself again. He felt angry with Jernyngham for giving him such a difficult part to play.

After this, he carefully avoided any personal topic and talked about Canadian farming, sitting silent when he could, while Muriel gazed about with pleasurable curiosity. It is never quite dark on those wide levels in summertime, and, for there was no moon, the prairie stretched away before them shadowy, silent, and mysterious. Now they passed a sheet of water, gleaming wanly among thin willows; then they plunged into the deep gloom of a poplar bluff; and later, lurching down a steep declivity, swept through a shallow creek. The air was filled with the smell of dew-damped soil and unknown aromatic scents, the loneliness was impressive, the half-obscurity emphasized the strangeness of everything. Muriel felt as if she had left all that was stereotyped and matter-of-fact far behind. It was the unexpected and romantic that ought to happen in this virgin land.

Then, worn by several days' journey in the jolting cars, she grew drowsy. The steady drumming of hoofs, the slapping of the traces, and the rattle of wheels were strangely soothing. She fancied that once or twice when they sped furiously down an incline, the driver held her fast, but she did not resent the support of his arm: it was a steady, reassuring grasp. At last, as they swung round a poplar bluff, she roused herself, for dim black buildings loomed up ahead, and one which had lighted windows took the shape of a small house. The team stopped, there were voices speaking with a curious accent which reminded her of Norway, and the rancher helped her down.

Afterward she followed her sister into a simply furnished, pine-boarded room with a big stove at one end of it, where a middle-aged woman set food and coffee before them. She spoke English haltingly, but her lined face lighted up when Muriel thanked her in Norse. Then there followed a flow of eager words, a few of which the girl caught, until the woman broke off when their host came in. He was silent, for the most part, during the meal, and shortly afterward Muriel was shown into a small room where she went to sleep in a few minutes.

CHAPTER III

JERNYNGHAM MAKES A DECISION

Prescott's guests had spent a week at his homestead with content when Colston and his wife sat talking one morning.

"I'm frankly puzzled," said Colston, opening his cigar case; "I can't make Cyril out. He's frugal, remarkably industrious—I think the description's warranted—and, from all that one can gather, as steady as a rock. This, of course, is gratifying, but it's by no means what I expected."

"He certainly doesn't fit in with the picture his sister Gertrude drew me, though she conveyed the impression that she was softening things down. There can be no doubt that he was wild. That might, perhaps, be forgiven, but one or two of the stories I've heard about him filled me with disgust."

Her husband looked thoughtful. He had not noticed that Muriel was sitting just outside the open window, though Mrs. Colston, being in a different position, had done so. She thought their voices would reach the girl, and if anything strongly in Cyril's disfavor cropped up during the conversation it might be as well that she should hear it. Mrs. Colston was willing that he should be reconciled to his relatives, but a reformed rake was not the kind of man to whom she wished her sister to be attracted. One could not tell whether the reformation would prove permanent.

"After all, I never heard any really serious offense proved against him," Colston rejoined. "It's sometimes easy to acquire a reputation without doing anything in particular to deserve it. People are apt to jump at conclusions."

"When there's a general concurrence of opinion it's wiser to fall in with it. But what did he say about his father's suggestion that he should go home?"

"Asked for a day or two to think it over; I fancied that he wished to consult somebody. Then he

promised to give me an answer."

"On the whole, I think they need have no hesitation about taking him back now," Mrs. Colston responded; and Muriel agreed with her. "There's another point," she added. "How long shall we stay here?"

"I don't know. I've a growing liking for Cyril, the place is pleasant, and though things are rather rudimentary, the air's wonderfully bracing. He urged me to stay some little time, and I felt that he wished it."

Mrs. Colston considered. She was enjoying her visit; everything was delightfully novel and she felt more cheerful and more vigorous than she had done for some time. But Muriel seemed to find the prairie pleasant, and there was a possibility of danger there.

"We might, perhaps, remain another week," she suggested.

As it happened, Colston's suspicion that his host wished to consult somebody was correct, for Prescott was then driving in to the settlement to lay his visitor's message before the man it most concerned. He found him lounging in the hotel bar, and, drawing him into the general-room, he sat down opposite him in a hard wooden chair. The apartment had no floor covering and was cheerless and dirty; there was not even a table in it; and only a railroad time-table and advertisements of land sales hung on its rough pine walls. Jernyngham, however, looked in keeping with his surroundings. The dirty bandage still covered his forehead, his clothes were stained and untidy, and he had an unkempt, dissipated air.

"Well," he asked with a grin, "how are you getting on with your new friends?"

"I don't know; I'm curious about what they think of me. Anyway, I found the thing harder than I expected. Why didn't you tell me Mrs. Colston was bringing her sister?"

"If I ever heard she had one, I forgot it; suppose I couldn't have read the letter properly. What's she like?"

"Herself," said Prescott. "I can't think of anybody we know I could compare her with."

He had endeavored to speak carelessly, but something in his voice betrayed him and Jernyngham laughed.

"That's not surprising. If you want to play your part properly, you had better make love to her. It's what would be expected of me, and it couldn't do any harm, because these people would very soon head you off. Harry Colston's sister-in-law would look for an assured position and at least five thousand dollars a year. When are they going?"

"I've asked them to stay a little longer and I think they'll agree. But that is not what I came to see you about. Colston laid a proposition before me—you're formally invited to return home."

"On what terms?"

Prescott detailed them, watching his companion. The latter sat silent for a minute or two, and then he said slowly:

"It's a handsome offer, but it was made under a mistake. There's no doubt that Colston was trusted with powers of discretion. He must be satisfied with you—don't you feel complimented, Jack?"

"What I feel is outside the question."

"Well," continued Jernyngham thoughtfully, "I suppose if I indulged in a spell of hard work in the open and practised strict abstinence it might improve my appearance, and I could, perhaps, keep out of Colston's way, or if needful, own up to the trick. The old man would hold to his bargain: he's that kind. It's a strong temptation—you see what I'd stand to gain—a liberal allowance, a life that's wildly luxurious by comparison with the one I'm leading, the society of people of the stamp I've been brought up among. Jack, I feel driven to the point of yielding. But it's a pity this offer has come too late."

"Is it too late?"

"Think! Would it be fair to go? For a month or two I might keep straight, then—I've tried to describe my people—you can imagine their feelings at the inevitable outbreak. Besides, there's a more serious difficulty." Jernyngham's tense face relaxed into a grim smile. "Can you imagine Ellice an inmate of an English country house, patronizing local charities, presiding over prim garden parties? The idea's preposterous! And that's not all."

Prescott knew little about England, but he could imagine her making an undesirable sensation in Montreal or Toronto.

"You force me to ask something. Is she Mrs. Jernyngham?" he said, hesitatingly.

"I used to think so; there's a doubt about the matter now."

"One would have imagined that was a point you would have been sure about."

"I understood her husband was dead when we were married in Manitoba. She was a waitress in a second-rate hotel; the brute had ill-used and deserted her. But there's now some reason to believe he's farming in Alberta. I haven't made inquiries: I didn't think it would improve matters."

Prescott said nothing. In face of such a situation, any remarks that he could make would be superfluous. There was a long silence; and then Jernyngham spoke again, slowly, but resolutely.

"You see how it is, Jack—where my interest lies. Against that, there's the feelings of my father and sister to consider. Then my reinstatement would have to be bought by casting off the woman who has borne with my failings and stuck to me pluckily. I haven't sunk quite so far as that. You'll have to tell Colston that I'm staying here!"

He got up and Prescott laid a hand on his arm.

"It's hard; but you're doing the square thing, Cyril."

Jernyngham shook off his hand.

"Don't let us talk in that strain. Come and see Ellice and try to amuse her. Don't know what's wrong with the woman; she has been moody of late."

"I must get back as soon as I can and I've some business to do."

"Oh, well," acquiesced Jernyngham, walking with him to the bar, which was the quickest way of leaving.

On reaching it he turned and glanced about sardonically. The room was dark, filled with flies, and evil smelling, as well as thick with smoke; half a dozen, untidy men leaned against the counter.

"What a set of loafing swine you are!" he coolly remarked. "It's not to the point that I'm no better, but if any of you feel insulted, I'll be happy to make what I've said good."

"Cut it out, Cyril! Can't have a circus here!" exclaimed the bar-tender.

"You needn't be afraid. They look pretty tame," Jernyngham rejoined, and going on to the door, shook hands with Prescott.

"Tell Colston he has my last word," he said.

Turning away, he proceeded to the untidy parlor where he found Ellice dawdling over a paper. Her white summer dress was stained in places and open at the neck, where a button had come off. The short skirt displayed a hole in one stocking and a shoe from which a strap had been torn. Jernyngham leaned on the table regarding her with a curious smile.

"What's Jack come about?" she asked.

"To say my fastidious relatives want me to go home, which would mean leaving you behind."

She looked at him searchingly, and then laughed.

"And you won't go?"

"That's the message I sent."

Ellice's face softened, though there was a hint of indecision in it.

"You're all right, Cyril, only a bit of a fool."

"A bit?" he said dryly. "I'm the whole blamed hog. But enough of that. We'll pull out for the homestead to-morrow. I expect Wandle is robbing me."

"He's been robbin' you ever since you bought the ranch. I don't know why you stopped me from gettin' after him."

"He saves me trouble," explained Jernyngham, and they discussed the arrangements for their return.

Prescott, arriving home, had a brief private interview with Colston, who realized with some disappointment that his errand had failed. Then the rancher harnessed a fresh team and proceeded to a sloo where his Scandinavian hired man was cutting prairie hay. An hour or two later Muriel went out on the prairie and walked toward a poplar bluff, in the shadow of which she gathered ripe red saskatoons, and then sat down to look about.

The dazzling blue of the sky was broken by rounded masses of silver-edged clouds that drove along before a fresh northwest breeze. Streaked by their speeding shadows, the great plain stretched away, checkered by ranks of marigolds and tall crimson flowers of the lily kind that swayed as the rippling grasses changed color in the wind. A mile or two distant stood the trim wooden homestead, with a tall windmill frame near by, girt by broad sweeps of dark-green wheat and oats. These were interspersed with stretches of uncovered soil, glowing a deep chocolate-brown, which Muriel knew was the summer fallow resting after a cereal crop. Beyond the last strip of rich color, there spread, shining delicately blue, a great field of flax; and then the dusky green of alfalfa and alsike for the Hereford cattle, standing knee-deep in a flashing lake. The prairie, she thought, was beautiful in summer; its wideness was bracing, one was stirred into cheerfulness and bodily vigor by the rush of its fresh winds. She felt that she could remain contentedly at the homestead for a long time; and then her thoughts centered on its owner.

This was perhaps why she rose and strolled on toward the sloo, though she would not acknowledge that she actually wished to meet him. The man was something of an enigma and therefore roused in her an interest which was stronger because of some of the things she had heard to his discredit. Following the rows of wheelmarks, she brushed through the wild barley, whose spiky heads whipped her dress, passed a chain of glistening ponds, a bluff wrapped in blue shadow, and finally descended a long slope to the basin at its foot where the melting snow had run in spring. Now it had dried and was covered with tall grass which held many flowers and fragrant wild peppermint.

A team of horses and a tinkling mower moved through its midst, and at one edge Prescott was loading the grass into a wagon. Engrossed as he was in his task, he did not notice her, and she stood a while watching him. He wore no jacket; the thin yellow shirt, flung open at the neck and tightly belted at the waist, and the brown duck trousers, showed the lithe grace of his athletic figure. His poise and swing were admirable, and he was working with determined energy, his face and uncovered arms the warm color of the soil.

Muriel drew a little closer and he stopped on seeing her. His brown skin was singularly clean, his eyes were clear and steady, though they often gave a humorous twinkle. If this man had ever been a rake, his reformation must have been drastic and complete, because although she had a very limited acquaintance with people of that sort, it was reasonable to conclude that they must bear some sign of indulgence or sensuality. The rancher had no stamp of either.

He showed his pleasure at her appearance.

"You have had quite a walk," he said. "If you will wait while I put up the load, I'll take you back."

Muriel sat down and watched him fling the grass in heavy forkfuls on to the growing pile, until at last he clambered up upon the frame supporting it and, pulling some out and ramming the rest back, proceeded to excavate a hollow.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Making a nest for you," he told her with a laugh. "Now, if you'll get up."

While she mounted by the wheel he stood on the edge of the wagon, leaning down toward her. There did not seem to be much foothold, the grass looked slippery, and the hollow he had made was beyond her reach, but she seized the hand he held out and he swung her up. For a moment his fingers pressed tightly upon her waist, and then she was safe in the hollow, smiling at him as he found a precarious seat on the rack.

"You couldn't see how you were going to get up, but you didn't hesitate," he said with a soft laugh, when he had started his team.

"No," she smiled back at him. "Somehow you inspire one with confidence. I didn't think you would let me fall."

"Curious, isn't it?"

She reclined in the recess among the grass, which yielded to her limbs in a way that gave her a sense of voluptuous ease. Her pose, although scarcely a conventional one, showed to advantage the fine contour of her form; and the lilac-tinted dress that flowed in classic lines about her made a patch of cool restful color on the warm ochre of her surroundings. It was easy to read the man's admiration in his glance, and she became suddenly filled with mischievous daring.

"Cyril," she said, "you are either an excellent actor, or else—"

"I have been maligned. Is that what you meant?"

"I think I did mean something of the kind."

"Then I'm a very poor actor. That should settle the question."

"I've wondered how you became so very Canadian," she said thoughtfully.

"What's the matter with the Canadians?"

"Nothing. I haven't met very many yet, but on the whole I'm favorably impressed by them. They're direct, blunt, perhaps less complex than we are."

"No trimmings," he suggested. "They don't muss up good material so that it can hardly be recognized. You can tell what a man is when you see him or hear him talk."

"I don't know," Muriel argued. "I've an idea that it might be difficult, even in Canada."

He let this pass.

"What do you think of the country?" he asked.

She glanced round. It was late in the afternoon and somewhat cooler than it had been. Half the plain lay in shadow, but the light was curiously sharp. A clump of ragged jack-pines stood on a sandhill miles away, and a lake twinkled in the remote distance. The powerful Clydesdale horses plodded through short crackling scrub; a fine scent of wild peppermint floated about.

"Oh," she responded, "it's delightful! And everybody's so energetic! You move with a spring and verve; and I don't hear any grumbling, though there seems to be so much to do!"

"And to bear now and then: crops wiped out—I've lost two of them. The work never slackens, except in winter, when you sit shivering beside the stove, if you're not hauling in building logs or cordwood through the arctic frost. At night it's deadly silent, unless there's a blizzard howling; the plains are very lonely when the snow lies deep. Don't you think you're better off in England, taking it all 'round?"

He laid respectful fingers on the hem of her skirt, touching the fine material, as if appraising its worth.

"Our wheat-growers' wives and daughters are lucky if they've a couple of moderately smart dresses, but I suppose you have several trunks full of things like this. That and the kind of life it implies must count for something."

"I believe I have," said Muriel with candor, answering his steady inquiring glance. "Still, I've felt

that we drift along from amusement to amusement in a purposeless way, doing nothing that's worth while. There might come a time when one would grow very tired of it."

"It must come and bring trouble then. Here one goes on from task to task, each one bigger and more venturesome than the last; acre added to acre, a gasoline tractor to the horse-plow, another quarter-section broken. Mind and body taxed all day and often half the night. One can't sit down and mope."

This was, she thought, a curious speech for a man who had been described as careless, extravagant, and dissolute; but he was getting too serious, and she laughed.

"You were energetic enough in England, if reports are true. I've often thought of your right-of-way adventure. It must have been very dramatic when you appeared at the garden party covered with fresh tar."

"Sounds like that, doesn't it?" he cautiously agreed. "How do they tell the tale?"

"Something like this—you were at the Hall with Geoffrey when the townspeople were clamoring about Sir Gilbert's closing the path through the wood, and for some reason you assisted them in attacking the barricade. It had been well tarred as a defensive measure, hadn't it? Then you returned, triumphant, black from head to foot, when you thought the guests had gone, and plunged into the middle of the last of them—Maud always laughs when she talks about it. Sir Gilbert was somewhere out of sight when you related the rabble's brilliant victory, but he dashed out red in face when he understood and never stopped until he jumped into his motor. I don't think Geoffrey's wife has forgiven you."

Prescott smiled.

"Well," he said, "I must have grown very staid since then."

Muriel changed the subject, but they talked with much good-humor until they reached the homestead, where the man alighted and held out his arms to her. She hesitated a moment, and then was seized by him and swung gently to the ground, but she left him with a trace of heightened color in her face and went quietly into the house.

CHAPTER IV

MURIEL FEELS REGRET

It was pleasantly cool in the shadow of Jernyngham's wooden barn, where Prescott sat, talking to its owner. Outside the strip of shade, the sun fell hot upon the parched grass, and the tall wheat that ran close up to the homestead swayed in waves of changing color before the rush of breeze. The whitened, weather-worn boards of the house, which faced the men, seemed steeped in glowing light, and sounds of confused activity issued from the doorway that was guarded by mosquito-netting. A clatter of domestic utensils indicated that Ellice was baking, and she made more noise than she usually did when she was out of temper. Jernyngham listened with faint amusement as he filled his pipe.

"Sorry I can't ask you in, Jack," he said. "The kitchen is a pretty large one, but when Ellice starts bread-making, there isn't a spot one can sit down in. Of course, we've another living-room—I furnished it rather nicely—but for some reason we seldom use it."

The mosquito door swung back with a crash and Ellice appeared in the entrance with a hot, angry face, and hands smeared with dough, her hair hanging partly loose in disorder about her neck, her skirt ungracefully kilted up.

"Ain't you goin' to bring that water? Have I got to wait another hour?" she cried, ignoring Prescott.

Jernyngham rose and moved away. Returning, he disappeared into the kitchen with a dripping pail and Ellice's voice was raised in harsh upbraiding. Then the man came out, looking a trifle weary, though he sat down by Prescott with a smile.

"These things should be a warning, Jack," he said. "Still, one has to make allowances; this hot weather's trying, and Ellice got a letter that disturbed her by the last mail. I didn't hear what was in it, but I suspect it was a bill."

Prescott nodded, because he did not know what to say. Mrs. Jernyngham had, he gathered, been unusually fractious for the last week or two, and Cyril was invariably forbearing. Indeed, Prescott sometimes wondered at his patience, for he imagined that his comrade had outgrown what love he had borne her. The man had his virtues: he was rash, but he seldom failed to face the consequences with whimsical good-humor.

"Your friends are going to-morrow," Prescott told him. "They understand that you will write home and explain your reasons for remaining."

"I suppose I'll have to do so, though it will be difficult. You see, to give the reasons that count

most would be cruel. If it's any comfort to my folks to think favorably of me, I'd rather let them. I've made a horrible mess of things, but that's no reason why others should suffer."

Prescott glanced round at the dilapidated house, the untidy stable, the door of which was falling to pieces, and the wagon standing with a broken wheel. There was no doubt that Jernyngham was right in one respect.

"Jack," Cyril resumed, "your manner gives me the impression that you'll be sorry to lose your visitors."

"I shall be sorry. I pressed them to stay and I think they'd have done so, only that Mrs. Colston was against it."

"Ah! That strikes me as significant. You see, I can make a good guess at her motives; I've suffered from that kind of thing. She evidently considers you dangerous. Don't you feel flattered?"

"Mrs. Colston has no cause for uneasiness; I could wish she had."

"Then I'm glad my friends are going. It will save you trouble, Jack. A match between Miss Hurst and you is out of the question."

"I've felt that, so far as my merits go, which is the best way I can put it," said Prescott gravely. "You speak as if there were stronger reasons."

"There are; I'm a little surprised you don't see them. Your merits—I suppose you mean your character and appearance—should go a long way; we'll admit that you're a man who might have some attraction for even such a girl as Miss Hurst seems to be, if she didn't pause to think. Unfortunately for you, however, it's her duty to her relatives to make a brilliant match and I've no doubt she recognizes it. Girls of her station—you had better face the truth, Jack—never marry beneath them."

"But a man may."

"A fair shot," laughed Jernyngham. "I can't resent it. But the man generally suffers, and the price is a heavier one when the girl has to pay. There's a penalty for breaking caste."

"You seem to tolerate worse things in the old country."

"Not often, after all—you hear of the flagrant offenders, and though I dare say there are others who are not found out, the bulk against whom there's no reproach, excite no attention. But we'll let that go. I want you to understand. You're right, Jack; it's your position that's all wrong. Girls of the kind we're considering are brought up in luxury, taught every accomplishment that's economically useless, led to believe that every comfort they need will somehow be supplied. They're charming in their proper environment, but it's a cruelty to take them out of it. They'd be helpless in this grim country, where you must work for all you want and do without many things even then. Can you imagine Miss Hurst standing over a hot stove all day and spending her evenings mending your worn-out shirts?"

Prescott looked up, his face set hard.

"You have said enough."

There was silence after this, until a big man dressed in old brown overalls stopped his horse near-by.

"I've fixed up with Farrer to send over his gasoline tractor to do the fall breaking," he said. "Saw the telephone construction people yesterday and told them I'd let them have two teams to haul in their poles. It's going to pay us better than keeping them for plowing."

"Quite right, Wandle," replied Jernyngham, and the fellow nodded to Prescott and rode away.

He lived on the next half-section and assisted Jernyngham in the management of his ranch, besides sharing the cost of labor, implements and horses with him, though Prescott had cause for believing that the arrangement was not to his friend's benefit.

"You'd be better off if you didn't work with that man," he said.

"It's possible," Jernyngham agreed. "I know he robs me, but he saves me bother. Besides, if we decided to separate and came to a settlement, I dare say he would claim that I was in his debt; and he might be right. I'm no good at business. Ranching I don't mind, but I could never learn how to buy and sell."

"It's a very useful ability," Prescott rejoined with some dryness. "But as I want to be home for supper, I must get on."

He unhitched his horse and mounted, and Jernyngham walked with him to the gate in the wire fence.

"You'll remember what I told you, Jack," he said meaningly.

"Yes," Prescott answered with a stern face. "I suppose I ought to thank you. I'm not likely to forget."

He rode home and arriving in time for supper took his place at the table with mixed feelings, foremost among which was keen regret. Except for the company of his Scandinavian hired man and the latter's hard-featured wife, he had lived alone in Spartan simplicity, thinking of nothing but his farm; and his guests' arrival had revealed to him the narrowness of his life. They had brought him new desires and thoughts, besides recalling ideas he had long forgotten, and

among other things had made the evening meal a pleasant function to be looked forward to, instead of an opportunity for hurriedly consuming needed food.

The spotless cloth and the flowers on the table were novelties, but they pleased his eye. Colston with his cheerful, well-bred air and fastidiousness in dress, talked interestingly; Mrs. Colston with her gracious dignity, and Muriel, who was wholly alluring, seemed to fill the room with charm. It was perhaps all the more enjoyable because Prescott had been accustomed to pleasant society in Montreal, before he abandoned it with other amenities and went out to a life of stern toil and frugality in the grim Northwest.

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He said little, though it was the last time they would gather tranquilly round his board—they were to leave for the railroad early on the morrow. A heavy melancholy oppressed him, though bright sunlight streamed into the room and an invigorating breeze swept in through the open window, outside which tall wheat and blue flax rolled away. He could not force himself to talk, though he laughed at Colston's anecdotes, and it was a relief when the meal was over. Half an hour later he overtook Muriel strolling along the edge of the wheat.

"Have you recovered yet?" she asked. "You looked very downcast."

"That's how I feel. It strikes me as perfectly natural. I'll be alone to-morrow."

"But you were alone before we came."

"Very true; I didn't seem to mind it then. I was happy thinking how I could put in a bigger crop or raise another bunch of stock. My mind was fixed on the plow. But you have lifted me out of the furrow. I guess it's weak, but somehow I hate the thought of going back to the clods."

Remembering Jernyngham's remarks, it struck him that this was not the line he should have taken, and for a moment or two Muriel turned her head. Then she looked at him, smiling.

"I shall be very sorry to leave, and I believe Florence and Harry feel the same."

"But you are going to British Columbia and down the Pacific Coast. You will revel in new experiences and interesting sights."

"I suppose so," she answered, rather listlessly. "We shall get a glimpse of a new country, but that will be all. On the steamers we'll meet much the kind of people we are accustomed to, and no doubt we'll stay at hotels built especially for luxurious tourists. You see, we take our usual environment along with us."

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"But isn't that what you like?"

"I don't know; perhaps it ought to be." Muriel paused and looked up at him with candid eyes. "You hinted that we had given you a new and wider outlook—or brought back the one you used to have, which is what you must have meant. You don't seem to realize that you have done much the same thing to me."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"It shouldn't be difficult. You know the kind of people I have hitherto met, and how we spend our time in a round of amusements that lead to nothing, with all that could jar on one carefully kept away. This is the first time I've come into touch with strenuous, normal life."

"And it doesn't seem to have frightened you?"

"No," she said with a smile; "I'm not in the least afraid—why should I be? I must have more courage than you think, but does one need a great deal of it to live here?"

He looked at her in grave admiration. There was a hint of pride in her pose, and her eyes were calm.

"I believe if ever a time of stress came, you wouldn't shrink. But this is a pretty hard and lonely country, especially in winter."

Muriel changed the subject.

"For all that, I feel you are right in staying, Cyril. Have you written to your people?"

Prescott felt embarrassed and guilty, as he generally did when, in confidential moments, she called him by Jernyngham's name. Somehow he could not imagine her saying Jack.

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"No," he rejoined slowly. "Of course, they must be written to."

Muriel did not answer. The turn their conversation had taken had filled her with a vague unrest as she looked back at the life she had led. Three or four years ago it had seemed filled with glamour and excitement, and she had entered on its pleasures with eager zest, but of late she had begun to find them wearisome. They no longer satisfied her. If this were the result of a few years' experience, what would she feel when she had grown jaded with time and everything was stale? Then her glimpse of the simple, healthful western life had come as a revelation. It was real, a bracing struggle, in which no effort was wasted but produced tangible results: broad stretches of splendid wheat, sweeps of azure flax.

But this was not all. She felt drawn to her brown-faced companion, who had obviously redeemed whatever errors he had been guilty of in the past. She had known him for only about a fortnight, but she had seen his admiration for her with a satisfaction that was slightly tempered by misgivings. She could not tell exactly what she expected from him, but she had at least looked for some expression of a wish that their acquaintance should not end abruptly on the morrow. She did not think she would have resented a carefully modified display of the gallantry Cyril

Jernyngham must be capable of, if reports were true. Considering what his past was supposed to have been, the grave man who watched her with troubled eyes was hard to understand.

"Cyril," she asked, "has Harry given you our address at Glacier and Banff?"

He supposed that this implied permission to write to her, but he could not do so as Jack Prescott and he already bitterly regretted that he had allowed her to think of him as Jernyngham.

"Yes," he said, with a carelessness which cost him an effort. "But I'm afraid I'm not a good correspondent. I'm too busy, for one thing."

"Too busy?" she mocked, with a stronger color in her face. "Can't you spare half an hour from your plowing to write to your friends?"

"Well," he answered with forced coolness, "it's difficult, except, of course, in the winter and you'll be back in England then, with so many festivities on hand that you won't be anxious to hear about Canada."

She looked at him for a moment, puzzled and a little angry, and he guessed her thoughts. He was behaving like a boor; but it was better that she should think him one.

"How very un-English you have become!" she said.

"You mean I'm very Canadian? Anyway, I try to be sensible—I've done some wretchedly foolish things and I've got to pay for them. Of course, this visit's only an episode to you; something that's soon over and forgotten."

There was trouble in his voice, though he strove to speak with indifference, and after a swift glance at him she answered coldly:

"I suppose it is. One impression rubs out another, and no doubt we shall see something novel and interesting farther on. However, we won't stay in Canada very long and we shall see your father and sister as soon as we get home. It's curious that you have scarcely mentioned them."

"Oh, well," he evaded awkwardly, "Harry has told me a good deal."

He turned his head, dreading her curious eyes. His last evening in her company was proving more trying than he had expected; though usually tolerant and good-humored, the strain made him bitter. To-morrow he must put this girl out of his mind. After all, it was to Cyril Jernyngham, rake and wastrel, but a man of her own station, that she had been gracious and charming; had she known he was Jack Prescott, she would, no doubt, have treated him very differently; but in this supposition he did her wrong.

Puzzled by his lack of responsiveness and with wounded pride, she stopped and looked out toward the northwest across the prairie. Steeped in strong coloring, it seemed to run back into immeasurable distance, though a wonderful blaze of crimson marked its rim. The faint, cool air that flowed across it was charged with a curious exhilarating quality; there was a subtle fragrance of herbs in the grass.

"It's getting late," she said; "I must go in. This is the last sunset I shall watch on the prairie, and in several ways I'm sorry. You have made our stay here very pleasant."

CHAPTER V

THE MYSTERY OF THE MUSKEG

Colston and his party had been gone a fortnight when Prescott called at the Jernyngham homestead one afternoon and found its owner sitting moodily in the kitchen, which presented a chaotic appearance. Unwashed plates and dishes were scattered about, the wood-box was overturned and poplar billets strewed the floor, there was no fire in the rusty stove, and the fragments of a heavy crock lay against the wall. The strong sunlight that streamed in emphasized the disorder of the room.

"I was passing and thought I'd come in," Prescott explained. "Where's Mrs. Jernyngham? The look of the place gives one the idea that she's not at home."

"It's never remarkably tidy." Jernyngham broke into a rueful smile. "I believe she started for the settlement when I was at work in the summer fallow this morning. The fact that the horse and buggy are missing points to it."

"But don't you know whether she has gone or not?"

"I don't," said Jernyngham. "She didn't acquaint me with her intentions. As I see she has taken some things along, it looks as if she meant to visit Mrs. Harvey at the store. They're friends now and then."

His manner was suggestive, though he looked more resigned than disturbed, and Prescott, glancing at the shattered crock, ventured a question which he feared was not quite judicious:

"How did you break that thing?"

"It ought to be a warning. I didn't break it; it was meant to break on me. Ellice flung it at my head a day or two ago, and fortunately missed, though as a rule she's a pretty good shot. I suppose it's significant that neither of us troubled to pick up the pieces."

Prescott looked sympathetic, and hesitated, with his half-filled pipe in his hand.

"Shall I go, Cyril? I want to make Sebastian before it's dark."

"Sit still," Jernyngham told him. "I'm in an expansive mood, and I've a notion that I'm not far off a crisis in my affairs. Ellice has been fractious lately; I seem to have been getting on her nerves, which perhaps is not surprising."

Prescott made no comment and after sitting silent a few moments Jernyngham resumed:

"I was rather rash when I ventured to remonstrate about a bill. Ellice pointed out, with justice, that so long as I slouched round and let Wandle rob me, I'd no right to grumble at her for buying a few things. Most unwisely I maintained my point and"—he indicated the broken crock and littered table—"you see the consequences."

"Wandle is a bit of a rogue," said Prescott, choosing the safest topic. "I've told you so."

"You have. For all that, he's useful and I don't mind being robbed in moderation; I'm a man who's accustomed to losing things." His half-mocking tone grew serious. "I wrote to my people, as soon as Colston left, telling them I'd determined to remain in Canada; but if it wasn't for Ellice, I think I'd quit farming."

Prescott smoked in silence for a while. Jernyngham had made a costly sacrifice, chiefly on the woman's account, and Prescott felt sorry for him.

"Perhaps I'd better get on," he said after a while.

For a few moments Jernyngham looked irresolute, and then he got up.

"I'll come with you to Sebastian. I think I'd have gone earlier, only Ellice had the horse and rig, and Wandle's using the wagon team. It's no doubt my duty to sue for peace."

They set out shortly afterward and reaching Sebastian late in the evening drove to the livery-stable, where Jernyngham called the man who took Prescott's team.

"I suppose you have my horse?" he asked.

"Sure," said the fellow, looking at him curiously. "Mrs. Jernyngham said we'd better keep him until you came in. She left a note for you with the boss; he's in the hotel."

Jernyngham crossed the street, followed by his companion, and Prescott noticed that the loungers in the bar seemed interested when they came in. Two of them put down their glasses and turned to fix their eyes on Jernyngham, a third paused in the act of lighting his pipe and dropped the match. Then the owner of the livery-stable looked up in a hesitating manner as Jernyngham approached him.

"I believe you have a message for me," Jernyngham said abruptly.

"That's so," the man rejoined gravely. "I'll give it to you outside."

They left the bar, and when they stood under the veranda, Jernyngham tore open the envelope handed him. A moment later he firmly crumpled up the note it had held.

"When did she leave?" he asked in a harsh voice.

The liveryman regarded him sympathetically.

"By the afternoon East-bound. I'm mighty sorry, Cyril—guess you know it isn't a secret in the town."

Jernyngham's face grew darkly flushed.

"Then you can tell me whom she went with?"

"The drummer who was selling the separators. Bought tickets through to St. Paul. Told Perkins he wasn't coming back here; nothing doing on this round."

The man tactfully moved away and Jernyngham turned to Prescott, speaking rather hoarsely.

"She's gone—that's the end of it!"

He dropped into one of the chairs scattered about and a few moments later broke into a bitter laugh.

"It would have been more flattering if she had chosen you or Wandle instead of that blasted weedy drummer. Still, there the thing is, and it has to be faced." Then he surprised his companion, for his voice and expression became suddenly normal. "Go in and get me a cigar."

He lighted it carefully when it was brought to him and leaned back in his chair.

"Jack," he said, "I've got to hold myself in hand—if I start off on the jag now, it will be a dangerous one. Have you noticed that I've been practising strict abstinence since Colston left?"

Prescott, not knowing how to regard his ironic calmness, said nothing, and Jernyngham continued:

"It's a bitter pill. I was very fond of her once, and there's not much consolation in reflecting that she'll probably scare the fellow out of his wits the first time she breaks out in one of her rages."

Then his voice grew regretful. "Ellice's far from perfect, but she's much too good for him."

Remembering that it was on the woman's account his friend had remained on the prairie, Prescott made a venture:

"Since she has gone, it's a pity she didn't go a few weeks earlier."

"That doesn't count," declared Jernyngham. "She has cause to blame me as much for marrying her—one must try to be just. I thought of her when I determined to stay, but my own weaknesses played as big a part in deciding me."

He sat silent a while, and then indicated his surroundings with a contemptuous sweep of his hand—the dirty sidewalk strewn with cigar ends and banana peelings, the straggling houses with their cracked board walls and ugly square fronts, the rutted street down which drifted clouds of dust.

"Jack," he said, "I'm very sick of all this, and I can't face the lonely homestead now Ellice's gone. I must have a change and something to brace me; something that has a keener bite than drink. Think I'll take a haulage job on the new railroad, where there ought to be rough and risky work, and I'll leave this place to-night. Come across with me to Morant's, and I'll see what I can borrow on the land."

The sudden unreasoning decision was characteristic of him, but Prescott expostulated.

"You can't clear out in this eccentric fashion; there are a number of things to be settled first."

"I think I can," Jernyngham retorted dryly. "It's certain that I can't stay here."

He took his companion with him to call on a land-agent and mortgage-broker, and when they left the office Jernyngham had a bulky roll of bills in his pocket.

"Jack," he requested, "you'll run my place and pay Morant off after harvest; if Wandle gets his hands on it, there'll be very little left when I come back. You may have trouble with him, but you must hold out. Charge me with all expenses and pay as much of the surplus as you think I'm entitled to into my bank when you have sold the crop. Now if you'll come into the hotel, I'll give you a written authority and get Perkins to witness it."

Prescott demurred at first, but eventually yielded because he believed his friend's interest would need looking after in his absence. After some discussion they agreed on a workable scheme, which was put down in writing and witnessed by the hotel-keeper. Then Jernyngham borrowed a saddle and sent for his horse.

"I'll pull out for the railroad now; it's cooler riding at night and there's a good moon," he said. "As I'll pass close to your place, you may as well drive so far with me."

They set off, Prescott seated on the front of his jolting wagon, Jernyngham riding as near it as the roughness of the trail permitted, with a blanket and a package of provisions strapped to his saddle. He was wearing a hat of extra-thick felt and uncommon shape which had been given him by a man who had broken his journey for the purpose of seeing the country when returning from Hong Kong by the Canadian Pacific route. Soon after they left Sebastian, a young trooper of the Northwest Police dressed in khaki uniform came trotting up in the moonlight and joined them.

"Where are you off to, Jernyngham?" he asked, glancing at the rolled up blanket. "Looks as if you meant to camp on the trail."

"I'll have to, most likely," said Jernyngham. "I'm leaving the farm to Prescott for a while and heading for Nelson's Butte on the new road."

"What are you going to do there?"

"Thought I'd pick up a horse or two at one of the ranches I'll pass and apply for a teaming job. Contractor was asking for haulage tenders; he's having trouble among the sandhills and muskegs."

"Then you'll be taking a wad of money along?"

Jernyngham assented and the trooper looked thoughtful.

"Now," he cautioned, "there's a pretty tough crowd at Nelson, and though we stopped any licenses being issued, we've had trouble over the running-in of liquor. Then you have a long ride before you through a thinly-settled country. You want to be careful about that money."

"The settlers are to be trusted."

"That's so, but we have reason to believe the rustlers are at work in the district; seem to have been going into the liquor business, and I've heard of horses missing. Now that the boys have stopped their branding other people's calves in Alberta and corralled their leaders, it looks as if the fellows were beginning the game in this part of the country."

"Thanks," said Jernyngham. "I may as well take precautions. How would you recommend my carrying the money?"

The trooper made one or two ingenious suggestions as to the safest way of secreting the bills, and Jernyngham, dismounting, carried them out. Soon afterward the trooper struck off across the plain, and the others, riding on, met a farmer who spoke to them as he passed. At length Prescott pulled up his team at the spot where his companion must leave the trail.

"I'll do what I can with the land, Cyril, and keep an account," he said. "You might write and let me know how you are getting on."

They shook hands and Jernyngham trotted away, while Prescott sat watching him for a minute or two. Man and horse were sharply outlined against the moonlit grass. Jernyngham looked very lonely as he rode out into the wilderness. He could hardly have been happy, Prescott thought, in his untidy and comfortless house at the farm; but, after all, it had been a home, and now he was rudely flung adrift. It was true that the man was largely responsible for the troubles that had fallen upon him, but this was no reason for refusing him pity, and Cyril had his strong points. He had staunchly declined to profit by a felicitous change of fortune out of consideration for the relatives who had once disowned and the woman who had deserted him. Jernyngham had been a careless fool, and Prescott suspected that he was not likely to alter much in this respect, but he did not expect others to pay for his recklessness when the reckoning came. Then Prescott started his team.

Two days later, he was busy in front of his homestead putting together a new binder which had just arrived from the settlement. It was the latest type of harvesting implement and designed to cut an unusually broad swath. While he was engaged, the trooper he had met when accompanying Jernyngham rode up with a corporal following. He stopped his horse and glanced at the binder with admiration.

"She's a daisy, Jack; I guess she cost a pile," he said. "Where did you get the money to buy a machine of that kind?"

"It wasn't easy to raise it," Prescott replied. "But I'll save something in labor—harvest wages are high—and I've long wanted this binder. When Trant came round from the implement store yesterday morning I thought I'd risk the deal. Will you wait for dinner?"

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"No, thanks," the corporal broke in. "We're making a patrol north; just called to look at your guards. Several big grass fires have been reported in the last few days."

Prescott pointed to the rows of plowed furrows which cut off his holding from the prairie. The strip of brown clods, which was two or three yards in width, seemed an adequate defense, and after a glance at it the corporal nodded his satisfaction.

"Good enough," he said. "We'll take the trail."

He trotted away with his companion and it was evening when they rode along the edge of a ravine which pierced a high tract of rolling country. The crest of the slope they followed commanded a vast circle of grass that was changing in the foreground from green to ocher and silvery white. Farther back, it ran on toward the sunset, a sweep of blue and neutral gray, flecked with dusky lines of bluffs, interspersed with gleaming strips of water, but nowhere in the wide landscape was there a sign of human habitation. Small birches and poplars, with an undergrowth of nut bushes, clothed the sides of the ravine, but some distance ahead it broadened out and the stream that flowed through it turned the hollow into a muskeg. There harsh grass and reeds grew three or four feet high, hiding the stretch of mire.

The police were young men with deeply bronzed faces, dressed in smart khaki uniform with broad Stetson hats of the same color.

"What's that?" exclaimed Corporal Curtis, pointing to an indistinct object lying among a patch of scrub some distance off.

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"Looks like a hat," replied Private Stanton. "Some settler prospecting for a homestead location must have lost it."

"You jump at things!" said the corporal. "How'd the man lose it? Guess it wouldn't drop off without his knowing it, and with the sun we've been having he'd want it pretty bad. He wouldn't throw it away, when he knew he couldn't get another. We'll go along and see."

They dismounted a minute or two later and made a startling discovery. The hat was a good one, but in one place the soft gray felt had been crushed and partly cut as though by a heavy blow. On turning it over, they saw that the inside was stained a dull red.

"Blood!" said Curtis significantly, and swept a searching glance about. "More of it," he added. "See here—on the brush."

Moving forward, they found a succession of crimson spots and splashes on the leaves of the willow scrub and withering grass.

"Picket the horses. Stanton; we've got to look into this," the corporal said.

"I'd better lead them back a piece," responded his companion. "We don't want to muss up things by making fresh tracks."

When he had done so, they set about the examination systematically. They were men who lived, for the most part, in the open, and made long journeys through the wilds, sleeping where they could find shelter in ravine or bluff. Such things as a broken twig, a bruised tuft of grass, or a mark in loose soil had a meaning to them, and here they had plentiful material to work upon. Counting footprints and hoofmarks, measuring distances, they constructed bit by bit the drama that had taken place, but half an hour had passed before they sat down to talk it over and took out their pipes. The afterglow shone about them; their hands and thoughtful faces showed the same warm color as the brown grass in the ruddy light. In the hat lay a five-dollar bill and a coat button.

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"There were two men here," Curtis remarked. "Both were mounted and came up the trail from the settlement, but it looks as if the first one had picketed his horse and started to make camp when the other joined him."

"That's so," Private Stanton agreed.

"Then there was trouble, but the men didn't clinch. One fellow hit the other with something heavy enough to drop him in his tracks, then got into the saddle and rode off, leading the other horse."

The evidence on which he arrived at this conclusion was slender, but Stanton signified assent.

"Well," he said, "where's the hurt man?"

"I've a notion he's in yonder muskeg. The other fellow could have packed him there on the led horse—the blood spots point to it—though he might have hid him farther on in a bluff. It's getting too dark to search now; we'll try to-morrow. But I guess we know who he is."

"Sure," said Stanton. "I'll swear to the hat. Chaffed Jernyngham about it one day, and he put it in my hands and said there wasn't another of the kind in the country. A man from Hong Kong gave it to him."

Curtis took up the bill.

"Five dollars, Merchants' Bank, and quite clean; not been issued long. We'll find out if they've a branch at Regina or Saskatoon and trace up the fellow they paid it to. The button doesn't count—quite a common pattern. Now if you'll fill the kettle at the creek, I'll start a fire. We'll camp near the birch scrub yonder."

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CHAPTER VI

A DEAL IN LAND

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On the morning after the corporal's discovery, Gustave Wandle was leading his team to a drinking pool on the creek that crossed his farm. He was a big, reserved, fair-haired man, with a fleshy face that was redeemed from heaviness by his eyes, which were restless and keen. Though supposed to be an Austrian, little was known about him or his antecedents except that he owned the next half-section of land to Jernyngham's and farmed it successfully. It was, however, believed that he was of an unusually grasping nature, and his neighbors took precautions when they made a deal with him. He had reached the shadow of a poplar bluff when he heard hurried footsteps and a man with a hot face came into sight.

"I'm going across your place to save time; I want my horse," he explained hastily. "Curtis, the policeman, has ridden in to the settlement and told me to go up and search a muskeg near the north trail with Stanton. Somebody's killed Jernyngham and hidden him there."

"So!" exclaimed Wandle. "Jernyngham murdered! You tell me that?"

"Sure thing!" the other replied. "The police have figured out how it all happened and I'm going to look for the body while Curtis reports to his bosses. A blamed pity! I liked Jernyngham. Well, I must get to the muskeg soon as I can!"

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He ran on, and Wandle led his horses to the pool and stood thinking hard while they drank. He was well versed in Jernyngham's affairs and knew that he had once bought a cheap quarter-section of land in an arid belt some distance off. A railroad had since entered the district, irrigation work had been begun, and the holding must have risen in value. Now, it seemed, Jernyngham was dead, which was unfortunate, because Wandle had found their joint operations profitable, and it was very probable that Ellice and himself were the only persons who knew about the land. Wandle mounted one of the horses and set out for Jernyngham's homestead at its fastest pace.

On reaching it, he soon found an iron cash-box in a cupboard and succeeded in forcing it with a screw-driver. It contained a few papers, among which were one or two relating to the purchase of the quarter-section, and Wandle put these in his pocket. The others he threw into the cupboard—Jernyngham's carelessness was well known—and then hastily studied a railroad time-table. By starting promptly, he could catch a train at the station next after Sebastian, which he thought would be wiser, and reach a new wooden town of some importance in the evening. Having ascertained this, he hurried out and rode home, taking the cash-box with him. On arriving, he smashed it flat with an ax and flung it into his stove in which a fire was burning; then he made a hasty meal, changed his clothes, and saddling a horse, rode hard across the prairie. There was, he realized, some risk in what he meant to do, but it was not a very serious one, and he was thankful that the sale of land is attended by few formalities in western Canada.

When he reached his destination, business premises were closed for the night, but after making inquiries he found a land agent who was recommended as respectable and trustworthy at a smart hotel. Wandle led him to the far end of the lobby, where they would not be disturbed, and sitting down at a table took out the papers.

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"What's that quarter-section worth?" he asked.

The agent told him and Wandle lighted his pipe and affected to consider. He thought Jernyngham had not suspected its value.

"Don't you think you could get another three dollars an acre?" he suggested.

"It's possible, if you will leave the sale in my hands; but I may have to wait for a suitable opportunity. There's a good demand for land in the district now that they're getting on with the irrigation scheme, but to insist on the top price will mean delay."

"Could you sell it for me promptly at the figure you mentioned?"

"Why, yes," said the agent. "I've a number of inquiries for farming land on my books. I shouldn't wonder if I fixed the thing up in a week."

"I can't wait a week. There's a pretty good haulage contract I could get, but it will take some financing, which is what brought me along; because I ought to see about it in the next few days. Now I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll sell you that land to-night at the lower figure."

The agent pondered.

"No, sir," he said, irresolutely. "I'd only make a few dollars an acre on the deal, and I can get ten per cent. on my money right in this hotel."

"You'd have to wait a year for it, wouldn't you? What price will give you ten per cent. profit on this quarter-section? You want to remember that you may get it in a few weeks, and you'd have first-class security."

After making a rough calculation in his notebook, the agent looked up.

"As a rule, I prefer to buy for other people, but I can't go back on what I said about land being in strong demand, and I'll make you a bid. This is the most I can do."

Wandle, after trying to raise the price, made a sign of acquiescence.

"We'll let it go at that. I'll get things fixed up as soon as the land-office is open in the morning."

He left the hotel, satisfied on the whole, though he had sacrificed a dollar or two an acre and there was an element of danger in what he had done. The sale of the land must be registered, and the date would be two or three days after the one on which Jernyngham was killed. The latter's homestead was, however, a long distance off, there was only one small weekly newspaper published in the district, and it was very probable that the agent would not hear of the affair until some time had elapsed, and then might not attach any importance to the fact that the victim's name was that of his customer. Even if he did so, the small discrepancy in the dates would, no doubt, escape his attention. Wandle did not think he had much cause for uneasiness.

Reaching home the next day, he raked out his stove and found the cash-box. It had not fallen to pieces as he had expected, and he doubled it up again with the ax before he flung it into the ash pail. Then he lighted the stove and set about getting supper, for it was late in the evening. After finishing the meal, he threw some fragments of potatoes and a rind of pork into the pail and took it up to carry it to the refuse heap, but stopped with a start when he left the house. It was getting dark, but two shadowy figures were riding up the trail and by the way they sat their horses he recognized them as police troopers. Putting down the pail, he waited until they dismounted near-by.

"You're too late for supper, Curtis," he said coolly. "I've just cleaned it up."

The corporal glanced at the pail and in the dim light noticed only the domestic refuse.

"I've had some," he answered. "I want a few minutes' talk." Then he motioned to his companion. "Hitch the horses, Stanton, and come in when you're ready."

They entered the house, followed presently by the trooper, and Wandle lighted his pipe. He felt more at ease with it in his hand and he suspected that he would need all his collectedness.

"Well," he said, "what's the trouble?"

"I suppose you know that Jernyngham's missing?"

"I heard that he was killed."

"Looks like it," said Curtis. "You know the muskeg where the creek spreads out, about fourteen miles north?"

"I don't; never been up so far."

Curtis noticed the prompt disclaimer.

"Anyway, Jernyngham rode there and was knocked out with something heavy that must have left him stunned, if it didn't make an end of him. He didn't ride away after it, though his horse went on. The point is that it was led."

"How do you know that?" Wandle asked.

"It's my business to know these things. Think we can't tell the difference between the tracks of a led horse and a ridden one? The only times two horses trot close together at an even distance is when one's rider has both bridles, or when they're yoked to a wagon pole. However, I've come to ask if you can throw any light on the matter? You and Jernyngham were partners, in a way, weren't you?"

"That's so. Now and then we bought implements and horses, or hired a tractor plow, between

us. As a matter of fact, Jernyngham owed me about five hundred dollars. Anyhow, I'm as puzzled about the thing as you must be."

"Then you think we're puzzled?" Curtis said in a significant tone.

Wandle laughed.

"It struck me as likely. You know there's not a rancher in the district who would hurt the man. He was easy to get on with."

"Did you know that he borrowed money on his holding and took it with him the night he disappeared?"

"I didn't," said Wandle, starting. "I'm not pleased to hear it now. I've a claim on the place and there are some pretty big storekeepers' bills to come in."

Curtis asked a few more questions before he took his leave. He passed near the ash pail as he went out and Stanton touched it with his foot, but they had mounted and reached the trail before either of them spoke.

"Well?" said Curtis.

Stanton smiled.

"Nothing much to be learned from him; the fellow's about as sly and hard to get at as a coyote."

"A sure thing," Curtis agreed. "We'll keep an eye on him; I've a suspicion he knows something."

Then they trotted away in the moonlight, for it was a long ride to their camp beside the muskeg, which with the assistance of several men they were engaged in searching.

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On the next afternoon, Prescott was at work in the summer fallow, sitting in the iron saddle of a gangplow, which four powerful horses hauled through the crackling stubble. It was fiercely hot and he was lightly clad in thin yellow shirt and overalls. A cloud of dust rose about him from the parched soil, and the broad expanse of wheat which the fallow divided glowed with varied colors as it rippled before the rush of breeze, the strong greens changing to a silvery luster as the lush blades bent and caught the light. Farther on, there were faint streaks of yellow among the oats; the great stretch of grass was white and delicate gray, the rows of clods behind the plow rich chocolate-brown.

Prescott, however, paid little attention to his surroundings. He was perhaps the only man in the district who had known Jernyngham intimately; he felt troubled about his disappearance, and he had had a disturbing interview with Wandle during the morning. The Austrian had contested his right to manage the farm, declaring that Jernyngham owed him money and had made certain plans for the joint working of their land which must be carried out. This did not so much matter, in a sense, if one could take Jernyngham's death for granted; but Prescott could not do so and had, moreover, no intention of letting his property fall into the hands of a cunning, grasping fellow, who, he was fully persuaded, had no real right to it. If Jernyngham did not turn up, Prescott meant to discharge all his debts after harvest and, as the crop promised well, to send the balance to England as a proof that his friend had not been a failure in Canada. This might be some comfort to Jernyngham's people.

He was considering the matter when he heard the stubble crackle behind him and, looking around, saw Curtis riding up. Stopping his team, he waited until the corporal drew bridle.

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"Have you found him yet?" he asked.

"We have not," said Curtis. "It's a big muskeg and quite deep. You know the place?"

"Oh, yes, I know it pretty well."

Curtis looked at him sharply, but Prescott seemed to be musing.

"It's a sad thing when you think of it," he said after a few moments. "From the little he told me, the man had hard luck all through; and that Mrs. Jernyngham should leave him just after he'd sacrificed his future for her must have been a knock-out blow. Yet I've an idea that instead of crushing it braced him. It pulled him up; he showed signs of turning into a different man."

"You knew him better than I did," Curtis replied. "I heard at the hotel he'd asked you to look after his place, given you a share in the crop."

"He did. I'd some words with Wandle about the matter this morning; Jernyngham warned me he might pretend he had a claim. However, that's not to the purpose; somehow I feel convinced he'll turn up again. What motive could any one have for killing him? The only man we might have suspected—the fellow who went off with Ellice—must have been on the train bound for St. Paul."

"He was; we wired the conductor. But the thing's quite simple—the motive was robbery. You remember that wad of bills?" The corporal paused before he added: "Where did you last see Jernyngham?"

"At the trail-forks near my place. He rode right on; I took the turning."

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"Did you see your man, Svendsen, or his wife when you got home?"

"I didn't; they live at the back of the house. I put up the horses, slipped in quietly, and went to bed."

"Then you can't fix the time you got back?"

Prescott moved sharply, lifting his head, while an angry color suffused his face.

"Curtis, you can't think—Jernyngham was my best friend!" Then he laughed indignantly. "You always struck me as a sensible man."

The corporal regarded him with scrutinizing eyes, his manner stamped with official austerity.

"I'm forming no opinions—yet. It's my duty to find out all I can about the matter and report. If there's anything you're open to tell me, I'll make a note of it."

Prescott's face grew stern and his glance very steady.

"I can add nothing to what I've said, and I'm busy."

Curtis rode away, but when he was out of the rancher's sight he broke into a dry smile. He was an astute young man and knew his business, which was merely to investigate and follow the instruction of his chiefs at Regina. Unembroidered facts were what they required in the first instance, but later he might be permitted to theorize.

When the corporal had gone, Prescott went on with his plowing, but the crackle of the stubble and the thud of the heavy Clydesdales' hoofs fell unheeded on his ears, and it was half-consciously that he turned his team at the head-land. He had a good deal to think about and his thoughts were far from pleasant. To begin with, the memory of Muriel Hurst had haunted him since she left; he recalled her with a regretful longing that seemed to grow steadily stronger instead of diminishing. He thought she had left an indelible mark on his life. Then there was his impersonation of Jernyngham, which he had rashly agreed to, but did not now regret. If Colston had met Cyril on the night of the riot and had gone to his untidy dwelling, he would have been forced to send home an adverse report. Prescott was glad to think he had saved his friend from a farther fall in his English relatives' esteem, though, knowing a little of the man's story, he held them largely responsible for his reckless career. Their censoriousness and suspicion had, no doubt, driven him into wilder rashness.

Besides all this, the corporal's manner rankled in his mind. He knew Curtis well and had a good opinion of his ability. It seemed preposterous that such a man could imagine that he had had any hand in Jernyngham's death. Yet the corporal's tone had been significant and the facts had an ugly look. He had seen Jernyngham secrete his money and had afterward ridden on with him, unaccompanied by anybody else. He could not prove when he returned to his farm, and it might be said that he stood to benefit by securing the management of Jernyngham's property.

When he reached the end of the furrows his face was grim, but he steadily continued his plowing.

CHAPTER VII

THE SEARCH

Prescott dismounted and turned loose his horse, short-hobbled, near the muskeg about two o'clock one hot afternoon. He had begun work at four that morning, and, with harvest drawing near, time was precious to him, but he was filled with a keen curiosity to see what progress Curtis had made in his search. He had a strong personal interest in the matter, because it seemed that some suspicion might rest on him; though he was far from sharing the corporal's conviction that Jernyngham was dead. Stopping at the edge of the ravine, he looked about, taking in the details of the scene.

Though the prairie had lost its greenness and the flowers had died, it stretched away, flooded with dazzling light, a great expanse of silvery gray, flecked with faint lemon and brown. In the swampy hollow, however, the grass grew tall and green among the shining pools, and Prescott noticed to his astonishment a dozen men working assiduously lower down. They had discarded most of their clothing, their brown arms were bare, and the stiff, dark-colored soil they flung up with their shovels cumbered the bank of the ravine, which had narrowed in again. Prescott saw that they were cutting a deeper channel for the creek, with the object of draining the swamp.

Moving farther along the bank, he came upon the two policemen, who looked very hot and somewhat muddy, which, as they were usually fastidiously neat, was noticeable. He felt some hesitation in accosting them, as he recalled the corporal's attitude when they last met, but he was curious.

"I suppose you have found nothing?" he said, and when Curtis made a sign of negation continued: "How did you get so many of the boys here?"

Putting his hand in his pocket, the policeman gave him a printed circular which announced that a reward of one thousand dollars would be paid for the discovery of Cyril Jernyngham's remains.

"His people in the old country cabled it over," he explained.

"Well," Prescott said thoughtfully, "I don't believe he's here; but he was a friend of mine, and

I'm as anxious to have the question answered as you are."

Private Stanton, who was sitting in the grass, looked up with a rather significant smile. Indeed, there was a certain reserve in the manner of both men which exasperated the rancher.

"It's quite likely you'll have to wait," Curtis rejoined. "Even when we've run the water out, it may take a long while to search the mushy stuff it will leave, and if we're beaten here, we'll have to try the bluffs." He looked hard at Prescott. "We don't let up until we find him."

"Tell me where I can get a shovel and I'll help the boys."

Stanton brought him one and for the next two hours he worked savagely, standing knee-deep in water in a trench, hacking out clods of the "gumbo" soil, which covers much of the prairie and grows the finest wheat. When dry it sets like stone, when wet it assumes a glutinous stickiness which makes it exceptionally difficult to deal with. Fierce sunshine poured down on Prescott's bent head and shoulders, his hands grew sore, and mire and water splashed upon him, but he was hard and leanly muscular and, driven as he was by a keen desire to test the corporal's theory, he would have toiled on until the next morning, had it been needful. At length, however, there was a warning cry from one of the men nearer the swamp.

"Watch out! Let her go!"

Prescott leaped from the trench. There was a roar higher up the ravine, and a turgid flood, streaked with frothy lines, came pouring down the new channel, bearing with it small nut bushes and great clumps of matted grass. By degrees it subsided, and the men, gathering about the edge of the muskeg, hot and splashed with mire, lay down to smoke and wait, while the pools that still remained grew smaller. They had been working hard since early morning and they did not talk much, but Prescott, sitting a little away from them, was conscious of an unpleasant tension. It was possible that the search might prove Curtis right. The corporal stood higher up the bank, scanning each clump of grass and reeds with keenly scrutinizing eyes. At length, however, he approached the others.

"I guess you've made a job, boys," he told them. "The soft spots ought to dry out in about a week, but we can't wait till then. You want to remember there's a thousand dollars for the man who finds him."

They glanced at the morass hesitatingly. It did not look inviting. In places the reeds grew as high as their heads, and one could not tell what depths they hid. In other spots there were tracks of slimy ooze in which one might sink a long way. None of them, however, was fastidious, and they waded out into the mire, shouting warnings to one another, disappearing now and then among the grass. The search was partially rewarded, for while Prescott and a companion were skirting a clump of reeds they saw part of a soaked garment protruding from the slime. For a few moments they stood looking at it irresolutely; and then Prescott, mustering his courage, advanced and seized the stained material. It came away more readily than he had expected, and he turned to his companion, conscious of keen relief, with a brown overall jacket in his hand. A further examination, shrinkingly made, revealed nothing else, and after marking the place they waded to the bank. The garment was carefully washed in the creek and the men gathered in a ring round Curtis when he inspected it.

"Have any of you seen this thing before?" he asked, holding it up.

None of them would identify it. Thin duck overalls are commonly worn by ranchers and working people, in place of heavier clothing, during the hot weather. Then Curtis turned to Prescott.

"What's your idea?"

"It isn't Jernyngham's," the rancher said decidedly. "It's too old, for one thing; looks as if it had been in the water quite a while."

"Hard to tell," commented Curtis. "But go on."

Prescott took the jacket and held it so that the others could see the inside of the collar.

"No maker's tag," he continued. "Now Cyril always bought the kind they give you a doll with."

One of the others laughed and supplied the name of the manufacturer, which was attached to every garment.

"I've seen three or four of those dolls and golliwog things in his house," the man added. "Used to guy him about keeping them, as he had no kids."

"We can fix the thing by inquiring at the dry goods store," Curtis rejoined.

"Can't see whose it was, if it wasn't Jernyngham's," another broke in. "There's no homestead anywhere near the creek and mighty few people come up here!"

The policeman took from his pocket a wet envelope, upon which the blurred writing was still legible.

"Well," he said coolly, "there's no doubt about whose this is." He handed it to Prescott. "Ever see it in Jernyngham's possession?"

"Yes," answered Prescott with some hesitation. "I recognize the address, though the English stamp has gone. It was lying near when he was talking to me on the night of the trouble in Sebastian."

He was filled with uneasiness. The police would certainly attempt to read the letter, which was the one Colston had written announcing his arrival. If they succeeded, they would no doubt

wonder why the Englishman had not stayed with Jernyngham, and investigation might lead to a discovery of the part Prescott had played.

"We've begun quite satisfactorily," said the corporal, "and there's nothing more to be done to-night. I guess you can quit and have supper, boys."

In a little while trails of gray smoke floated across the ravine, and after a meal with one of his neighbors Prescott rode back to his homestead, feeling much disturbed. For all that, and in spite of the letter, he did not think Jernyngham would be found in the swamp.

On the following evening a commissioned officer of the police, who had made the journey from headquarters at Regina and spent an hour or two examining the scene of the supposititious tragedy, sat with Curtis in a very hot private room of the hotel at Sebastian. Its raw board walls gave out a resinous smell; the opening in the window was filled with mosquito-netting, so that little air crept in. On the table lay a carefully made diagram; a boot, and one or two paper patterns representing footprints were on the floor. The officer's hair was turning gray and he had a quiet brown face with a look of command in it.

"Taking it for granted that your theory's right, suspicion seems to fall on the men you mentioned," he said. "Whom do you suspect?"

Curtis considered. He was reluctant to express a decided opinion in the presence of his superior, who was famous for his acumen.

"So far as we have any evidence, I think it points to Prescott," he responded. "He saw Jernyngham hide his money; he went on alone with him, and can't prove when he got home. Then several of the footprints marked on the plan might have been made by him."

The officer took up the boot and one of the paper patterns.

"There's a doubt. I suppose he knows you have his boot?"

The corporal's eyes twinkled faintly.

"I guess he'll miss it sometime."

"It's possible. But what else have you against him?"

"Prescott stands to profit by Jernyngham's death: he has control of the holding until the year's up, and it's a pretty good crop. He declares the jacket isn't Jernyngham's; he won't allow the man can be in the muskeg. A day or two after Jernyngham disappeared he bought one of the new wide-swath binders. Paid the money down in new bills, which was what Jernyngham had, though the implement agent didn't note the numbers."

"Pretty strong points. What's your private opinion? Out with it."

The man's tone was commanding and Curtis complied.

"On the whole, I'm inclined to blame the other fellow, Wandle."

"Against the evidence?" asked his superior in quiet surprise. "You of course remember your instructions and know what your duty is."

"Yes, sir," said Curtis. "Still, I think——" He paused and continued diffidently: "You would have an answer."

The other leaned back in his chair with a meditative expression.

"We'll let it go at that," he said. "Perhaps you had better follow the waiting course you seem to have decided on, but if suspicion gathers round Prescott it won't be a drawback and you needn't discountenance it. For one thing, it may divert attention, and after all he may be the right man."

A look of comprehension shone in the corporal's eyes. He believed that his superior, who never expressed a strong opinion prematurely, agreed with him.

"Suppose either of the men lights out?" he suggested.

"You'll have to guard against it. If it happens, apply for a warrant and follow him."

The officer returned to Regina the next day; and a week or two, during which Curtis and his assistants laboriously searched the drying swamp, passed uneventfully. Then one morning Prescott sat somewhat moodily in the saddle of his binder which a powerful team hauled along the edge of the wheat. The great stretch of grain blazed with color as it swayed with a harsh rustle of warm-tinted ears before the breeze, but now and then broad cool shadows sped across it as the white-edged clouds drove by. Behind him followed two more teams and machines, half covered by falling sheets of yellow grain, while their whirling wooden arms flashed in the dazzling sunlight as they flung out the sheaves. Bare-armed and very scantily attired men came after them, piling the stocks together. Disturbed as he was, Prescott felt cheered by the prospect of harvesting a record crop.

He had turned a corner and was proceeding along another side of the great oblong when he noticed a wagon approaching, carrying two strangers and several large trunks. As their dress differed from that usually worn on the prairie, he wondered who they were and why they were driving toward his ranch. The liveryman, who held the reins, presently pulled up his team and Prescott; stopping his binder, waited to be addressed. An old soft hat fell shapelessly forward over his deeply bronzed face, his neck and most of his arms were uncovered. Before him the four powerful horses stood fidgeting in the heat, a black cloud of flies about their heads. Though not a man of striking appearance, he was in harmony with his surroundings, and formed a fine

central figure in the great harvest field: a worthy type of the new nation that is rising in the West.

For a moment or two the strangers studied him carefully from the wagon. The one nearest him was a woman of thirty, he thought, of tall and chastely lined figure, with a colorless and rather expressionless face, though her features were excellent. She wore a tight-fitting dark dress which seemed to have been made all in one piece, and gave an impression of prim coldness and careful restraint. The man in the soft hat was obviously her father. He had gray hair; his face, which was finely chiseled, suggested a formal, decided, and perhaps domineering, character; his gray tweed traveling suit was immaculately neat. There was no doubt that they were English, and Prescott wondered whom they reminded him of, until the truth flashed upon him with a disconcerting shock—they were Jernyngham's father and sister!

"Mr. Prescott?" inquired the man.

Prescott bowed, and the teamster, jumping down, handed him two cards.

"I understand that you knew my unfortunate son," the newcomer continued.

"I did," Prescott replied guardedly.

"Then can I have a word or two with you in private?"

Getting down from the binder, Prescott helped the other to alight from the high wagon; the man was not agile, though he carried himself well. They walked back some distance along the edge of the wheat. Then the rancher stopped and from force of habit felt for his pipe.

"I must be to some extent confidential," began Jernyngham. "You must guess why I came."

The strong light fell searchingly on his face, revealing lines on it which Prescott thought had lately been deepened by pain, but his eyes were very keen and hard.

"I suppose the recent calamity brought you," the rancher ventured.

"Yes; I have come to see justice done. But we will not discuss that yet. We arrived yesterday evening and found it was impossible that my daughter should be comfortable at the hotel; besides which, it is rather too far away. I accordingly determined to look for quarters at one of the ranches, but succeeded in getting shelter for only the one night."

Prescott felt amused. Jernyngham and his daughter were not the kind of people the somewhat primitive prairie ranchers would welcome; their request for accommodation was more likely to cause astonishment and alarm.

"People are very busy, now that harvest's coming on, and they've extra hands to cook for," he explained.

"I understand," continued Jernyngham, "that my son's homestead is in this neighborhood, and domestics might be hired; but after what has happened, I fear my daughter would find living there a painful strain. That was why I thought of applying to you."

The announcement filled Prescott with dismay. The presence of the Jernynghams might involve him in further complications.

"I'm sorry, but we live very simply," he said hastily. "My place is only half furnished; we have no time to make it comfortable—and I'm sure you'd find our cooking barbarous. I'm afraid Miss Jernyngham couldn't put up with the accommodation we could offer her."

"We only want quietness, fresh air, and a little privacy, none of which seems to be obtainable at Sebastian. While the question of terms is no consideration, I recognize that I must make my appeal to your generosity."

Prescott did not answer, and Jernyngham resumed in a more urgent tone:

"I must beg you not to make difficulties; I'm told there is nobody else in the neighborhood who could take us in. We will require very little attention and will promise to give you no trouble."

Prescott wavered. The man was keenly anxious; it was hard to resist his appeal, and there was, after all, only a small risk that he might hear of Colston's visit. Svendsen and his wife, who attended to the housekeeping, were Scandinavians, and could scarcely converse in English. When they addressed him by any distinguishing epithet it was always as "Boss."

"Well," he said doubtfully, "I can't refuse you shelter. You can stay for a while, anyway, until we see how we get on. I'll go up to the homestead with you."

He had an interview with his housekeeper, who protested in broken English that harvest was a singularly inconvenient time to entertain strangers, but eventually gave away. The extra hands lately hired could be put up in the barn, and there were two rooms that could be spared. Prescott showed his visitors in and afterward watched with some amusement their surprise when they sat down to the midday meal with the lightly clad toilers from the field. During the afternoon and until late in the evening, he worked hard among the grain, but when the light was failing and he leaned on a wire fence, hot and tired after the long day of effort, Jernyngham came toward him.

"We have had very little talk so far," he said. "My daughter, however, desires me to convey her thanks to you. She believes she will be perfectly comfortable."

He was irritatingly formal, his tone was precise, but it changed as he added:

"So you knew Cyril!"

"Yes," Prescott said gravely. "I was fond of him."

Jernyngham seemed to be struggling with some stirring of his deeper nature beneath the crust of mannerisms.

"Mr. Prescott," he said, "I may tell you that I now fear I treated the lad injudiciously, and perhaps with needless harshness. I looked upon extravagance and eccentricity as signs of depravity. It was a vast relief when I heard from Colston, whom you may have met; that Cyril had prospered and was leading an exemplary life in Canada."

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The blood crept into Prescott's face, and Jernyngham glanced at him curiously before he proceeded.

"We were somewhat hurt that he would not come home; but after past mistakes I could not urge him, and it seemed possible that he might change his mind later. Then the dreadful blow fell—crushing and filling me with all the bitterness of useless regret. I had spoken too late; the opportunity I would not use in time had gone."

He broke off, and his face had grown white and stern when he went on again:

"There is only one thing I can do, but if needful, I will devote the rest of my life to it—that is, to track down the man who killed my son!"

He was silent for the next few minutes, and then, after a few words on indifferent subjects, intended, Prescott thought, to cover his display of feeling, he turned away, leaving the rancher smoking thoughtfully.

CHAPTER VIII

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A DAY ON THE PRAIRIE

A week after Jernyngham's arrival at the homestead he sat among the sheaves in the harvest field late one afternoon studying a letter which the mail-carrier had just brought him. His daughter, sheltered from the strong sunlight by the tall stocked sheaves, was reading an elegantly bound book of philosophy. Gertrude Jernyngham had strict rules of life and spent an hour or two of every day in improving her mind, without, so far as her friends had discovered, any enlargement of her outlook. Among her numerous virtues was an affectionate solicitude about her father's health, which was variable. Though still muscularly vigorous, Jernyngham was getting an old man, and he had been out of sorts of late.

"I'm glad you are looking much better than you did this morning," she said, glancing at him after a while.

"Thank you," Jernyngham rejoined punctiliously. "I suppose it was the strain of the past few weeks that tried me, and perhaps I have been doing too much, traveling backward and forward between here and the muskeg." Then with an effort he banished his painful thoughts and smiled. "I wonder how many years it is since I spent an afternoon in a harvest field! I'll confess that I find much to interest me."

Gertrude laid down her book and glanced about. She was of a practical disposition and almost devoid of artistic susceptibilities, but the richness and color of the scene impressed her. Far away in front ran the long ranks of sheaves, gleaming in the sunshine amid the golden stubble which was flecked by their deep-blue shadows. The air was cooling, but the light was brilliant and the standing wheat was picked out with tints of burnished copper. By comparison with it, the oat stocks shone pale and silvery. Round the edge of the grain moved the binders, clashing and tinkling musically, while their whirling arms flashed in the sunlight.

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Prescott, lightly clad, drove the foremost machine. The fine modeling of his lean, muscular figure was effectively displayed; his uncovered arms and face were the color of the soil. Seated behind the big horses, he looked wonderfully virile. The man seemed filled with primitive vigor; he was a type that was new to Gertrude Jernyngham.

"Our host," remarked her father, "strikes one as tireless; though I'm inclined to think that during harvest everybody here works at a higher tension than would be borne at home. Their methods are rather wasteful—this tall stubble, for instance, continuous cereal crops, except for the short summer fallow—but they're no doubt adapted to the needs of the country. Having some experience in these matters, I should say this farm was excellently managed."

In place of answering, Gertrude watched the rancher. The physical perfection of the man had an effect on her, though she was essentially prudish.

"I ought to drive in to the settlement and send off a cablegram, though I expect it will be difficult to get a team," Jernyngham resumed, returning to his letter. "Cranford wants instructions about a matter of importance that has cropped up since we left."

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"It wouldn't be wise for you to drive so far," Gertrude said firmly. "I might go instead; we'll

speak to Mr. Prescott about it this evening.”

Shortly afterward there was a harsh clanking sound and Prescott, pulling up his team, sprang down from the binder. He became busy with hammer and spanner, and in a few minutes the stubble was strewn with pinion wheels, little shafts, and driving-chains. Then, while his guests watched him with growing interest, he put the machine together, started his team and stopped it, and again dismembered the complicated gear. This, as Gertrude realized, was work that needed a certain amount of skill. Finally, when the overtaking binders had stopped near-by, he took out a small shaft and held it up so that the harvesters could see it.

“Journal’s bent; I’ll have to go get a new piece,” he said. “Go ahead with your teams.”

After that he unhitched his horses and was leading them past the place where the Jernynghams sat, when Gertrude spoke to him.

“I’m sorry you had an accident, and I suppose you will have to send the broken part to Sebastian. May I go with the team?”

“Why, of course,” he said. “I’ll drive you in to-morrow. As it’s a pretty long way, I’ll try to borrow a comfortable rig.”

He went on with the horses and she saw no more of him that day, but early the next morning he brought up a light, four-wheeled vehicle, which would carry two people and had a hood that could be drawn up. Gertrude thought it a great improvement on the prairie wagon, and she admired the restive team which he had some trouble in holding. When she got in, he sprang to the seat beside her, the horses bounded forward, and they sped out through a gap in the fence, the vehicle lurching wildly among the ruts.

For a while Gertrude was occupied, to the exclusion of everything else, in trying to keep her place, but when Prescott turned the team on to a stretch of smooth short grass she began to look about. It was a clear, cool morning, the sky was a wonderful blue, and bluffs miles away showed up with sharp distinctness. In the foreground the gray grass was bathed in a soft light which was restful to the eyes. Then Gertrude examined the rig, as the man had called it, which struck her as remarkably light and fragile; and the same thing was noticeable about the harness. The horses moved as if they were drawing no load, swinging along at a fast and springy trot, while the vehicle ran lightly up and down the slight undulations, the wheels jarring now and then into a hollow or smashing through dwarf scrub. The pace was exhilarating, the fine air invigorated the girl, and her usual prim reserve melted away.

“I am fortunate in getting in to Sebastian,” she said. “There’s a cablegram it’s necessary that my father should send.”

“Glad to take you,” Prescott rejoined. “Is Mr. Jernyngham in business?”

“Oh, no; not as you would understand it. We spend most of our time in the country, where he manages the estate. It’s small, but there are two quarries which need looking after. Then he’s director of a company. He doesn’t believe that a man should be idle.”

Prescott smiled. He had read a good deal about England, and he could imagine Jernyngham’s firm control of his property. His rule would, no doubt, be just, but it would be enforced on autocratic and highly conventional lines. His daughter, the rancher thought, resembled him in some respects. She was handsome and dignified in a colorless way; she might have been charming if she were only a trifle less correct in manner and there were more life in her.

“Well,” he said, in answer to her last remark, “that’s a notion you’ll find lived up to here. The man who won’t work mighty hard very soon goes broke. It’s a truth you in the old country ought to impress on the men you’re sending out to us.”

She liked his easy phraseology; which she supposed was western, and there was nothing harsh in his intonation. It was that of a well-educated man, and the Jernynghams were exacting in such matters.

“I think there must be something in the air which makes toil less arduous,” she said. “The people I’ve met have a cheerful, optimistic look.” She hesitated, and added in a confidential tone: “I like to imagine that my brother wore the same expression, though he was always carelessly gay. He seems to have made a capable rancher. It was a great relief to us when we were told of it.”

Prescott grew hot and embarrassed, but he thought he could understand how Cyril Jernyngham had entered on a course of recklessness. It was a reaction against the overwhelming propriety of his father and sister.

“I don’t think you need grieve for your brother yet,” he said gravely. “Although nobody here seems to agree with me, I find it impossible to believe that he is dead.”

Gertrude gave him a grateful look.

“I’m glad to hear you say so—there is at least a doubt, and that is comforting; though I’m afraid my father can’t be made to realize it.”

“Can’t you persuade him not to take too much for granted?”

“I wish I could.” Gertrude’s tone was sad. “He has been brooding over the dreadful news ever since it reached us. It has possessed him absolutely; he can think of nothing else, and there will be no relief for him until he finds the guilty person, or it is proved beyond all doubt that the police are mistaken.” She paused before she went on. “If they’re right, I think I should feel as

merciless as he does. Cyril was my only brother; I was very fond of him."

Her voice trembled a little, though her eyes were hard, and Prescott felt sorry for her. She was not of emotional nature; he could imagine her shrinking from any display of tenderness. Nevertheless, it was obvious that she was a prey to fear and grief.

"So was I," he said. "I wonder if I may point out that he struck me as being different from you and your father?"

"I think I know what you mean. Cyril was like my mother—she died a long while ago, but I remember her as gentle, sympathetic, and perhaps more variable than I am. Cyril was swayed by feeling rather than by judgment."

Prescott knew this was correct, but he found his companion an interesting study. She was wrapped up in cold propriety; she must have led an uneventful life, looked up to and obeyed by the small community that owned her father's rule. Romance could not have touched her; she was not imaginative; but he thought there were warmth and passion lying dormant somewhere in her nature. She could not have wholly escaped the consequences of being Cyril Jernyngham's sister.

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Nothing further was said for a while, and presently the team toiled through a belt of sandy ridges, furrowed by the wind, where the summits were crested here and there by small jack-pines. Looking up as they crossed one elevation, Gertrude noticed a wedge of small dark bodies outlined against the soft blue sky.

"What are those?" she asked.

"Wild geese; the forerunners of the host that will soon come down from the marshes by the Polar Sea."

"But do they go so far?"

He laughed.

"They cross this continent twice a year; up from the steaming lagoons on the Gulf to the frozen muskegs of the North, and back again. They're filled with a grand unrest and wholly free; travelers of the high air, always going somewhere."

"Ah!" responded Gertrude. "To be always doing something is good. But the other—the ceaseless wandering——"

"Going on and on, beating a passage through the icy winds, rejoicing in the sun, seeking for adventure. Is there no charm in that?"

She looked at him uneasily, as if his words had awakened some half-understood response.

"I think Cyril must have felt something of the kind. So far it has never stirred me. Isn't it wise to hold fast by what is safe and familiar?"

"Oh, I don't know," Prescott answered with a smile. "I follow the course you mention, because I have to. It's my business to drive the plow, and the hazard of having a crop hailed out is adventure enough. But I don't think it should make one hard on the people who prefer the other thing. After all, they may be right; the life they take pleasure in may be the best for them, though it wouldn't appeal to you or me."

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"I'm not sure that toleration should be encouraged. It often means indifference, perhaps a lack of principle."

She grasped tightly the rail around the seat, for the horses plunged down a sandy slope at a wild gallop, passing at the bottom a horse and buggy in which sat a man dressed in a dark gray suit, to whom Prescott waved his hand.

"Is he a clergyman?" asked Gertrude.

"Well," Prescott smiled, "he's a Presbyterian minister. I suppose you think there's a difference?"

His companion with unusual forbearance let this pass.

"Then you have churches at Sebastian?"

"Four. I can't say they're crowded; but, while we're liberal-minded on many points, the flocks won't mix. Strikes me as a pity."

"It is a pity; there should be only one strong and united church in every place."

"And that the right one?" Prescott's eyes twinkled mischievously. "You're thinking of the one we call Episcopalian?"

"Yes," said Gertrude severely; "the Church."

"I'll admit that I'm on pretty good terms with the lot, but Father Dillon's my favorite. For one thing, he's a practical farmer as well as a fine classical scholar. His crowd, for the most part, are hard-up foreigners; and he shows them how to build decent homes and put their crops in. All the same, I've quite a high opinion of the Methodist and the Presbyterian, who are at the opposite end of the scale."

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Gertrude showed signs of disapproval.

"In these matters, broad-mindedness may be dangerous. One can't compromise."

"Well," he said, "even the Roman Curia tried it before the council of Trent, and your people

made an attempt to conciliate the English Calvinists about Elizabeth's time; you were inclined to Genevan Protestantism once or twice afterward."

His companion's surprise was evident, and he laughed as he read her thoughts.

"Oh," he explained, "I used to take some interest in these matters once upon a time. You see, I was at McGill."

"McGill? I seem to have heard the name, but what does it stand for?"

Prescott looked amused.

"I don't know that it quite means what Oxford does to you, but it's something of the kind; you might have seen the fine buildings at the foot of the mountain, if you had stayed in Montreal. Then we have Toronto; with deference to the Toronto men, I'll compare that to Cambridge. Still, so far as I understand your English ideas, there's a difference—our boys go to McGill or Toronto with the intention of learning something that will open up a career. They certainly play football and one or two other games pretty well, but that's a very secondary object; so's the acquiring of a polished style. In fact, it's not altogether unusual on this side of the Atlantic to find university men spending a vacation as waiters in the summer hotels."

"But why do they do that?" Gertrude asked with a shocked expression.

"For money," Prescott answered dryly. "One gathers that the St. Andrew boys did something of the same kind in Scotland in your grandfather's time; and no logical objection could be made to it, anyway. Isn't it a pretty good test of a man's determination? It's hard to see why he should make a worse doctor, engineer, or preacher, because he has the grit to earn his training by carrying plates, or chopping trees, which some of our boys take to."

This was difficult to answer, and Gertrude did not attempt it; her prejudices were stronger than her powers of reasoning. Looking southward, she saw the turreted tops of the Sebastian elevators rising from the sea of grass like cathedral towers. Their smallness emphasized the vastness of the plain, which was beginning to have a stimulating effect on her mind. She thought it might explain the broadness of her companion's views, which, while erroneous, were becoming comprehensible. He lived in the open, beyond the bounds of walls and fences, breathing this wonderful invigorating air. Nevertheless, he was obviously a man of varied and extensive information, which struck her as somewhat curious in face of his severely practical abilities. He could mend harness, plow a straight furrow, break horses, and strip a complicated machine. As a new type, he deserved attention.

After a while they struck into a well-beaten track which had been graded where it crossed a muskeg. The rude work, however, had suffered from frost and rain: the ruts in the hard black soil were deep and there were dangerous holes. To make matters worse, a big gasoline tractor, intended to assist in some harvesting operations, had got into difficulties near the middle of the graded track. It was making an alarming noise and diffusing a pungent odor, while two men thrust bits of board beneath the wheels for it to climb out of the hole on. Prescott's team slackened their pace, jerking their heads and pricking their ears. They were young range horses that had roamed over wide spaces, and were badly broken.

Getting a tight grip on the reins he turned to his companion.

"We can't get around—the muskeg's too soft. I'd put you down, only that I may not be able to hold the team after we get past that machine." He raised his voice. "Can't you stop her, boys?"

"No, sir!" cried a grimy man. "Soon as we cut out the engine she'd run back into the hole! We've been here two hours already!"

"Hold tight!" Prescott cautioned Gertrude, and urged the horses forward.

As they approached the tractor the noise suddenly increased, and its wheels spun faster, grinding on the skids. One of the horses reared, swinging up the pole, which nearly threw its fellow; then there was a frantic thud of hoofs against the frame of the vehicle, and the team, swinging half around, threatened to overturn it into the swamp. Prescott plied the whip; the beasts plunged. One pair of wheels left the road, and the rig slanted alarmingly. A violent crash and jolt followed; Gertrude came near to being flung out of her seat; and they passed the tractor and sped across the graded stretch at a furious pace. Prescott was braced backward, his feet pressed hard against a bar, his lips tightly set, while Gertrude, shrinking from the disaster that seemed imminent, wondered how he swung the panic-stricken beasts clear of the worst holes. She gasped with relief when they had passed the muskeg, but the trail was still in a dangerous state, and Prescott turned the team upon the grass, where they galloped on while the wheels smashed through short scrub, until at last the speed began to slacken. The horses' coats were foul and flecked with spume when Gertrude looked backward and saw the tractor far away in the distance.

"They've had enough," Prescott remarked. "We made the last mile at a pretty good clip; I kept them at it. Guess they won't start another circus if we meet a freight locomotive on the switches."

The settlement was reached without further mis-adventure, and Prescott, as a special favor, secured a separate table at the hotel, where Gertrude was served with an excellent meal. Afterward he showed her how to despatch her father's message, and as she turned away the telegraph operator grinned at Prescott.

"Where are all these high-toned English girls coming from, Jack?" he said. "You have brought

another one this time."

Leaving the man without an answer, Prescott rejoined his companion.

"Are there any English people staying near the settlement?" she asked.

"The fellow was alluding to Miss Hurst."

"Muriel Hurst?" Gertrude exclaimed sharply. "Was she here with you?"

"Yes." Prescott regretted that she had asked for an explanation of the operator's remarks. "I once drove her in; Cyril's team was doing something else. But you said you wanted to visit the drygoods store, didn't you?"

Gertrude accompanied him there and when he left her in the hands of a lady clerk she fancied that she was favored with somewhat unusual attention on his account. The man seemed to be a favorite in the settlement. She spent a tedious afternoon in the hotel parlor while he went about the business that had brought him in and the team rested. It was a relief when he reappeared in time for supper; and after that they set out again. The sun set before they reached the homestead, the air grew bracingly cool, and the prairie rolled away before them, dim and mysterious, streaked with shadowy blurs of bluffs until a full moon rose and flooded it with silvery light. There was strange, deep silence except for the thud of hoofs which rose and fell in sharp staccato rhythm.

Gertrude was tired when Prescott helped her down at the homestead, but all her senses were unusually alert. She had enjoyed what she felt had been an invigorating day, and she admitted that, although she by no means agreed with all the rancher said, his breezy talk had added to its zest.

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CHAPTER IX

PRESCOTT MAKES A PROMISE

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The fortnight that followed Gertrude's drive to Sebastian passed uneventfully, though the minds of three of the occupants of the homestead were filled with disturbing thoughts. Prescott spent the time working hard at his harvest, but he wished that something might relieve him of his guests, whose presence he found embarrassing, since it forced him to be continually on his guard. In spite of this, he was conscious of strong sympathy for them and did what he could to ensure their comfort. He was getting uneasy, for he saw that Cyril Jernyngham had involved him in a maze of complications from which there seemed to be no escape. It was obvious that appearances were against him; the evidence that Curtis had obtained pointed to his being implicated in the death of his friend, and the painstaking corporal might discover something more damaging. Prescott fancied that one or two of his acquaintances who now and then rode across his farm on different errands returned his greeting with a new and significant coldness.

Jernyngham spent much of his time at the muskeg, encouraging the men who searched it and often assisting in the work. The whole morass was being systematically turned over with the spade, but no further discoveries had been made. In addition to this, Jernyngham rode to and fro about the prairie, talking to the farmers whom he met on the trail or found at work in the fields. They were all sorry for him, but there was something deterrent in his sternness and his formal English manner, and they were less communicative than they might have been. This was why he failed to learn that the Colstons had stayed at Prescott's homestead, though, for that matter, the fact was not generally known. The man could not rest; tormented by regrets for his past harshness, he was bent on making the only amend he could by hunting down the slayer of his son. His whole mind was fixed on the task, and he brooded over it in a manner that aroused his daughter's concern. She dreaded the effect a continuance of the strain might have.

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Gertrude, however, was relieved of a more pressing anxiety. Though her father steadfastly refused to entertain it, she shared Prescott's belief that her brother was not dead. For one thing, Cyril was not the man to come badly to grief; he had done many reckless things and somehow escaped the worst results. Illogical as the idea was, she felt that his luck was good. It was a comforting reflection and she was sensible of a growing confidence in the farmer, who encouraged her to cling to it.

One afternoon she left the house and strolled across the harvest fields, which had greatly changed in appearance since she had first seen them. The oats were all stooked and stood in silvery sheaves, ready for the thrasher; the great stretch of wheat had melted down to a narrow oblong, round which the binders were working. Gertrude stopped to watch them. The plodding horses, the bent figures of the men, the play of light on falling grain, and the revolving arms of the machines fixed her eyes; the rustle of sheaves, the crackle of stubble, and the musical tinkle of metal, fell pleasantly on her ears. The mornings and evenings were cold now, but the days were hot and bright, and the scene was steeped in vivid hues: ocher, lemon, and coppery red below, dazzling blue above.

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Prescott drove the leading binder and when it drew nearer she followed his movements with careful scrutiny. She admitted that the man aroused her interest. He was wonderfully virile, sanguine, and hopeful, with a trace of what she thought of as the primitive strain; which tended toward physical perfection; his vigor and muscular symmetry had their effect on her. Though her father was a man of means and influence, her circle of acquaintances had been restricted by the narrowness of his views; and the men with whom she had been brought into contact were, for the most part, distinguished rather by unexceptional morals and sound opinions than by bodily grace and original thought.

By disposition as well as training Gertrude was a formalist and a prude, but she was human and she unconsciously obeyed a law of nature which ordains the union of the dissimilar. This was why, having met only men of her own kind hitherto, she had escaped the touch of passion and now felt drawn toward one who greatly differed from her.

After a while Prescott stopped his binder and opened a box attached to it. He closed it sharply, as if annoyed, called to one of the men gathering up the sheaves, and then walked toward the house.

"Run out of twine; I'll have to get some," he explained to Gertrude.

"You look tired," she said, stopping him. "You have been working very hard."

"I don't feel quite as bright as usual," he confessed. "It's the heat, I think, but I've turned out at four o'clock every morning since harvest began."

"Then why not take a few minutes' rest? I'll make you a cup of tea; I was going in to get some ready. It's an English custom."

He indicated his attire.

"I'd be glad, but I haven't time to make myself presentable."

"I'll excuse that." Gertrude smiled and added with unusual boldness: "You don't seem to know that your dress is really most artistic. It suits you."

He bowed to her.

"I'm flattered. This costume was adopted with a view to economy and comfort. The worst of a man's wearing smart clothes is that whenever he wants to do anything useful he has to take them off."

"Is that a great trouble?"

"It takes a lot of valuable time," he answered with a smile.

They turned toward the house, and after getting the twine he joined her in a cool, shadowy room. Gertrude was watching a silver spirit-lamp; near which two dainty cups and plates were laid out.

"That's a very pretty outfit," he remarked. "Is it English?"

"No; I bought it at a big store in Winnipeg—on Portage Avenue, I think."

"I know the place. So they're selling this kind of thing there! It's significant. A few years ago they'd have got nobody to buy such truck." He picked up a cup and held it to the light after examining the chaste color, design, and stamp. "Anyway, it's English; the genuine article. I believe the biscuit can't be imitated."

Gertrude had not expected him to understand artistic china.

"I've read about these things," he explained with a good-humored laugh; "and I've a way of remembering. We have time in winter, and one is glad to study anything that comes along. Still, I'll allow that I found five-cent cans quite good enough when I first came out."

This was not a point of much importance, but it fixed Gertrude's attention. She was in the habit of roughly sorting people into different groups; there were, for example, those who appreciated beautiful things and had been endowed with them as a reward of merit, and those of coarser nature on whom they would be wasted, which was, no doubt, why they had none. Yet here was a man with artistic taste, who was nevertheless engaged in hard manual labor and had drunk contentedly out of common cans. It did not fit in with her theories.

"I suppose this country has its influence on one?" she said, searching for an explanation.

"That's so; the influence is strong and good, on the whole."

She considered this, quietly studying him. It was the first time she had entertained at table a man in outdoor working attire; Prescott, out of deference to his guests, had made some preparation for the meals they shared. Still, the simple dress became him; he was, as she vaguely thought of it, admirable, in a way. His hands and wrists were well-shaped, though scarred and roughened by the rasp of the hot straw. The warmth of the sun seemed to cling to his brown face; a joyous vitality emanated from him, and he had mental gifts. She felt lightly thrilled by his propinquity.

"But everything out here is still very crude," she said.

"That's where our strength lies; we're a new people, raised on virgin soil out in the rushing winds. We haven't simmered down yet; we're charged with unexhausted energies, which show themselves in novel ways. In our cities you'll find semibarbarous rawness side by side with splendor and art, and complicated machines run by men who haven't much regard for the

fastidious niceties of civilization, though they're unexcelled in their engineering skill. We undertake big works in an unconsidered manner that would scare your cautious English minds, make wild blunders, and go ahead without counting the damage. We come down pretty hard often, but it never brings us to a stop."

He saw that she did not grasp all he meant to convey, and he leaned back in his chair with a laugh.

"This is the kind of fool talk you would expect from a boastful Westerner, isn't it?"

"No," she replied somewhat formally; "that isn't what I thought. I find everything I see and hear interesting, but there's much I can't understand. One has to feel for its meaning."

"It's a very proper attitude," he rejoined with amusement. "So long as you don't bring over a ready-made standard to measure our shortcomings by, we'll explain all we can. In fact, it's a thing we're fond of doing." Then his tone grew grave. "But I haven't seen your father since this morning. Is he at the muskeg?"

"Yes. I'm getting anxious about him; the trouble is preying on his mind. Grief, of course, is a natural feeling, but he thinks of nothing except revenge. He's growing haggard and losing his judgment. I'm almost afraid to think what may happen if he finds anything that looks like a clue. The shock has shaken him terribly."

"And you?"

"I feel half guilty because I've been so calm since I came here, but I can't believe the worst. You have reassured me." She paused and added softly: "And I'm very grateful."

"I'm glad." Prescott's tone was sympathetic. "But I can imagine what your father feels. From a few things he has told me, he seems to have led a smooth, well-ordered life; no doubt he made too much of the trouble your brother caused him."

"Yes; I think so now."

"Perhaps he half-consciously formed an idea that things would always go tranquilly with him, and when it came without warning the shock of Cyril's disappearance was too strong. And yet I firmly believe he's mistaken in his fears."

Gertrude made a sign of agreement.

"Nothing I can say calms him. One can only wait."

"And that's always hard," Prescott said gently.

She roused him to strong compassion. She had, he thought, no great depth of character, but her development had been checked by many restraints. Her father had curbed each natural impulse, until the little originality in her withered and died; she had grown up cold and colorless, with narrow views, and petty, if quite blameless, aims. Prescott, however, was wrong in crediting Jernyngham with too great a success. Gertrude's nature had not been utterly repressed and stunted, and now, in time of stress, it was expanding.

Romance had come late to her, but she was dimly conscious of it at last. Her senses were stirring and she felt a half-guilty pleasure at seeing the bronzed rancher's eyes bent on her tenderly. To think of him except as her host for a few weeks was, of course, folly; but there was a fascination in the gentleness he showed her. She was beginning to understand and sympathize with Cyril's rash daring and contempt for restraints. She felt tempted to follow her impulses; her frigid reserve was melting.

"Will you have more tea?" she asked, shrinking back to safe ground.

"Thank you," he said, holding out the dainty cup.

"Hot water? It's rather strong."

"Before I had a housekeeper we made it black and drank it by the kettleful."

"But the effect on your nerves!"

"Nerves?" he laughed. "We don't cultivate them in this country. Mine make no trouble."

"You're to be envied," she said, and looked up sharply at a sound of footsteps as her father came in.

His clothes were dusty and creased; the neatness which had characterized him on his arrival had gone. His face had grown brown, but it was haggard, hotly flushed, and beaded with perspiration; his lips were tightly set, his eyes had an ominous glitter. Throwing down a riding quirt he carried, he sat down; resting his arms on the table, in an attitude of blank dejection.

"Nothing yet," he said listlessly. "It's hard to bear."

"There's a suggestion I want to make." Prescott spoke quietly. "The offer of a reward here has led to nothing; send another round to the Alberta and British Columbia papers, with a description of your son, saying you'll pay a hundred dollars for trustworthy information about him. I believe it will bring you good news."

Jernyngham turned to him in keen impatience.

"It would be useless—my son is dead! The police have proved that beyond a doubt, and I cannot understand why you should persist in denying it!" His eyes grew hard with sudden suspicion. "It looks as if you had some motive."

"I'm afraid you're hardly just," Gertrude broke in. "Mr. Prescott only wishes to lessen your anxiety, but he's convinced of what he says."

It was a rare thing for her to oppose him, but Jernyngham was too preoccupied to be surprised at her boldness, and he made a gesture of deprecation.

"You must forgive me, Mr. Prescott—my daughter's right. But to offer me assurances that must prove false is rank cruelty. I have faced the worst; I'm not strong enough to bear a second blow, which is what must follow if I listen to you. As it is, the strain is merciless."

His voice and bearing showed it. Indeed, one could have imagined that it would have been better had he yielded a little more, but his eyes expressed a grim, vengeful determination. He was not the man to weaken, he would hold out until he broke down; but his daughter and Prescott were filled with fears for him.

"I'm sorry," said the rancher. "Has Curtis thought of anything new?"

"No," Jernyngham answered harshly. "The police can entertain only one idea at a time; they can read the meaning of footprints and there their ability ends. They have no power of organization; I can't force them to make investigations on a proper scale, and I'm helpless until harvest's over. Then, when men can be hired, I'll have every bluff and ravine in the country searched. If I spend the rest of my life here, I'll find the guilty man!"

He said nothing further, and there was a strained silence while he sat, leaning forward limply, with bent head, and a thin hand clenched hard upon the table. Rousing himself by and by, he took the cup of tea Gertrude passed to him, and set it down without drinking. It made a sharp clatter, but he left it setting near him as if he had forgotten it. Unable to bear the sight of his distress, Prescott went quietly out, and when he was leaving the house Gertrude joined him.

"Perhaps I should have stayed with him, but I was afraid to speak," she said. "Besides, there was nothing to be said."

"This can't go on," Prescott declared. "It's too much for him. I can't leave here until the harvest's over, and then the grain ought to be hauled in, but I've thought of making a tour of inquiry along the new railroad and round the Alberta ranches and the mines in British Columbia."

Gertrude looked grateful.

"It would be a great relief to feel that something was being done. But—" she added hesitatingly, "your time is valuable and there would be expense. I have some means, Mr. Prescott, and though I dare not speak to my father about it, you must draw on me."

"We'll talk about it later. I wish I could go now, but that's impossible, and there's no use in suggesting that Mr. Jernyngham should send somebody else. Besides, I believe I'd have the best chance of picking up the right trail. You won't mind my saying that I'm very sorry for you?"

Her eyes grew soft and her whole expression gentle. It was an attractive face Prescott looked into.

"I value your sympathy," she said softly. "Indeed, I can't tell you what a comfort you have been. But you will undertake this search as soon as possible, won't you?"

"Yes," Prescott replied firmly; "you can count on that. If I've made things easier for you, I'm very glad."

Then he turned away and hurried back to the binder.

CHAPTER X

A NEW CLUE

It was a clear, cool morning and Prescott was busily engaged throwing sheaves into his wagon. He had finished his harvest and, in accordance with western custom, had immediately begun the thrashing. Part of the great field was already stripped to a belt of tall stubble, though long ranks of stooks still stretched across the rest, and dusty men were hard at work among them. Wagons rolled through the crackling straw—going slowly, piled high with rustling loads; returning light, jolting wildly, as fast as the teams could trot, for the thrashers were paid by the bushel and would brook no delay. In the background stood their big machine, pouring out a cloud of smoke that stretched in a gray trail across the prairie, and filling the air with its harsh clatter.

It was a scene of strenuous activity, filled with hurriedly moving figures, but its coloring had lost something of its former vividness. The blue of the sky was softer, the light less strong; the varying hues of lemon and copper and ocher had become subdued; the shadows were no longer darkly blue but a cool restful gray. The rushing winds that had swept the wide plain all summer had come to rest; the air was sharp and still.

The last week or two, however, had brought no change to the inmates of the homestead. Jernyngham still brooded over his loss and worried the police, his daughter looked to her host for comfort, and Prescott did what he could to cheer her. Gertrude, indeed, was sensible of a rapidly growing confidence in him and of the abandonment of many long-held ideas. The man was not of her station: he was a working farmer, his views at first had jarred on her; and yet the attraction he had for her was steadily increasing. She made a feeble fight against it. In England she had stood on safe ground, hedged in by conventions, ruled by the opinions of a narrow circle of friends. Now all was different; she had lost these supports and restraints and she was helpless without them. Passion was beginning to touch her and she mistook the rancher's gentleness and sympathy.

When Prescott had loaded his wagon she joined him as he led his team between the ranks of stooks, but while she walked by his side he thought of another Englishwoman whom he had once brought home with the prairie hay. He remembered how Muriel Hurst had nestled among the yielding grass, with something delightful in every line of her figure. He recalled her bright good-humor, the music of her laugh, the soft tones of her voice, the hint of courage he had seen in her eyes; and there was pain in the recollection. Gertrude Jernyngham was powerless to move him as Muriel had done, but he was sorry for Cyril's sister and very considerate of her.

"We'll have the crop off the ground before long," he said. "Then I'll start for Alberta, as I promised."

"You will be away some time?"

"I'm afraid so. It's a big province, though there are not a great many settlements in it yet; and I may have to cross over into British Columbia."

Gertrude looked down.

"It is very generous of you to go, but I shall miss you. I shall feel as if I had lost my chief support."

"So far, I've done nothing but talk; and talk is cheap," he laughed.

"You have given me courage," she said with shy hesitation. "And sympathy is worth a good deal."

He did not respond as she thought he might have done, and she continued:

"If my father had been less obstinate, you need not have gone; he could have hired a professional inquiry agent. But you had better not say anything about your object to him—it must be a secret between us."

"Yes," assented Prescott thoughtfully, "I guess that would be wiser. You want to keep his mind at rest as far as you can. Of course, there's a big chance that I may fail."

Gertrude turned to him with a smile.

"Oh, no! You are not one to fail!"

Prescott was slightly embarrassed. He had a feeling that he was being gently led on toward a closer acquaintance with his companion. She was dropping the reserve she had at first displayed and seemed to invite him tacitly into her confidence. He admitted that this idea might be incorrect, but it had troubled him once or twice before.

"I expect you'll be comfortable enough while I'm away," he said. "Mrs. Svendsen's trustworthy, and everything will be quiet after the harvesters have gone."

Gertrude did not answer, and they went on in silence to the noisy separator. Perspiring men, stripped of their heavier garments, were tossing the sheaves amid a cloud of dust; cleaned grain poured out into open bags, and as each was filled two panting toilers flung it into a wagon. Near-by stood a great and growing pile of bags, over which the short straw would be spread a number of feet thick, to form a granary. Gertrude joined her father, who was standing near the machine, moodily looking on, and before Prescott had unloaded his wagon Curtis rode up with Private Stanton.

"Nothing new at the muskeg, sir," he reported to Jernyngham rather curtly, and walked his horse toward Prescott.

"We were passing," he told him, and indicated the pile of grain. "You're not selling right away?"

"No; I'm not ready to haul the crop in to the elevators yet. I've one or two more pressing things to do."

"Mayn't you miss a chance? Prices are pretty good."

Prescott was on his guard; he felt that Curtis suspected him.

"I don't know," he answered. "I guess they won't fall much."

"Your neighbors mean to sell, though it's quite likely that's to meet their bills, and you always tried to get in on the first of the market until this year. It must have cost you a pile to put in that big crop."

"It did."

"Then how have you got so prosperous since last fall?"

It was a pointed question, because everybody in the district knew that Prescott had sold only a few head of cattle and a horse or two, while he would shortly have his accounts to meet.

"It's a matter of management," he replied. "I've been working on a different system this spring, and I find it pays." Then he looked steadily at the corporal, "Besides, running Jernyngham's place along with mine made it easier to cut expenses."

"It's a great crop. But we must be getting on."

He rode off and when they had left the stubble, Private Stanton looked at him.

"His being able to hold his wheat; which he couldn't do last year, is a pretty strong count against the man. You gave him his chance for explaining and he made a mighty bad show. Looks as if he'd got some money he couldn't account for since last fall."

"Not proved," returned Curtis. "There's something in what he said. Anyway, he isn't afraid of us, since he's putting up his grain."

"I don't quite catch on."

Curtis smiled.

"You're young. A guilty man would have rushed his crop into the elevators and had his money ready to light out with. If Prescott pulls out suddenly, he'll have to leave his property behind."

"The thing's between him and Wandle," Stanton persisted.

"Looks like that. Anyway, as the Austrian's at the settlement, we'll have a good look round his homestead. It's possible that we'll find something."

"What made you think of searching the place again? Anything in the last instructions you got from Regina? You didn't show them to me."

"That's so. It isn't a part of my duty to consult you, and you're a bit of a hustler. However, this is what I heard—a land agent in Navarino sent for the district sergeant; told him he'd run across a man from Sebastian at the hotel and the fellow got talking about Jernyngham. It was the first the land agent had heard of the matter; but he was struck by the date on which Jernyngham disappeared, because he'd had a deal with him three days later."

"That's mighty strange. If he's right, Jernyngham couldn't have been killed."

"Don't hustle!" said Curtis. "The fellow showed the sergeant the sale record, but he described Jernyngham as a big, rather stout man with light hair."

"Wandle!" exclaimed Stanton. "Are you going to arrest him?"

"Not yet. We might get him sent up for fraud and forgery, but if he had anything to do with knocking Jernyngham out, he'll be more likely to give us a clue of some kind while he's at large."

They rode on and reaching Wandle's farm searched the house carefully, replacing everything exactly as they found it. They discovered nothing of importance, but as they went out Curtis glanced at the ash and refuse heap.

"We might have thought of that earlier," he said. "I've heard of people trying to burn up things it might be dangerous to leave about."

Setting to work with a fork and shovel, they presently unearthed a rusty iron object which Stanton picked up.

"Looks like a big meat can," he remarked. "Kind of curious that Wandle should double it over this way and flatten it down."

Curtis took it from him and examined it carefully.

"It isn't a meat can; top edges are turned over a wire—here's a bit sticking out—and it's had a handle. There's a hinge in another place. The thing has been a box—a cash-box, I guess—one of the rubbishy kind they sell for about a dollar."

"But what would make a man smash up his cash-box?"

"I don't know; guess it doesn't apply. I could understand his wanting to get rid of one that belonged to somebody else, after he'd cleaned it out. Aren't you beginning to understand?"

"Sure," said Stanton eagerly. "The box was Jernyngham's—we'll find out when he bought it at the hardware store. Then we'll get after Wandle."

"You hustle too much!" Curtis rebuked him, and then sat down with knitted brows. "Now see here—in a general way, it's convictions we're out for; you want to count on your verdict before you arrest a man. It comes to this: he's tried first by us, and if he's to be let off, it saves trouble if we decide the thing, instead of leaving it to the jury. They won't tell you that at Regina, but, in practise, you'll find that a police trooper is expected to use some judgment. Still, there are exceptions to what I've said about holding back. In the interests of justice, one might have to corral an innocent man."

"How's that going to serve the interests of justice?"

The corporal's eyes twinkled with dry amusement.

"For one thing, it might lead the fellow we were really after to think we hadn't struck his trail. But that's not the point. How much ash would you figure Wandle takes out of his stove each time he lights it?"

"About a bucketful, burning wood."

"Not quite, but there's a bucket yonder. See how many times you can fill it with the stuff we shoveled off, while I take a smoke. Build up the pile to look as if we hadn't disturbed it."

Stanton did as he was bidden, counting each bucketful he replaced, and then Curtis sent him to clean out the stove and estimate the quantity of ash before he put it back. Then he made a calculation.

"Allowing for some of the ash slipping down the pile and for our having moved a little that was there before Wandle threw the cash-box in, it fixes the time he did so pretty close to Jernyngham's disappearance," he remarked. "Looks bad against the Austrian, doesn't it?"

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"You have quite as much against Prescott."

"Yes," Curtis admitted regretfully; "that's the trouble. It isn't quite so easy being a policeman as folks seem to think. Now we'll ride along and call on the hardware man."

They mounted and soon afterward saw a buggy emerge from the short pines on the crest of a distant rise, whereupon Curtis rode hard for a poplar bluff, which he kept between himself and the vehicle.

"Looks like Wandle coming back," he said to Stanton, who had followed him. "I can't see any reason he should know we've been prospecting round his place."

Reaching the settlement they visited the hardware dealer, who remembered having sold Jernyngham a small cheap cash-box about twelve months earlier. On being shown the bent-up iron, he expressed his belief that it was the article in question.

A day or two after the corporal's discovery, the mail-carrier left some letters at the Prescott homestead, and when it was getting dusk Gertrude strolled out on the prairie, thinking of one she had received. After a while Prescott joined her and she greeted him with a smile.

"My team was looking a bit played out and the boys will be able to keep the separator gang going as long as they can see," he said.

"Do you feel that you have to make excuses for stopping work, after twelve hours of it?" Gertrude asked.

"Yes," he laughed; "I do feel something of the kind. There's so much to do and the days are getting shorter fast."

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He glanced at her with appreciation. She wore a thin, black dress made after the latest London mode, which showed to advantage the graceful lines of her tall figure; the Jernynghams, who seldom departed from an established custom, changed their attire every evening. Gertrude had on no hat, and the fading light shone into her face. It was finely cut but cold, the features unusually good. She was a handsome woman, but she lacked warmth and softness.

"I'm in a difficulty," she told him. "Perhaps you can help—you're a man of many resources."

"I'll be glad to do what I can."

"We are expecting a visit from three old friends of ours who heard in America of the trouble we are in and want to see us. What can we do with them?"

"I haven't room," Prescott answered. "But let me think—Leslie has quite a big house, and it's only three miles from here. Now that he will have got rid of the harvesters, he might be willing to take your friends in. He and his wife are pleasant people; but I think you met her."

"Yes. I knew you wouldn't fail us," Gertrude said gratefully. "But, after all, I feel inclined to wish they were not coming."

There was an elusive something in her tone which did not escape Prescott's notice.

"Why do you wish that?" he asked.

"Oh," she said, "it's difficult to explain, but we have got used to the mode of life here: the few people we meet seem to understand our feelings, and we have learned to trust them. Strangers would rather spoil it all; in a sense, their visit would be an intrusion."

Prescott realized that this was complimentary to him. She had made it clear that he was not a stranger, but one of the people she trusted. The effect was to render him somewhat embarrassed, but Gertrude resumed:

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"I think we owe you a good deal. I don't know what we should have done had we fallen into less considerate hands."

"I'm yours to command," he replied; and they walked on in silence for a while, Gertrude glancing at him unobtrusively now and then.

She did not believe her brother dead—Prescott had reassured her; and now she felt strongly attracted by the rancher. She had thrown off the restraints in which she had long acquiesced; she was driven by a passion which was rapidly overpowering her.

"You don't suggest that the Leslies should take us all," she said.

"No," Prescott answered gravely; "I'd rather keep you and your father here."

"Then you're no longer anxious to get rid of us?"

He colored.

"That's true. I begin to feel I'm one of the party. Then, you see, Leslie's pretty talkative and

agrees with Curtis. He might have a bad effect on your father; he might even shake your confidence."

"Oh," she begged, "don't labor the explanation. You are one of the party and our friend."

Prescott bowed.

"I'll try to make that good. I'm going off to look for your brother in a few more days, but it will cost me something to leave the homestead now."

He had spoken the truth. Until lately the man had been bereft of all the amenities of life, but he had now grown to appreciate the society of cultured people; the task of cheering and encouraging his guests had become familiar; he might even have been drawn to the beautiful woman he had comforted had not his heart been filled with the image of Muriel.

"But after the summer's hard monotonous work, a change must be nice," she suggested.

"Yes; in a way. The trouble is that I must leave my guests."

Gertrude's eyes grew soft as they rested on him.

"We shall miss you," she murmured. "But you must go and find out all you can; I'm afraid the mystery and suspense are breaking my father down."

They walked on in silence for a while, and then Svendsen appeared near the homestead, waving his arm.

"Looks as if I were wanted," Prescott remarked; "I believe there's a wagon to be fixed. Will you excuse me? I'll ride over and have a talk with Leslie in the morning."

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CHAPTER XI

A REVELATION

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The sun had just dipped, leaving a rim of flaring color on the edge of the vast plain, when Prescott sat smoking on the stoop of the Leslie homestead a week after his evening walk with Gertrude. Leslie and his wife were simple people from Ontario, who had prospered in the last few years. Their crops had escaped rust and hail and autumn frost, and as a result of this, the rancher had replaced his rude frame dwelling with a commodious house, built, with lower walls of brick and wood above, in a somewhat ornate style copied from the small villas which are springing up on the outskirts of the western towns.

Leslie, an elderly, brown-faced man, sat near Prescott; the Jernynghams, who had driven over to welcome his friends, were inside, talking to Mrs. Leslie.

"Guess you don't know much about the English people we're expecting?" Leslie asked.

"No," said Prescott; "only that they're friends of the Jernynghams. I don't think I've even heard their names yet."

"Mrs. Leslie knows," rejoined the farmer; "I forget it. I feel kind of sorry now that she agreed to take them in, but you made a point of it, and if the man's not so blamed stand-offish, I'll have somebody to talk to."

"I wouldn't talk too much about Cyril Jernyngham."

Leslie looked hard at him.

"There's one point, Jack, where I can't agree with you—you're the only man in this district who doesn't believe Jernyngham's dead. It strikes me that you know more about the thing than you have told anybody yet."

"Let it go at that," said Prescott awkwardly, "All I could say would only bring more trouble on his people, and they've had quite enough."

"Sure," agreed Leslie, raising his hand in warning. "Sh-h! They're coming out."

The next moment Gertrude and her father joined the men, and after a few words with them stood still, listening. A long bluff, through which the trail from the settlement led, ran close up to the homestead, cutting against the pale green glow of the sky. For a few minutes there was a deep silence, intensified by the musical clash of cowbells in the distance, and then a measured, drumming sound rose softly from behind the trees.

"Guess that's your friends," Leslie said to Jernyngham. "Jim's made pretty good time."

The beat of hoofs grew nearer until the listeners could hear the rattle of wheels. Then a light, four-wheeled vehicle came lurching out of the bluff and Jernyngham hurried down the steps. Prescott had entered the house to tell Mrs. Leslie, and he came out as the driver pulled up his team. The occupants of the wagon, which had run a little past the door, had their backs to him, but seeing a girl about to alight he sprang forward. Her head was turned away from him at first,

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but she glanced round when he offered to assist her; and he forgot what the consequences of the meeting must be as he looked into the eyes of Muriel Hurst. He was conscious of an overwhelming delight, which showed itself in his shining eyes and the warm color that suddenly flushed his face; Gertrude Jernyngham, standing beside him, read what was in his heart.

The effect on Muriel was as marked. He had seized her hand and as she was standing precariously poised, ready to descend, he swung her down. Then she recoiled from him, startled, but with strong relief in her expression.

"Cyril!" she cried in a strained voice. "Why didn't you write and tell us that it was all a mistake? We heard that you were dead!"

Then Prescott remembered and his heart sank, but he strove to gather his courage, for there was a crisis to be faced. He stood silent, with one hand clenched tight, while Gertrude watched him with hard, unwavering eyes. Jernyngham, however, had heard Muriel's startled exclamation and hurried toward her.

"What's this?" he asked harshly. "You called my son's name!"

The girl looked at Prescott; troubled and surprised by the confused emotions his face betrayed. There was obviously something wrong, but she could not imagine what it was.

"Yes," she said, "I called him Cyril. Why shouldn't I?"

Colston and his wife joined the group, while the driver looked on from the wagon and the Leslies from the stoop. Prescott and the girl stood a little distance apart and Muriel was sensible of a nervous shiver. When Prescott had first held up his hand to her, she had seen his keen pleasure and her heart had responded to it; now, however, she was filled with dismay.

Jernyngham answered her in curt, stern tones:

"There's one very good reason—this is not my son!"

"Not Cyril!" Colston broke in. "But he made us believe he was; he's the man we stayed with!" He made a puzzled gesture. "I can't understand the thing."

"Nor I," replied Jernyngham. "Is this the man you wrote to us about?"

"Of course!" said Colston stupidly. "I thought he was Cyril; so did we all. We had no cause to doubt it."

Jernyngham turned in fury to the Leslies.

"Who is the fellow?" he demanded.

Prescott braced himself.

"I'll answer that—Jack Prescott. Mr. Colston stayed at my homestead."

"And you personated my son? I suppose you had some motive for doing so and must see that we are entitled to an explanation?"

"Yes," Prescott returned quietly. "This isn't the place to make it. Hadn't you better take your friends in?"

They entered the house, which was getting dark, and while the hired man carried in the baggage Leslie lighted a lamp in his sitting-room. It was spacious, roughly paneled in cedar, with an uncovered floor. There were a few chairs scattered about and a plain pine table. Jernyngham sat by the table and the others found seats here and there, except Prescott, who stood quietly opposite the old man. At a curt sign from Jernyngham, Leslie and his wife left the room.

"Mr. Prescott," Jernyngham began, "you have deceived my friends here and I think they should remain to hear what you have to say, but I will dismiss them if you prefer it. You are responsible to me and I must ask for a full account of your conduct."

Prescott glanced round the room, which reminded him of a court. Gertrude Jernyngham's eyes were fixed on him, and there was a hardness that hinted at cruelty in them; she looked very dignified and cold. Mrs. Colston he could not see, but her husband seemed disturbed and uneasy. Muriel leaned forward in her chair, with wonder, apprehension, and pity curiously mingled in her expression. All of them were very still, the silence was disconcerting, but Prescott roused himself to make what defense he could.

"I passed for Cyril Jernyngham at his request," he said.

"An extraordinary statement!" Jernyngham remarked with ironical incredulity. "May one ask if he gave any reasons for wishing you to do so?"

Prescott hesitated, which counted against him.

"Well," he said, "Cyril had got hurt in a row at the settlement a few hours before Mr. Colston's arrival. His head was badly cut; he thought it might make a bad impression."

"That doesn't sound very convincing. Had he no better reason?"

The rancher paused to think. He would not explain that his friend's mode of life would not have borne a critical examination, but he had a duty to himself and something must be urged.

"I think he meant to hide the fact that he was married. He did not wish your friends to meet his wife."

Colston started and it was obvious that the others were keenly interested, but Jernyngham's face grew darker and marked by signs of pain, for he had learned a little about Ellice. He was struggling with an overwhelming humiliation.

"We'll let that pass," he said. "It's a matter that cannot be discussed. Was Mr. Colston's visit the only time you personated my son?"

"Certainly! Nothing would induce me to play the part again."

"Then you will be surprised to hear that shortly after Cyril's disappearance a man sold some land of his at a town farther along the line?"

"I am surprised, but I believe it must have been Cyril."

"Then his handwriting must have totally changed, which I believe is a very unusual thing," Jernyngham rejoined sarcastically. "I have been shown some documents which he is supposed to have filled in."

Prescott began to realize that appearances were very strongly against him. He had admitted having once impersonated his friend and it would be difficult to convince those who had heard his confession that he had not done so again, when there was a strong motive for it in the price of the land.

"Well," he said firmly; "if the handwriting wasn't Cyril's, I can't tell whose it was; it certainly wasn't mine. There's one thing I'm convinced of—your son is not dead."

Jernyngham looked at him; with the veins on his forehead swollen and his face tense with anger, but he held himself in hand.

"You have said so often. I did not believe you; I do not believe you now; but your object in making the statement is easy to understand. I've no doubt you realize that you lie open to a very ugly suspicion."

"No!" a strained voice broke in. "That is not just!"

Looking up, Prescott saw that it was Muriel who had spoken. Her eyes were bright with indignation and her face was hot, but none of the others showed him any sympathy. Colston's face was grave and troubled, his wife's expressionless; Gertrude Jernyngham looked more determined and more merciless than her father. She sat very still, coldly watching him.

"Thank you," he said to Muriel. "It's comforting to find one person who does not think the worst of me."

"Silence, sir!" Jernyngham exclaimed with the air of a judge rebuking a prisoner of whose guilt he is convinced. "You cannot be permitted to speak to this lady."

"I think that is a point for Mrs. Colston to decide, but we'll let it drop. Out of consideration for you, I've answered your questions; but you have gone too far, and this must end." Prescott's expression grew as stern as the old man's and he looked about with pride. "I tell you it must stop! What right have you to fling these infamous hints at me?"

Jernyngham broke into a harsh laugh.

"The part of an innocent man is too much for you to play; we won't force you into it. It will be a favor if you will have our baggage sent across here; needless to say, neither my daughter nor I can re-enter your house." Then his self-control deserted him and he broke out in hot fury: "I firmly believe you are the man who killed my son, and you shall not escape!"

"I think," said Colston quietly, "that is going too far."

Making no answer, Prescott left them; and he was harnessing his horse outside when, somewhat to his astonishment, Muriel came toward him. A half-moon hung low above the bluff and the silvery light shone into her face, showing her warmth of color and the sparkle in her eyes. He thought she looked wonderfully attractive and his heart throbbed faster, but he knew he must hold himself in hand.

"Hadn't you better go back?" he asked. "You have heard what your friends think of me."

"What does that matter?" she exclaimed with feeling. "I'm very angry with them. I can't let you go without saying that I know you could not have done what you have been wickedly accused of."

"I'm glad. Thank you. It's a big relief to feel that you believe in me. So long as I have that assurance nothing else counts."

"Harry Colston's not convinced; I believe he's trying to keep an open mind."

"Is that so?" said Prescott. "I don't expect much from him. He's the kind of man who's guided by appearances and seldom does anything out of the common."

Muriel disregarded this.

"But you were very foolish in deceiving us. I can't understand yet why you did so."

"I can only tell you that it was for Cyril's sake."

"Oh," she cried, "it could not have been because of any benefit that you would get! That would never have tempted you."

He read unshaken confidence in her eyes and it cost him a stern effort to refrain from reckless speech. Muriel was beautiful, but that was not all: she was generous and fearless, a loyal friend

and a staunch partizan.

"Well," Prescott confessed, "when I explained, I was more afraid of you than of Jernyngham. I wanted to keep your good opinion, and I wondered whether you had only given it to me because you thought I was Cyril Jernyngham. From your friends' point of view Jack Prescott is a very different kind of person."

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Muriel blushed.

"Is it unpardonable that I was angry when I first found out the mistake? Try to imagine with what ideas I have been brought up. But the feeling left me when I saw how merciless Jernyngham was; his hard words turned it into sympathy."

"That is something to be thankful for, though it doesn't content me. I think you would be sorry for any one, even an enemy, who was in trouble and getting hurt."

She grasped his meaning and looked at him steadily with an air of pride.

"Then must I tell you that I have as much faith in Jack Prescott as I had in the man whom I supposed to be Cyril Jernyngham? But you must justify my confidence. You have been wrongly and cruelly accused; don't you see the duty that lies on you?"

"Yes," Prescott answered gravely; "I have to clear myself. If there were no other reason than the one you have given, it would have to be done. It's going to be a tough proposition, but I'll get about it very soon."

"You know that I wish you all success," she told him softly.

Then she held out her hand and turned away. When she had gone Prescott went on with his work and after buckling the last strap he found that he had forgotten a parcel Mrs. Leslie had asked him to deliver. Hurrying back to the house for it, he met Gertrude Jernyngham in the hall and she stopped where the light fell on her, instead of avoiding him as he had expected. There was suspicion in her eyes.

"I see you agree with your father," he said boldly.

"Yes," she replied in a scornful tone. "You can pose rather cleverly—you tricked me into trusting you, but your ability is limited, after all. When the strain comes, you break down. Could anything have been feebler than the defense you made?"

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"It was pretty lame, but every word was true."

"Oh," she cried with disgust and impatience, "one wouldn't expect you to say it was false! You don't seem to have anything more convincing to add."

"I'm going to add nothing. It isn't very long since you were willing to take my word."

"I'm afraid I was easily deceived," Gertrude said bitterly. "I didn't know you had twice passed yourself off as my brother, and you can't complain if we see an obvious motive for your doing so the second time."

"You mean that I stole the price of Cyril's land?" Prescott asked sternly.

"Yes," she said, watching him with cruel eyes. "That, however, is not the worst." She struggled with rising passion before she resumed: "I believe——"

Prescott raised his hand commandingly.

"Stop! I'm going away to find your brother."

"One can understand your going away!" she flung back at him as she passed on down the hall.

Prescott drove home at a reckless pace. Facing the situation boldly, he recognized that the outlook was very dark.

CHAPTER XII

PRESCOTT'S FLIGHT

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Two days after the arrival of the Colstons, Gertrude Jernyngham walked down the trail from the Leslie homestead in a very bitter mood. During the last few weeks her cold nature had kindled into sudden warmth; love had most unexpectedly crept into her heart. At first she had struggled against and been ashamed of it, for its object was a man beneath her in rank and of widely different mode of thought; but by degrees the judgment she had hitherto exercised had given place to passion. After the narrow, conventional life she had led, there was a strange exhilaration and excitement in yielding to her impulses; the virility of Prescott's character and his physical perfection stirred her. She desired him and had boldly used such charms as she possessed in his subjugation. Miled by his gentleness, she imagined him responsive, and then Muriel had appeared on the scene and the truth was plain to her when she saw his face light up at sight of the girl. She had read warm love in his eager glance.

Now Gertrude was crushed and humbled. She had cheapened herself, as she thought of it, to this rancher, only to find that he preferred another. Her punishment was severe, but she felt that it was deserved, and her ripening passion had turned to something very much like hate. Whether he had really had any hand in her brother's death was a point she would not calmly reason out, though she had a half-conscious feeling that he could not be charged with this. She wanted to think him base: to believe in his guilt would be an excuse for making him suffer.

While she walked, she cast quick glances across the waste of grass, looking for a mounted figure that did not appear, until at last she turned with a start at the sound of footsteps as Muriel came up.

"I saw you alone and thought I would join you," Muriel said.

"It's a relief to be by oneself now and then," Gertrude answered with curt ungraciousness.

"One can understand that. I tried to give Harry a hint that our visit might be an intrusion, when he talked of joining your father; but he thought it would be some comfort for you to have your friends about you."

"He was some time in putting his idea into practise."

"We started as soon as we heard of your trouble," said Muriel. "We were in Mexico then, and as we had moved about a good deal there was some delay in our letters. Has your father decided to stay with the Leslies?"

"Yes, for a while. It was, of course, impossible for us to remain with Mr. Prescott."

"Why could you not?" Muriel asked with sparkling eyes.

"Isn't it obvious, after what you heard the man admit?"

Muriel stopped, the color creeping into her face, which was filled with anger.

"It's impossible that Mr. Prescott could have had any connection with Cyril's disappearance. It's wicked and cruel to suspect him!"

"You seem strangely convinced of his innocence," Gertrude retorted with a somber glance at her. "We shall see by and by whether you or my father is right."

They walked on slowly, and shortly afterward two mounted figures appeared on the plain. Gertrude watched them draw near, and then turned to her companion.

"The police; we have been expecting them," she said. "My father sent a message to the corporal after Prescott had gone."

"Then he will be deeply ashamed of his harshness before long," Muriel declared as she abruptly moved away.

Gertrude let her go with a cruel smile. She thought she knew how matters stood, and if the girl were suffering, she had no pity for her. Then she waited until the police trotted by, and afterward walked slowly toward the house. On reaching it, she met Curtis coming out and he asked for a word with her.

"I understand you were the last person to see Prescott when he left this place the other night," he said.

Gertrude admitted it, watching the man. He looked disturbed, as if he did not know what to think. Private Stanton was sitting in his saddle with an expressionless face a few yards away, but she imagined it was intended that he should hear her answers.

"Well," Curtis resumed, "I have to ask what he said to you; anyway, so far as it bears on the business we have in hand. You know why I was sent for?"

Gertrude hesitated. She was very angry with Prescott, and there was a statement he had made which would prove damaging to him if she repeated part of it without the rest. She shrank from this course, but her rancor against the man suddenly grew too strong for her.

"I suppose I must answer that?"

"It's your duty."

"Then," she said in a strained voice, "Mr. Prescott told me he was going away."

"Going away!" Curtis looked astonished. "I guess you realize that this is a serious matter. Did he mention when?"

"I understood it would be very soon." Gertrude looked at the man haughtily. "That is all I have to tell."

She went into the house, feeling that she had said enough, and Curtis motioned to his companion and rode away. They had gone some distance when Stanton turned to his superior.

"Pretty significant. What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

"I'll have to apply for a warrant."

"You certainly will."

"Well," Curtis went on, "this thing isn't quite so simple as it seems. To begin with, it's my idea that Miss Jernyngham hasn't told us all she knows; you want to remember that Prescott's a good-looking fellow with a taking manner. I can see complications, though I can't get the right drift of them."

"Guess the matter will be worse muddled up if Prescott lights out. Now that Bardsley's gone down the line, you can't get your warrant for a day or two."

"That's so," Curtis agreed. "I'll make for the settlement and wire Bardsley and our bosses at Regina; you'll ride on and keep Prescott in sight—though it would be better if you didn't let him know you were watching him. When he clears, take the trail behind him and send back word to Sebastian. Soon as I get the warrant or instructions, I'll come after you."

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They separated and some time later Stanton took up his station in a bluff which commanded a view of the Prescott homestead. Lying hidden with his horse, he saw the rancher drive up and disappear within the house. Prescott had been very busy during the past two days and had found strenuous application something of a relief. He recognized that suspicion was centering on him and that he might expect a visit from the police, but the only way of proving his innocence that he could see was to produce his supposed victim. He foresaw that it might take a long while to find the man, and he must make preparations for a lengthy absence. The risk he ran in remaining until he had completed them was grave, but there was a vein of dogged persistency in him and he would not go before he was ready.

He had, however, other matters to think of. Miss Jernyngham had turned against him; after the confidence she had expressed, he could not understand why she had done so. Muriel Hurst, however, still believed in him, which was a comforting thought, though he would not permit himself to dwell on it. He loved the girl, but it seemed impossible that she should marry him. There was so much against this: the mode of life to which she had been accustomed, his obscure position, the prejudices of her relations. He blamed himself for not struggling more determinedly against the charm she had exerted on him; but it was too late to regret this now. He must bear his trouble and try to think of her as seldom as possible, which would be the easier, inasmuch as the work that waited him would demand his close attention. As soon as it grew dark that evening, he must set off on his search for Cyril Jernyngham.

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Dusk was falling when he rode away from the homestead with a couple of blankets and provisions for a few days strapped to his saddle. Though he could trust Svendsen to look after things in his absence, he was anxious and dejected, and it was with keen regret that he cast a last glance across the sweep of shadowy stubble toward the lighted windows of the house. All he saw belonged to him; he had by patient labor in frost and scorching sun built up the farm, and he was conscious of a strong love for it. It was hard to go away, an outcast, branded with black suspicion, leaving the place in another's charge; but there was no remedy.

The sky was faintly clouded, the moon, which was near its setting, obscured; the prairie ran back, dim and blurred; the air was keen and still. Prescott thought he heard a soft beat of hoofs behind him. He could, however, see nobody, and he rode on faster, heading for the house of a neighbor with whom he had some business, near the trail to the settlement. After a while he pulled up, and listening carefully heard the sound again. It looked as if he were being followed and he thought that if the police were on his trail, they would expect him to make for the American frontier, and to do that he must pass through or near Sebastian. If they believed this was his object, it might save him trouble, for he meant to ride north in search of Jernyngham after calling at the farm.

Checking his horse, he rode on without haste until it became obvious that the man behind was drawing up, then he set off at a gallop. Behind the farm he meant to visit lay a belt of broken ground, marked by scrub and scattered bluffs, where it should not be difficult to evade his pursuer. The staccato thud of the gallop would ring far through the still, night air, but this was of no consequence; he was some distance ahead and his horse was fresh and powerful. In a few minutes he believed that he was gaining and when he rode into sight of the little wooden house, which showed up black against the sky with one dim light in it, he was seized by a new idea. A horse stood outside the door, and he supposed the rancher had just returned. The man was a friend of Prescott's and believed in his innocence.

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"Larry," he cried as he rode up, and added when a shadowy figure came out: "You can send along your teams and do that breaking we were speaking of. Svendsen will pay you when you're through with it. I'm off to the north."

"Ah!" exclaimed the other sharply. "I guess I know what you're after. It strikes me you should have gone before."

He paused with a lifted hand as he heard the drumming of hoofs, and Prescott laughed.

"That's so. I believe you'll have a police trooper here in the next few minutes. Your horse is still saddled?"

"Yes; I've just come back from Gillom's."

"Then get up and ride for the settlement. Mail an order for some harness or anything useful to Regina by the night train, when you get there; you can let Svendsen have the bill. You had better go pretty fast and keep ahead of the trooper as long as you can. I guess you understand."

"Sure," grinned the other, and getting into the saddle, rode away at a smart trot, while Prescott dismounted and led his horse quietly toward the nearest bluff.

On reaching it he stopped and, listening carefully, heard the rancher riding down the trail to Sebastian, and another beat of hoofs that grew rapidly louder. By and by he made out a dim mounted figure that pressed on fast across the shadowy waste, and for a few anxious moments wondered whether the policeman would call at the house and discover its owner's absence. He passed on, however, and was presently lost in the darkness. When the drumming of his horse's

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hoofs gradually died away, Prescott mounted and rode hard toward the north. It would, he thought, be an hour or two before the trooper found out his mistake; the rancher would not betray him, and there was a prospect of his getting clear away.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CONSTRUCTION CAMP

The light was fading when Prescott walked into sight of the construction camp. It was situated on the edge of a belt of a muskeg sprinkled with birches and small pines, where the new railroad, leaving the open country to the south, ran up toward the great coniferous forest that fringes the northern portion of the prairie. Prescott had sold his horse at a lonely farm and he was now tired and hungry, but he felt satisfied that he was on the right track and had succeeded in eluding the police. Curtis and Private Stanton were men of fixed ideas; believing Jernyngham to be dead, they had, no doubt, merely made a few perfunctory inquiries at the nearest railroad camps. Moreover, as they had reason for concluding that Prescott would seek refuge across the American boundary, they would concentrate their efforts on looking for him there. Accordingly, he felt safe from pursuit.

By and by he stopped to look about. To the eastward all was gray, a dim waste of grass dotted with shadowy trees; but a vivid band of green still glowed on the western horizon. In front lay a broad shallow basin, streaked with filmy trails of mist, between which came the wan gleam of little pools. A causeway stretched out into the morass, sprinkled with the indistinct figures of toiling men. At its inner end, where it left the higher ground, a row of cars stood on a side-track, and near-by there were ranged straggling lines of tents and wooden shacks. Wisps of blue smoke drifted across the swamp, and a beam of strong white light streamed out from the electric head-lamp of a locomotive. The still air was filled with the clink of shovels, the clang of flung-down rails, and the sharp rattle of falling gravel.

Going on until he reached the camp, Prescott stopped beside a group of men sitting about a fire, and loosed the heavy pack that galled his shoulders.

"If you can give me a place to lie down and a bit of supper, boys, I'd be obliged," he said.

Two or three of them turned and looked at him without much curiosity. They were strong, brown-faced fellows, dressed in old duck overalls and slate-colored shirts, with shapeless hats and dilapidated knee-boots.

"Why, certainly," responded one in a clean English intonation. "However, as we're paying for our board, we'll have to invite you as the guest of the construction contractor; but there's no reason you should be shy about accepting his hospitality. Sit down until Shan Li brings the grub along."

"Here's a place," said another. "Want a job?"

"I don't know yet," Prescott answered. "I'm looking for a friend of mine: man of middle height, with pale-blue eyes and a curious twinkling smile. He was wearing a green shirt of finer stuff than they generally sell at the settlements when I last saw him, and I expect he'd have a fresh scar on his head."

There was signs of interest and amusement which suggested that Prescott was on the right track.

"Did he call himself Kermode?" one of the men asked.

Prescott hesitated. It was possible that some of them had heard of the Jernyngham affair, and he had no wish that they should connect him with it. While he considered his answer, the man with the English accent broke in:

"We needn't trouble about the point. One name's as good as another, as our friend Kermode, who seems to have been a bit of philosopher, remarked when they put him on the pay-roll."

"When I was back at Nelson a smart policeman rode into the camp," said another of the group. "Wanted to know if we had seen the man you're asking for; gave us quite a good description of him. Anyway, I hadn't seen him then, and when I struck him afterward I didn't send word to the police. I've no use for those fellows; they're best left alone."

"Then you know him?" Prescott exclaimed eagerly.

The man looked at his comrades and there was a laugh.

"Oh, yes," said one of them; "we know him all right. Glad to meet a man who's a friend of his; but if you expect a job here, you don't want to mention it. If another fellow of that kind comes along, the boss will get after him with a gun."

"Kermode," the Englishman explained, "is a man of happy and original thoughts. I believe I might say he is unique."

The conversation was interrupted by a steadily increasing rattle, and a great light that moved swiftly blazed on the camp. It faded as a ballast-train rolled out upon the bank which traversed the swamp, with a swarm of indistinct figures clinging to the low cars. When it stopped, the sides of the cars fell outward, a big plow moved forward from one to another, and broken rock and gravel, pouring off, went crashing and rattling down the slope. The noise it made rang harshly through the stillness of the evening, and when it ceased a whistle screamed and the clangor of the wheels began again. As the engine backed the train away, the blaze of the headlamp fell on an object lying half buried in the muskeg about sixty feet below the line, and one of the men, pointing to it, touched Prescott's arm.

"See what that is?" he said.

Prescott saw that it was what the railroad builders call a steel dump: a metal wagon capable of carrying thirty or forty tons of ballast, with an automatic arrangement for throwing out its load.

"How did it get there?" he asked.

"Tell you after supper," said the fellow. "They're bringing it along."

A whistle blew and Prescott followed his companions into a shed built of railroad ties and galvanized iron. It was lighted by kerosene lamps which diffused an unpleasant odor, and fitted with rude tables and benches; but the meal laid out in it was bountiful and varied: pork, hard steak, fish from the lakes, potatoes, desiccated fruits, and tea. The shovel-gang paid six dollars a week for their board and got good value. As usual, most of them were satisfied in fifteen minutes, for in the West the rank and file eat with determined haste, and when they trooped out Prescott went back with his new friends to the fire. Taking out his pipe, he made himself as comfortable as possible on a pile of gravel and, tired with a long day's march, looked lazily about. The strong light still blazed along the bank where hurrying men passed through the stream of radiance, vanished into the shadows, and appeared again. There was a continuous rattling and clinking and roar of falling stones; rails rang as they were moved, and now and then hoarse orders came out of the darkness.

After Prescott had asked a few leading questions, the men began to talk of Kermode, who had already left the camp, and the rancher was able to put together the story of his doings there.

The muskeg was an unusually bad one. It swallowed the rock the men dumped in; logs, brush, and branches afforded no foundation, and a long time elapsed before the engineers were satisfied about the base of the embankment. The weather remained unusually hot until late in the fall, and the contractor, already behind time and anxious to make progress before the frost interfered with his work, developed a virulent temper. His construction foreman drove the men mercilessly, spurring on the laggards with scathing words and occasionally using a heavy fist when they showed resentment. The laborers' nerves were worn raw, their strength was exhausted; but the muskeg must be filled and, while carload after carload of rock and gravel was hurled down, the line crept on.

Things were in this state when Kermode reached the camp and, on applying for work, was given a shovel and made to use it in a strenuous fashion. It appeared that he was not expert with the tool and the foreman's most pointed remarks were generally addressed to him, but he had a humorous manner which gained him friends. Once or twice, to his comrades' admiration, he engaged his persecutor in a wordy contest and badly routed him, which did not improve matters. Indeed, his last victory proved a costly one, because afterward when there was anything particularly unpleasant or dangerous to be done, Kermode was selected. As it happened, the risks that must be faced were numerous.

Kermode stood it for some weeks, though he grew thin and his hands were often bleeding. In spite of this, his eyes still twinkled mischievously and, when occasion demanded, his retort was swift and edged with wit. Now and then he made reprisals, for when, as happened once or twice, a load of gravel nearly swept the foreman down the bank, Kermode was engaged in the vicinity. Another time, the bullying martinet was forced to jump into the muskeg, where he sank to the waist, in order to avoid a mass of ballast sent down before its descent was looked for.

There was a difference of opinion about the cause of Kermode's holding out. Some of his comrades said he must have meant to wait for the arrival of the pay car, so as to draw his wages before he left; others declared that this did not count with him, and he stayed because he would not be driven out. The Englishman took the latter view for, as he told Prescott, Kermode once said to him, "I want the opposition to remember me when I quit."

By degrees the foreman's gibes grew less frequent. Kermode was more than a match for him, and his barbed replies were repeated with laughter about the camp; but his oppressor now relied on galling commands which could not be disobeyed. Kermode's companions sympathized with him, and waited for the inevitable rupture, which they thought would take a dramatic shape. At length two big steel dump cars were sent up from the east and run backward and forward between the muskeg and a distant cutting where they were filled with broken rock. This was deposited in places where the embankment needed the most reinforcing, but after a while the foreman decided that the locomotive of the gravel train need not be detained to move the cars. They could, he said, be pushed by hand, and nobody was surprised when Kermode was among the men chosen for the task.

Though the nights were getting cold, the days were still very hot, and those engaged in it found the work of propelling a steel car carrying about thirty tons of stone over rails laid roughly on a slight upward grade remarkably arduous. This, however, did not content the foreman. He took

two men away; and when those whom he left had been worked to exhaustion, he changed them, with the exception of Kermode, who was kept steadily at the task. As a result, he came to be looked on as leader of the gang, and his companions took their instructions from him, which the foreman concurred in, because it enabled him to hold Kermode responsible for everything that went wrong.

Then the pay car arrived, and when wages were drawn, the men awaited developments with interest; but nothing unusual occurred until a week had passed. Kermode had had his hand crushed by a heavy stone and meant to rest it for a day or two, but his persecutor drove him out to work. He obeyed with suspicious meekness and toiled in the scorching sun all day; but a few minutes before the signal to stop in the evening for which they were eagerly waiting, the gang was ordered to run a loaded dump car to the end of the line. The men were worn out, short in temper, and dripping with perspiration. Kermode's hand pained him and in trying to save it he had strained his shoulder; but he encouraged the others, and they slowly pushed the load along, moving it a yard or two, and stopping for breath. The men on the bank were dawdling through the last few minutes, waiting to lay down their tools, and they offered the gang their sympathy as they passed. Then there was a change in their attitude as the foreman strode up the track.

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"Shove!" he ordered. "Get a move on! You have to dump that rock before you quit."

They were ready to turn on him and Kermode's eyes flashed; but he spoke quietly to his men:

"Push!"

A few more yards were covered, the foreman walking beside the gang until they stopped for breath.

"Get on!" he cried. "Send her along, you slobs!"

"We're pretty near the top of the grade," Kermode answered him quietly. "We want to go easy, so as to stop her at the dumping-place."

The line, when finished, would cross the muskeg with a slight ascent; but the bank sank as they worked at it, and the track now led downhill toward its end. The foreman failed to remember this in his vicious mood.

"Are you going to call me down?" he roared. "Mean to teach me my job? If this crowd's a sample of white men, give me Chinamen or niggers! Get on before you make me sick, you slouching hogs!"

He became more insulting, using terms unbearable even in a construction camp, but Kermode did not answer him.

"Keep her going, boys," he said.

They made another few yards, gasping, panting, with dripping faces; and then the work grew easier as they crossed the top of the ascent.

"Push!" said Kermode. "Send her along!"

They looked at him in surprise. It was getting dark, but they could still see his face, which was quietly resolute; he evidently meant what he said, and they obeyed him. The big car began to move more freely, and they waited for an order to slacken the pace; but their leader seemed to be increasing his exertions and his eyes gleamed.

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"He told us to push, boys!" he reminded them. "Rush her ahead!"

Then comprehension dawned on them. The foreman had dropped behind, satisfied, perhaps, with bullying them, but every man taxed his tired muscles for a last effort. The wheels turned faster, the men broke into a run, and none of them was astonished when a warning cry rose behind them.

"Go on!" shouted Kermode. "He'll hold me responsible! You know what to do!"

Men along the line called to them as they passed, and they answered with a breathless yell. The car was gathering speed, and they kept it going. There were further warnings, but they held on, until Kermode raised his voice harshly:

"A good shove, boys, and let her go!"

They stopped, exhausted, but the dump rolled on with its heavy load of rock, struck the guard-beams at the end of the track and smashed through them. Then with a crash and a roar the big steel car plunged down the slope, plowing up the gravel, hurling out massive stones. A cloud of dust leaped about it; there was a shrill ringing sound as an axle broke, a last downward leap, and with a mighty splash the dump came to rest, half buried, in the muskeg.

Kermode turned with a cheerful smile as the foreman ran up; and the spectators knew that the time for words had passed. Nobody could remember who struck the first blow, but Kermode's left hand was injured, and he clinched as soon as he could. For a few minutes the men reeled about the track; and then with a tense effort Kermode pushed the foreman off the bank and went down with him. The gravel was small and slippery, lying at a steep slope, and they rolled down, still grappling with each other, until there was a splash below. A few moments later Kermode painfully climbed the bank alone.

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"I guess you had better go down and pull your boss out," he said. "It's pretty soft in the muskeg; I believe he got his head in, and by the way he's floundering it looks as if he couldn't see." He paused and waved his hand in genial farewell. "Good-night, boys! I'm sorry I have to leave you;

but considering everything, I think I'll take the trail."

Then he turned and moved down the track, vanishing into the growing darkness.

When the tale was finished, Prescott sat a while, smoking thoughtfully. He imagined that he had struck Jernyngham's trail; all that he had heard was characteristic of the man.

"Do you know where Kermode went?" he asked.

"No. Guess he might have headed for a camp farther west; I've heard they're short of men."

Prescott thought this probable and determined to resume his search in the morning. Presently the gravel train came back and the stream of light from the head-lamp, blazing along the embankment, rested on the half-buried dump. Then there was a roar as the plow flung the load off the cars, and in the silence that followed one of the men got up.

"Morning will come soon enough; I guess it's time for sleep," he said.

CHAPTER XIV

ON THE TRAIL

When Prescott got up the next morning, dawn was breaking across the muskeg. There was frost in the air, the freight-cars on the side-track and the roofs of the shacks were white, and a nipping breeze swept through the camp. It was already filled with sounds of activity—hoarse voices, heavy footsteps, the tolling of a locomotive bell, and the rattle of wheels—and Prescott's new friends were eating in a neighboring shed. Going in, he was supplied with breakfast, and when he left the table the Englishman joined him.

"Have you made up your mind whether you want a job or not?" he asked.

Prescott said he thought he would push on, and the man looked at him deprecatingly.

"Well," he said, "we don't want to appear inhospitable, but as things are run here, you're the guest of the boss, and since he didn't give the invitation, there might be trouble if he noticed you."

"As it happens, I want to get hold of Kermode as soon as I can," Prescott answered.

"You shouldn't have much difficulty in finding him. It's hardly possible for a man of his gifts to go through the country without leaving a plain trail behind."

Prescott agreed with this. He had not much doubt of Kermode's identity, and he thought his missing friend would give any acquaintances he made on his travels cause to remember him.

"There's a construction train starting west in about half an hour," resumed the railroad hand. "If you get on board with the boys, it will look as if you belonged to the gang."

Daylight had come when Prescott clambered up on one of the long flat cars loaded with rails and ties, and in a few minutes the train started. It followed what was called a cut-out line, which worked round the muskeg and back to the main track through a country too difficult for the latter to traverse; and for a while Prescott's interest was occupied by its progress. Groups of men in brown overalls were seated on the rails, which clanged musically in rude harmony with the clatter of the wheels. A sooty cloud streamed back above them, now and then blotting out the clusters of figures; the cars swayed and shook, and in view of the roughness of the line Prescott admired the nerve of the engineer.

The wind that whipped his face was cold and pierced the blanket he had flung over his shoulders; but the sunshine was growing brighter and the mist in the hollows was rapidly vanishing. As a rule, the depressions were swampy, and as they sped across them Prescott could see the huge locomotive rocking, while the rails, which were spiked to ties thrown down on brush, sank beneath the weight and sprang up again as the cars jolted by. As they rushed down tortuous declivities, the cars banged and canted round the curves, while Prescott held on tight, his feet braced against a rail. It was better when they joined the graded track, and toward noon he was given a meal with the others at a camp where a bridge was being strengthened. When they started again, he lay down in his blanket where the sunshine fell upon him and the end of the car kept off the wind, and lighting his pipe became lost in reflection.

It was obvious that he must use every effort to find Jernyngham and he thought he might succeed in this; but what then? To prove his innocence, in which she already believed, would not bridge the gulf between him and Muriel Hurst. It seemed impossible that she should be willing to marry a working rancher. Yet he knew that he could not overcome his love for her; there was pleasure as well as pain in remembering her frankness and gaiety and confidence in him; and the charm of her beauty was strong. He recalled the crimson of her lips, the glow of warm color in her hair, the brightness of her smile, and the softness he had once or twice seen in her violet eyes. Then he drove these thoughts away; to indulge in them would only make the

self-denial he must practise the harder.

He next tried to occupy his mind with Gertrude Jernyngham, for he was still without a clue to her disconcerting change of mood. She had no great attraction for him, but he had pitied her and found a certain pleasure in her society. It was strange that after taking his view of her brother's fate against the one her father held, she should suddenly turn upon him in bitter anger. He was hurt at this, particularly as he did not think the revelation that he had personated Cyril accounted for everything. However, as it was unavoidable, he thought he could bear Miss Jernyngham's suspicion.

He was disturbed in his reflections by a sudden jolt of the train as it stopped at a water-tank. Getting down with the others, he saw a man standing in the entrance of a half-finished wooden building. The fellow looked like a mechanic, and his short blue-serge jacket and other details of his dress suggested that he was an Englishman. On speaking to him, Prescott learned that the train would be detained a while, because a locomotive and some empty cars were coming down the line. The man further mentioned that a number of railroad hands had been engaged in putting up the building until lately, when they had been sent on somewhere else, and Prescott inquired if there had been a man among them who answered to his friend's description.

"There was," said the other dryly, and called to somebody inside: "Here's a fellow asking for Kermode!"

"Bring him in!" replied a voice, and Prescott entered the building.

It contained a pump and two large steel tanks. Near one of them a man was doing something with a drill, but he took out his pipe and pointed to a piece of sacking laid on a beam.

"Sit down and have a smoke," he said. "You have plenty of time. Was Kermode a friend of yours?"

Prescott looked about the place. He saw that it was a filtering station for the treatment of water unfit for locomotive use.

"Thanks," he responded. "I knew Kermode pretty well; but I needn't stop you."

"Oh, don't mind that!" grinned the other. "We're not paid by the piece on this job. Besides, they've some chisels for us on your train and we haven't got them yet."

"You're English, aren't you?" Prescott asked. "Are you stopping out here?"

"Not much!" exclaimed the other with scorn. "What d'you take me for? There's more in life than whacking rivets and holding the caulker. When a man has finished his work in this wilderness, what has he to do? There's no music halls, no nothing; only the dismal prairie that makes your eyes sore to look at."

Prescott had heard other Englishmen express themselves in a similar fashion, and he laughed.

"If that's what you think of the country, why did you come here?"

"Big wages," replied the first man, entering the building. "Funny, isn't it, that when you want good work done you have to send for us? Every machine-shop in your country's full of labor-saving and ingenious tools, but when you build bridges with them they fall down, and I've seen tanks that wouldn't hold water."

"Oh, well," said Prescott, divided between amusement and impatience, "this isn't to the point. I understand Kermode was here with you?"

"He was. Came in on a construction train, looking for a job, and when we saw he was from the old country we put him on."

"You put him on? Don't these things rest with the division boss?"

The man grinned.

"You don't understand. We're specialists and get what we ask for. Sent the boss word we wanted an assistant, and, as we'd picked one up, all he had to do was to put him on the payroll."

"And did Kermode get through his work satisfactorily?"

"For a while. He was a handy man; might have made a boiler-maker if he'd took to it young. When we had nothing else to keep him busy, he'd cut tobacco for us and set us laughing with his funny talk."

This was much in keeping with Jernyngham's character. But the man went on:

"When we'd made him a pretty good hand with the file and drill, he got Bill to teach him how to caulk. He shaped first-rate, so one day we thought we'd leave him to it while we went off for a jaunt. Bill had bought an old shot-gun from a farmer, and we'd seen a lot of wild hens about."

"It would be close time—you can only shoot them in October; but I suppose that wouldn't count."

"Not a bit," said the boiler-maker. "All we were afraid of was that a train might come in with the boss on board; but we chanced it. We told Kermode he might go round the tank-plate landings—the laps, you know—with the caulker, and give them a rough tuck in, ready for us to finish; and then we went off. Well, we didn't shoot any wild hens, though Bill got some pellets in his leg, and when we came back we both felt pretty bad when we saw what Kermode had done. Bill couldn't think of names enough to call him, and he's good at it."

"What had he done?"

"Hammered the inside of the landings down with a gullet you could put your finger in. Too much energy's your mate's complaint. Nobody could tell what that man would do when he gets steam up. Understand, we're boiler-making specialists, sent out on awkward jobs; and he'd put in work that would disgrace a farmer! For all that, it was Bill's fault for speaking his mind too free—he got thrown behind the tank."

"I wasn't," contradicted the other. "He jumped at me unexpected when the spanner hit him, and I fell."

Prescott laughed. Remembering how Jernyngham had driven a truculent rabble out of Sebastian, he could imagine the scene in the shed; but it was evident that the boiler-makers bore him no malice.

"After all," said the first one, "when we cooled off and got talking quiet, he said he'd better go, and we parted friendly."

"Do you know where he went?"

"I don't; we didn't care. We'd had enough of him. First thing was to put that caulking right, and we spent three or four days driving the landings down—you can do a lot with good soft steel. Anyhow, when we filled up the time-sheet showing how far we'd got on with the job, there was a nasty letter from the engineer. Wanted to know what we'd been playing at and said he'd have us sent home if we couldn't do better."

While Prescott thanked them for the information a bell began to toll and there was a rattle of wheels. Hurrying out, he saw a locomotive approaching the tank and men clambering on to the cars in which he had traveled. Soon after he joined them, the train rolled out of the side-track and sped west, clattering and jolting toward the lurid sunset that burned upon the edge of the plain. Jack-pines and scattered birches stood out hard and black against the glare, the rails blazed with crimson fire and faded as the ruddy light changed to cold green, and there was a sting of frost in the breeze.

They dropped a few men at places where work was going on, stopped for water, and crawled at slow speed over half-finished bridges and lengths of roughly graded line. After nightfall it grew bitterly cold and Prescott, lying on the boards with his blanket over him, shivered, half asleep. For the most part, darkness shut them in, but every now and then lights blazed beside the line and voices hailed the engineer as the pace decreased. Then, while the whistle shrieked, ballast cars on a side-track and tall iron frameworks slipped by, and they ran out again into the silent waste. Prescott was conscious of a continuous jolting which shook him to and fro; he thought he heard a confused altercation among his companions at the end of the car, and the clang of wheels and the shaking rails rang in measured cadence in his ears. Then the sounds died away and he fell into a heavy sleep.

It was noon the next day when he alighted, aching all over, where the line ran into a deep hollow between fir-clad hills. A stream came flashing through the gorge and at the mouth of it shacks and tents and small frame houses straggled up a rise, with a wooden church behind them. Farther up, the hollow was filled with somber conifers, and the hills above it ran back, ridge beyond ridge, into the distance. Then, looking very high and far away, a vast chain of snowy summits was etched against a sky of softest blue. Those that caught the light gleamed with silvery brightness, but part of the great range lay in shadow, steeped in varying hues of ethereal gray. From north to south, as far as the eye could follow, the serrated line of crag and peak swept on majestically.

Tired as he was, Prescott felt the impressiveness of the spectacle; but he had other things to think about, and slipping away from the railroad hands, he turned toward a rude frame hotel which stood among the firs beside the river. Rows of tall stumps spread about it, farther back lay rows of logs, diffusing a sweet resinous fragrance. Through a gap between the towering trunks one looked up the wild, forest-shrouded gorge, and the litter of old provision cans, general refuse, and discarded boots could not spoil the beauty of the scene. Prescott asked for a room; and sitting outside after dinner, he gathered from some men, who were not working, the story of Kermode's next exploit. Their accounts of it were terse and somewhat disconnected, but Prescott was afterward able to amplify them from the narrative of a more cultured person.

Kermode had been unloading rails all day, and he was standing on the veranda one evening when a supply train from the east was due. It appeared that he had renewed his wardrobe at the local store and invariably changed his clothes when his work was finished. This was looked upon as a very unusual thing, and his companions thought it even more curious that he had not been known to enter the bar of the hotel; its proprietor was emphatic on the point. A number of railroad hands lounged about, attired as usual in their working clothes.

At length the tolling of a bell broke through the silence of the woods and the train ran in. The rutted street became crowded with unkempt, thirsty men, and in a few minutes the hotel was filled with their harsh voices. Last of all appeared a girl, with a very untidy man carrying a bag beside her. She walked with a limp, and looked jaded and rather frightened. Her light cloak was thick with dust and locomotive cinders which clung to the woolly material; her face was hot and anxious, but attractive.

"Thank you," she said to her companion, opening her purse when they reached the veranda.

"Shucks! You can put that back," returned the man with an awkward gesture and then, lifting

the bag, carefully replaced the end of a garment that projected through the bottom. "I'll carry the grip in for you, but you want to be careful with the thing. Seems to have got busted when the rails fell on it."

The girl passed through a wire-net door that he opened, and Kermode, following, waited for several minutes after her companion had rung a bell. Then a man in a white shirt and smart clothes appeared.

"Can I send a telegram from here to Drummond?" she asked him.

"No; the wires won't run into that district until next year."

"How can I get there?"

"I guess you'll have to hire a team at the livery-stable; take you about three days to get through."

The girl looked dismayed.

"Then can you give me a room to-night?" she asked.

"Sorry," said the man, "we're full up with the railroad boys; the waitresses have to camp in the kitchen. Don't know if anybody can take you in; the track bosses have got all the rooms in town."

He disappeared and the girl sat down, looking very forlorn and disconsolate. Her voice was English and she had obviously traveled a long distance in an open car on the supply train. Kermode felt sorry for her. He took off his hat as he approached.

"If you don't mind waiting a few minutes, I'll see if I can find you quarters," he said.

She glanced at him suspiciously, with a heightened color, which he thought a favorable sign, but her eyes grew more confident and when she agreed he withdrew. As a man of experience who had been a favorite with women, he was, however, guilty of an error of judgment during his search. A smart young woman with whom he was on friendly terms managed a cigar store, and it is possible that she would have taken some trouble to oblige him; but his request that she should offer shelter to another girl whose acquaintance he seemed to have made in a most casual manner was received with marked coldness. Kermode, indeed, felt sorry he had suggested it when he left the store and set out for a shack belonging to the widow of a man killed on the line. She was elderly and grim, a strict Methodist from the east, who earned a pittance by mending the workmen's clothes. After catechizing Kermode severely, she gave a very qualified assent; and returning to the hotel, he found the girl anxiously waiting for him. She looked relieved when he reported his success.

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"I had better go at once," she said. "You think Mrs. Jasper will take me in?"

Kermode picked up the bag.

"To tell the truth, she only promised to have a look at you." Then he smiled reassuringly. "I've no doubt there'll be no difficulty when she has done so."

The girl followed him and, as they went slowly up the street, while all the loungers watched them, she gave Kermode a confused explanation. Her name was Helen Foster, and she had come from England to join a brother who had taken up a farm near Drummond, which Prescott had heard was a remote settlement. Her brother had told her to notify him on her arrival at Winnipeg and await instructions, but on board the steamer she had met the wife of a railroad man engaged on the new line who had offered her company to a point in the west from which Helen could reach her destination. On arriving at the railroad man's station, he had sent her on by the supply train.

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A little distance up the street, Kermode stopped outside a shed in which a fellow of unprepossessing appearance was rubbing down a horse. His character, as Kermode knew, was no better than his looks.

"I must see the liveryman," he told the girl, and when he had sent the hostler for him the proprietor came out.

"The round-trip to Drummond will take six days, and you'd want a team," he said. "I'd have to charge you thirty dollars."

Kermode looked dubious, his companion dismayed. She had three dollars and a few cents.

"Can you drive this lady there?" Kermode asked.

"I can't. Jim would have to go."

"I think not," said Kermode firmly. "I'll see you about a saddle-horse in the morning." He turned to the girl: "We'll go along again."

A few minutes later they reached the widow's shack and Kermode waited some time after his companion was admitted. As she did not come out, he concluded that Mrs. Jasper was satisfied and returned to the hotel, where he was freely bantered by the loungers.

"That will do, boys," he said at length. "If there's any more of this kind of talk, the man who keeps it up will get badly hurt."

They saw that he meant it and, as he was popular, they left him in peace.

CHAPTER XV

MISS FOSTER'S ESCORT

On the morning after he met Helen Foster, Kermode sought a foreman with whom he was on good terms.

"I want to quit work for a week," he said abruptly.

"Sorry; I can't give you leave, and the boss went down the line yesterday. If you let up before you see him, it's quite likely he won't take you back."

"If he doesn't I won't be very grieved. Throwing forty-foot rails about all day palls on one. But what about my wages up to date?"

"That's a matter for the pay-clerk when he comes along. If you quit without notice, he'll make trouble."

Kermode considered this; but he had about ten dollars in his pocket and he was not of provident nature. He decided that something must be left to chance, though the thought that he might have handled heavy rails for the contractor's exclusive benefit was strongly distasteful. Walking across the town, he paid a visit to Miss Foster.

"Can you ride?" he asked her.

"I haven't ridden for years."

"Perhaps you could manage a steady horse which wouldn't go faster than a walk?" he suggested.

"Yes." Then she hesitated. "But horses are expensive, and I have very little money left. Somehow, it seems to disappear rapidly in Canada."

"That's an annoying trick it has," Kermode laughed. "However, you had better start for Drummond this morning, and I'll go with you."

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The girl looked dubious. She knew nothing about him, but his manner and appearance were in his favor, and her position was far from pleasant. Mrs. Jasper, who had already presented what appeared to be an extortionate bill, seemed by no means anxious to keep her, and it might be a long time before she could communicate with her brother. How she was to hold out until he came to her assistance she could not tell.

"Thank you," she said, gathering her courage; and after promising that he would be back in an hour, Kermode went away.

He was a man who acted on impulse and, as a rule, the more unusual a course was the better it pleased him. In spite of her lameness Miss Foster was attractive, which, perhaps, had its effect, though he was mainly actuated by compassion and the monotony of his track-laying task. He did not think the settlement, in which there were very few women, was the kind of place in which she could comfortably remain, particularly if her means were exhausted. Presently he met the livery-stable keeper driving in his buggy and motioned to him to pull up.

"How much will you charge for the hire of the roan, to go to Drummond?" he asked, and the man named his charge.

"I'll give you eight dollars now and the balance when I come back."

"No sir!" replied the other firmly. "You might fix up to stay there."

"Will an order on the railroad pay-clerk satisfy you?"

"It won't. If you want the horse, you must put the money down."

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"Then I can't make the deal."

The man drove on, but Kermode was not to be daunted by such a difficulty; besides, he had noticed Jim, the hired man, dawdling about the outside of the stable. When the buggy was out of sight, he accosted him.

"I want the roan in half an hour," he said. "I see you have Mrs. Leaver's saddle here, and as she's away, you had better put it on. I'm going to take the lady you saw with me to Drummond."

"S'pose you have seen the boss about it?"

"You must have noticed me talking to him," Kermode replied curtly. "Bring the horse along to Mrs. Jasper's as soon as you're ready."

Then he returned to the hotel and wrote a note which he gave the bar-tender, instructing him to let the proprietor of the livery-stable have it when he came in for dinner. After this he succeeded in borrowing a small tent, and when he had supplied himself with provisions he hurried toward the widow's shack. The horse was already there, and when he had strapped on the folded tent and Miss Foster's bag he helped her to mount, and set off, carrying his blankets and stores in a pack on his back. He showed no sign of haste and chatted gaily, though he was anxious to get out of the town as soon as possible, because he did not know when the stable-

keeper would return.

It was a clear morning; the girl looked brighter after her night's rest, and the fresh air brought a fine color into her face. Kermode kept her laughing with his light chatter, but he was nevertheless glad when they reached the shadow of the pines, where they could travel faster without attracting attention. After half an hour's rapid walking, he left the trail, which ran on toward Drummond for a day's journey before it stopped at a ranch, and turned down into the valley. He thought it might be wiser to keep to the south of the line he would be expected to take, though this would entail the crossing of rougher country. Reaching the edge of a stream, he stopped and regarded it with some concern. It ran fast between great boulders and looked deep, but as there was no sign of a better crossing he warned the girl to hold on, and led the horse in.

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After a few paces he sank above his knees, and found it hard to keep his footing and the horse's head upstream. The roan was slipping badly among the stones and the hem of his companion's skirt was getting wet. He was pleased to notice that she did not look unduly alarmed.

"We'll be across in another minute or two," he said as cheerfully as he could.

She smiled at him rather dubiously and at the next step he sank deeper and dragged the horse round as he clung to the bridle. The roan plunged savagely and the water rippled about Kermode's waist as he struggled for a foothold on the slippery stones. With a desperate effort he managed to find firmer bottom and soon came out on a strip of shingle. Stopping there for a few moments, he gathered breath while the girl looked about. They were in the bottom of a deep gorge filled with the sound of running water and sweet resinous scents. Here the torrent flashed in bright sunshine; there it flowed, streaked with foam, through dim shadow, while somber pines towered above it. There was no sound or sign of human life; they had entered the gates of the wilderness.

"Where do we go next?" the girl asked.

"Up this slope," said Kermode. "Then among the pines, across the hills, and high plains, into a lonely land. I don't suppose we'll see a house until we get to Drummond."

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"Do you know the way?"

"I don't," Kermode said cheerfully. "I've never been here before, but I'm accustomed to traveling about the prairie, where trails are scarce. You don't look daunted."

There was a hint of pleasurable excitement in his companion's laugh.

"Oh," she replied, "adventures appeal to me, and I've never met with any. For three years since my brother left, I've led a life of drudgery; and before that, half the pleasures I might have had were denied me by an accident."

Recognizing a kindred nature, Kermode looked sympathetic. She was evidently alluding to her lameness, which must prove a heavy handicap to a girl of the active, sanguine temperament he thought she possessed.

"In a way, it was a great adventure for you to come out here alone over the new road," he said.

"I thought so last night," she confessed with a smile. "When I reached the settlement and found I could get no farther, I was really scared. Now, however, all my fears have gone. I suppose it's the sunshine and this glorious air."

"Well, we had better get on. I'm afraid you'll have to walk a while."

She let him lift her down, with no sign of prudishness or coquetry, and he led the horse uphill while she followed. Her attitude pleased him, because he had no desire for philandering, although he was content to act as protector and guide. Still, while he adapted his pace to the girl's he thought about her. Her rather shabby attire and scanty baggage hinted that she had not been used to affluence; but she showed signs of possessing a vigorous, well-trained mind, and he decided that she must have been a teacher.

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When they reached the top of the ascent, she mounted and they went on among scattered clumps of pines and across a tableland as fast as he could travel, because it seemed prudent to place as long a distance as possible between them and the settlement. He had left the place with a valuable horse and saddle which he had not paid for, and he was very dubious whether the livery-stable keeper would be satisfied with the promises he had left. Accordingly he only stopped for half an hour at noon; and evening was near when he helped the girl down and picketed the horse beside a small birch bluff, and set up the tent.

"There are provisions in my pack and you might lay out supper, but I don't think we'll make a fire to-night," he said. "I'll be back in about half an hour; I want to see what lies beyond the top of yonder ridge."

She let him go, and he climbed between slender birches to the summit of a long rise, where he lay down and lighted his pipe. From his lofty position he commanded a wide sweep of country—hills whose higher slopes were still bathed in warm light, valleys filled with cool blue shadow, straggling ranks of somber pines. The air was sharp and wonderfully bracing; the wilderness, across which he could wander where he would, lured him on. Irresponsible and impatient of restraint, as he was, he delighted in the openness and solitude. For all that, he concentrated his gaze on one particular strip of bare hillside. At its foot ran the gorge they had crossed, but it had now grown narrow and precipitous, a deep chasm wrapped in shadow. He did not think a horse could be led down into it, which was consoling, because if any pursuit had been

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attempted, it would follow the opposite side, near which a trail ran.

After a while his vigilance was rewarded, and he smiled when three very small figures of mounted men appeared on the hillslope. They were going back disappointed, and he did not think he had much to fear from them. Wages were high about the settlement, where everybody was busy, and the liveryman would, no doubt, find the search too costly to persist in. When the horsemen had vanished, he returned to the camp, and Miss Foster glanced at him keenly.

"Supper's quite ready; you have been some time," she said. "What did you see from the top?"

"Mountains, woods and valleys. They were well worth looking at in the sunset light."

"And what else? As you live in this country, you didn't go up for the view."

Kermode saw that she was suspicious, and thought her too intelligent to be put off with an excuse.

"I'll admit that I wasn't greatly surprised to see three men a long way off. They were riding back to the settlement and I dare say they were angry as well as tired."

"Ah!" she said. "You wouldn't light a fire, though you have a package of tea here and there's a spring near-by. You thought it wouldn't be prudent?"

"I did think something of the kind; but won't you begin your supper? What shall I hand you?"

"Wait a little. You haven't told me very much yet." Then her eyes sparkled with amusement. "Mr. Kermode, I'd better say that my brother will be responsible for the expenses of this journey. I suppose you haven't paid for the horse?"

"It's unfortunately true. The trouble was that your brother lives a long way off, and you led me to believe that your money was running out."

"I have," she said calmly, "fifty cents left."

Kermode began on a sandwich she handed him.

"And I've three or four dollars. You see our difficulty needed a drastic remedy."

"But you were at work on the railroad. I understand wages are high."

"That's so; but it's some time since the pay car came along."

"But you will get what is due you, when you go back?"

"Have another sandwich," said Kermode. "You have made them very well." Then seeing that she meant to have an answer, he added: "I'm not going back."

A little color crept into her face as she looked at him. Kermode had for a time led a dissipated life, but there had been a change during the last few months. He had practised abstinence, and in new surroundings found it easier than he had expected; severe labor had healed and hardened him. His brown skin was clear, his pale-blue eyes were bright and steady, his figure was spare and finely lined.

"So," she said, "you sacrificed your wages to assist a stranger?"

He made her a whimsical bow.

"I'd like to think we'll be better acquainted before we part."

"But what will you do now?"

"Oh," he responded lightly, "that's hardly worth talking about. I'll strike something. So long as you're pretty active there's generally work to be had, and when it grows monotonous you pull out and go on again."

Miss Foster mused.

"After all," she said, "life must have a good deal to offer a strong man with the ability to make the most of things. He can set off, when he likes, in search of new and interesting experiences."

"It has its drawbacks now and then," declared Kermode, smiling. "Anyway, you needn't imagine you're shut off from everything of the kind. You took a big risk and faced a startling change when you came out here."

"So I felt. Though I had misgivings, the thought of it drew me."

"I understand. You have courage, the greatest gift, and you felt circumscribed at home. No doubt, the love of adventure isn't confined to one sex. It's a longing many of us can't overcome; but it doesn't seem to meet with general sympathy, and it's apt to get one into difficulties."

"Yes," Miss Foster assented with some bitterness; "particularly a woman."

After that, she went on with her meal while dusk crept up about the lonely camp. The sky was pale green in the west and the hills stood out against it, black and calm; not a breath of wind was stirring and it was very still, except that out of the distance came the murmur of falling water. When the air grew damper, Kermode brought her a blanket which she wrapped about her shoulders and they talked on for an hour in a casual manner. Then he got up.

"You will be quite safe in the tent," he said. "I've found a comfortable berth in the wood. We'll get off as soon as it's light to-morrow."

He disappeared into the shadows and she noticed that he had left her the two blankets he had brought from the settlement. She hesitated about taking them both, but decided not to call him

back. A little later she entered the tent, while Kermode scraped out a hollow in a bank of fallen leaves and went to sleep.

The grass was white with frost when Miss Foster left the tent in the morning, but a fire of branches crackled cheerfully near-by and Kermode was busy with a frying-pan. A light cloud of smoke rose into the still, cold air, and day was breaking on the eastern horizon.

"This looks pretty good," he said, taking out a greasy cake and several strips of pork. "If you will make the tea, I'll water the horse."

He was back in a few minutes. His companion enjoyed the simple meal, and when it was finished they resumed the march. During most of the day their pathway led over high, treeless ridges which lay in bright sunshine, though a delicate haze dimmed the encircling hills. Then they dipped to a valley where they had trouble among the timber and the girl was forced to dismount. The winter gales had swept the forest and great pines lay piled in belts of tangled ruin, through which Kermode found it difficult to lead the horse, while as they floundered over branches and through crackling brush his companion's limp grew more pronounced. Afterward there were several rapid creeks to be forded, and Kermode was wet and Miss Foster very tired when they camped at sunset, in a grove of spruce. Little was said during the evening meal and soon after it was over the girl sought her tent, while Kermode found a resting-place among the withered sprays at the foot of a tree.

They spent the next morning toiling up a long ascent, and from its summit a prospect of majestic beauty burst upon them. The great peaks had grown nearer, the air was clear, and the girl sat, rapt, in the saddle, gazing at the vast snow-fields that glittered with ethereal brilliance, very high up against a cloudless sky. Then the wonderful blue coloring of the shadows streaking the white slopes caught her glance, and she found it unutterably lovely. Kermode, however, had an eye for other things and carefully searched the wide valley that stretched away beneath them.

"What are you looking for?" the girl asked at length.

"Smoke; I thought I saw a faint streak, but it has gone. I suppose you didn't notice it?"

"Oh no!" she told him with a smile. "I'm afraid I shouldn't have noticed such a commonplace thing, even if it had been very plain."

He made a sign of comprehension.

"Then what have you seen?" he asked.

"Unapproachable, stainless whiteness, touched with an unearthly glory that daunts the mind!" Then her expression changed. "But the sight is too overpowering to talk about. I would have been more useful had I looked for smoke, as that would mean a house."

Kermode nodded.

"We have stores enough for another meal or two and had better get on. I believe I've kept pretty near the line I was told to take, but I'd be glad to see the first ranch in the Drummond district by supper time."

They went down into the valley, struggling through belts of timber and clumps of brush, until they reached a broad expanse of grass broken by small bluffs. After camping for a meal, they pushed on steadily while the girl grappled with a growing fatigue, until the white peaks faded into dusky blue and the waste grew shadowy. Kermode had seen no sign of life and he was getting anxious when, as they approached a bluff, he pulled up the horse.

"Listen!" he exclaimed. "I think I heard something!"

There was silence for a moment or two, and then he caught a soft drumming and a rattle that might have been made by wheels.

"Yes," he said. "It's a team and wagon."

The sound grew plainer, and when Kermode shouted, an answer came out of the gathering darkness. Then a moving shape appeared from behind the bluff, and a minute or two later the newcomer pulled up his team.

"Well," he said, "what do you want?"

"Tom!" cried the girl excitedly.

The man sprang down, and Kermode needed no explanation. After his companion had dismounted and run forward, he stood quietly holding the horse, until she beckoned him.

"This is Mr. Kermode, who brought me here," she said. "My brother, Tom Foster."

"Indebted to you," responded the man. "I was driving home when you shouted; my place is about six miles off. If you'll follow, I'll take my sister in the wagon."

Kermode thought it better that she should explain the reason for their journey, and he got into the saddle and contented himself with keeping the vehicle in sight until it stopped at a wooden house that stood near a sod stable and rude log barn. When he entered the dwelling after putting up the horse, the lamp was lighted and the stove burning. He saw that Foster was a young man with a good-humored brown face.

"I understand that I owe you more than I thought at first," he said. "Helen seems to have been pretty awkwardly situated when you appeared on the scene. Sit down and smoke while I get supper."

They talked gaily during the meal.

"Is there any means of sending back the horse I brought?" Kermode asked after a while.

"I've been thinking about that," Foster replied.

"I have a neighbor who is going east on business. He'll strike the new line where you left it, and he'll be glad to have the horse."

Then they talked about other matters, but when the men sat smoking some time later, Foster said cordially:

"You'll stay here a while?"

Kermode said that he would remain a few days.

"Where will you make for then?" his host asked. "There's nothing doing round here except a little cattle-raising."

"For the mountains, I think. I hear the railroad people are busy in the passes; but I'll try to strike something softer than handling rails."

"I can fix that," Foster declared. "They've been advertising for haulage tenders—there are a lot of piles and building logs they want brought in. Now I've two good horses I've not much use for and I'd be glad to let you have them. You could bring them back when the frost stops work."

"Thanks," said Kermode. "What's your idea of shares?"

The rancher declared that he did not expect a share, but when Kermode insisted, they arrived at a satisfactory understanding, and soon after Helen appeared the party broke up.

Kermode spent three or four pleasant days with his new friends, and when he left the ranch one morning, leading two strong horses, Helen Foster walked with him some distance up the valley. She had not known him long enough to recognize his failings, which were plentiful, but his virtues were obvious, and she knew that she would miss him.

"So you are going out on the trail again," she said. "Where will it lead you?"

"That," he answered with a gay laugh, "is more than I can tell. No doubt, to fresh adventures and strange experiences."

"But you know your first stopping-place, the railroad camp. When you have finished your work there, you could come here again and rest a while."

"No," he said, more gravely; "I'll send your brother his horses, but I don't think I'll come back. It's nice to feel that we have been pretty good friends, but it might spoil any pleasant impression I'm leaving if you saw too much of me. Besides, I'm a wanderer; the long trail beckons."

"It runs through swamps and many rough places into the lonely wilds. Aren't you afraid of weariness?"

Kermode smiled, falling into her mood.

"You may remember that there are compensations," he said; "glimpses of glory on the untrodden heights. It's true that one never gets there, but they lead one on."

"But you can see them from the valley."

"No; the farmer's eyes are fixed on the furrow; he must follow the plow. His crop and his stock are nearer him; he cannot see past them. The wanderer's mind is free."

"When you had that glimpse of glory, you turned away and looked for household smoke."

"There you have me," he laughed. "Inconsistent, wasn't it? But we're only human: one needs rest and food."

Helen changed the subject.

"Well," she declared, "I'm grateful; and if it's any comfort, you won't be forgotten."

He stopped the restive horses.

"That's good to hear," he told her. "But the ground is rough ahead and you have come some way."

"Good-by," she said, and gave him her hand.

He held it for a moment, and then, getting into the saddle, turned and swung off his hat. After that he rode on into the waste, leading one horse; and Helen Foster watched him for a while before she went back, slowly and thoughtfully, to the ranch.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MISSIONARY'S ALLY

On reaching the railroad camp, Kermode was engaged by the contractor to haul in logs cut in a neighboring forest for constructional purposes. The line ran into a wild valley, clinging to the rocks that formed one side of it, with a torrent brawling hoarsely among the stones beneath. Above rose vast slopes, streaked in some places with small firs, in others ground to a smooth scarp by sliding snow. Farther back were glaciers and a chain of glittering peaks.

The mouth of the valley had been laid out as the site of a future town, but so far it was occupied by rows of tents and rude wooden shacks, inhabited by the construction gangs. A large proportion of them were orderly, well-conducted men: industrious immigrants who had seized the first opportunity for getting work, small farmers attracted by high wages, skilled artisans. There were, however, some of a rougher type; and the undesirable element, was, as usual, well represented. On the whole, the camp was sober, largely because no licenses had been issued, though this did not prevent men who came up from other points from bringing liquor in, and the authorities suspected another source of supply.

Kermode had little trouble with his work, which he found profitable, and he rapidly made friends. Among them was a young Presbyterian missionary whom he met for the first time on the hillside, engaged on a squared log with a big jack-plane. He wore knee-boots and a threadbare suit of gray, while his hat had suffered from exposure to the weather. Kermode stopped his team near-by and the clergyman looked around.

"If you have a good eye, you might tell me whether this chamfer's running true," he said.

"You want a bit off here." Kermode laid his finger on the spot. "Except for that, it's good."

The clergyman sat down and pulled out a tobacco pouch.

"I'll attend to it presently, but I feel I'm entitled to a rest. Take a smoke; you're not paid on time."

"I'm not sure it would matter if I were." Kermode's eyes twinkled as he filled his pipe. "An idea of the kind you suggested doesn't go far in a construction camp, unless, of course, a foreman happens to be about. However, you made one rash statement, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid I make a good many," replied the clergyman good-humoredly. "But you are right. It would be very rash to claim all that one was entitled to; in other words, one's deserts. You're Mr. Kermode, I believe; you must know my name is Ferguson."

Kermode bowed.

"What are you going to do with this log?" he asked.

"It's to be a door-post in the new church. I wonder if you would be willing to haul it in?"

Kermode said that he would be glad to do so.

"You encourage me to go a little farther," Ferguson continued. "Building a church is a costly proposition."

"So I should imagine; I can't speak from experience." Kermode was generally liberal, and he took out some money. "I think you ought to let me off with this, as I don't belong to your flock."

"It's a generous contribution; better than the excuse. There are, I may remind you, many kinds of sheep, and the outward difference is often marked. Since, you're from the old country, you can take the little Cheviot and the ponderous Shropshire as examples. You see the drift of this?"

"That they're all sheep. I've noticed, however, that they wear a good many different brands."

"Ah, the pity of it! After all, a shepherd has his human weaknesses; perhaps he's too fond of using his private mark or the stamp of his guild."

"That," Kermode smiled, "is a handsome admission. Anyway, you have no rival in shepherding the boys here; and taking us all round, we need it. But can you raise building funds on the spot?"

"Oh, no! I went to Ontario this summer and spent a month begging from people who have very little to spare. The response was generous—I've a carload of shiplap lumber coming out; but you may understand how that adds to one's responsibility."

"It's obvious. I suppose you know you're up against a strong opposition?"

"That's true, unfortunately." The clergyman looked thoughtful. "There's one group, the Mitcham crowd, who would like to run me out. The fellow's piling up money by smuggling in liquor; he and his friends are depraving the camp. They must be stopped."

"It's a big thing for one man to undertake. It may wreck your mission."

Ferguson's eyes sparkled.

"The risk mustn't count. One can't shut one's eyes to what those fellows are doing. But I want backers; will you give me your support?"

"That's more than I can consistently promise. However, I'll look on and see you get fair play. If the opposition hit below the belt, I may take a hand in."

"Thanks," responded Ferguson, and Kermode went on with his team.

He was favorably impressed by the young missionary and kept the promise he had made, though it now and then involved him in difficulties with his comrades. The carload of lumber duly arrived, and with the help of men who gave their labor after their hard day's work was done, the

church was raised by the light of flaring blast-lamps which the contractor allowed. By day, Ferguson worked at it alone, and the building steadily grew into shape; but as the weather got colder trouble broke out in camp. Men engaged on the higher portions of the line were laid off by snow and frost, and when the cost of their board ran on, their tempers got short. There were dismissals, and as working hours diminished, the gangs were driven harder. Friends began to quarrel over games of chance, and the violence they displayed was often accounted for by indulgence in smuggled liquor.

Ferguson, however, was making progress: gaining staunch adherents here, tacit sympathizers there, though the opposition saw to it that several had reason to regret their joining him. Kermode took no open part in the struggle, but watched it interestedly.

At length, one nipping morning, he left his tent with a shiver before it was light and busied himself about his horses with a lantern in their rude branch and bark shelter. Winter was beginning in earnest, and a bitter wind had raged all night, covering gorge and hillside deep with snow, but this would make his hauling easier when he had broken out a trail. He plowed through the snow in the darkness, and the threatening dawn had broken when he came down the hillside with the ends of three or four big logs trailing behind his jumper-sled. The shacks and tents were white in the hollow, over which there floated a haze of thin, blue smoke; the rapid creek that flowed past them showed in leaden-colored streaks among the ice; and somber pines rose in harsh distinctness from the hillside.

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Then the half-covered frame of the church caught Kermode's eye. Something was wrong with it. The skeleton tower looked out of the perpendicular; and on his second glance its inclination seemed to have increased. The snow, however, was clogging the front of his sled and he set to work to scrape it off. While he was thus engaged there was a sharp, ripping sound, and then a heavy crash, and swinging around he saw that the tower had collapsed. Where it had stood lay a pile of broken timber, and planks and beams were strewn about the snow.

Kermode urged his team downhill, and when a group of men came running up to meet him, he recognized Ferguson some distance in front of them. The man's face showed how heavy the blow had been.

"It looks bad; I'm very sorry," said Kermode when they reached the wrecked building.

"I'm afraid we can't get things straight until spring and I don't know how I'll raise the money then," declared Ferguson. "A good deal of the lumber seems destroyed, and I've levied pretty heavily on every friend I've got." Then he tried to assume a philosophic tone. "Well, I suppose this is the result of impatience; there were spikes I didn't put in because I couldn't wait for them and some tenons were badly cut. It blew hard last night and there must have been a big weight of snow on the new shingling."

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"I don't think you're right," Kermode said dryly, and turned to a bridge-carpenter who stood near-by. "What's your idea?"

"The thrust of what roof they'd got up wouldn't come on the beams that gave," rejoined the man. "There's something here I don't catch on to."

"Just so," said Kermode. "Suppose you take a look at the king-posts and stringers. We'll clear this fallen lumber out of the way, boys."

They set to work, and in an hour the sound and damaged timber had been sorted into piles. Then, when the foundations were exposed, Kermode and the carpenter examined a socket in which a broken piece of wood remained.

"This has been a blamed bad tenon," the mechanic remarked. "The shoulders weren't butted home."

"I'm afraid that's true; I made it," Ferguson admitted; but Kermode, laying his finger on the rent wood, looked up at his companion.

"For all that, should it have given way as it has done?"

"I'll tell you better when we find the beam it belonged to."

It took them some time; and then the carpenter turned to Ferguson.

"You marked this tenon off before you cut it. Did you run the saw past your line?"

"No," said Ferguson with a start; "that's certain. I dressed up to the mark afterward with a chisel."

The carpenter looked at Kermode meaningly.

"Guess you're right. See here"—he indicated the broken stump—"there's a saw-cut running well inside his mark. Now that tenon was a bit too small, anyway, and when they'd notched her, she hadn't wood enough left to hold up the weight."

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There were exclamations from the others standing round in the snow, but Kermode glanced at Ferguson. His face grew darkly red, but with an effort he controlled his anger.

"Who can have done this thing?" he asked.

"There's no direct evidence to show, but I've my suspicions," Kermode said. "It's dangerous to interfere with people's business, particularly when it isn't quite legitimate. You must have known you ran a risk."

"Do you think I should have let that stop me?" Ferguson asked with sparkling eyes.

"That's a matter of opinion," Kermode rejoined. "Perhaps you had better wait and think the thing over when you cool off. I've some logs to haul in."

He moved off with his team and went on with his work all day, but when night came he attended, by special invitation, a meeting held in a tent that flapped and strained in the boisterous wind. Half a dozen men were present, steady and rather grim toilers with saw and shovel, and though two or three had been born in Ontario, all were of Scottish extraction. Their hard faces wore a singularly resolute expression when Kermode entered.

"Boys," he said, "before we begin I'd better mention that taking a part in a church assembly is a new thing to me."

One or two of them frowned at this: his levity was not in keeping with the occasion.

"Ye're here, and we'll listen to your opinion, if ye hae one," said their leader. "Jock is for raiding Mitcham's shack and firing him and the other scoundrel out of camp."

"I see objections. Mitcham has a good many friends, and if he held you off, you'd have made a row for nothing, besides compromising Mr. Ferguson."

"There's reason in that," another remarked.

"Then," continued Kermode, "you can't connect Mitcham with the wrecking of your church."

"I'm thinking the connection's plain enough for us. Weel, we ken——"

"Knowing a thing is not sufficient; you want proof, and if you go ahead without it, you'll put yourselves in the wrong. This is not the time to alienate popular sympathy."

"Weel," said the leader, "hae ye a plan?"

Kermode lighted his pipe and after a few moments answered thoughtfully:

"I hear that Mitcham, Long Bill, and Libby will take the trail to-morrow with Bill's team and sled—he's laid off work because of the snow. They were away three or four days once or twice before, and when they came back a number of the boys got on a high-class jag and there was trouble in camp. I dare say you can put the things together?"

"Sure," declared one who had not spoken yet. "Where do we butt in?"

"This is my suggestion—half a dozen picked men will meet Mitcham coming home and seize the sled. If its load is what I suspect, somebody will ride off for Sergeant Inglis on my horse, and you'll have a guard ready to bring the sled to camp and hold the liquor until the police arrive. I'm inclined to think you can leave the rest to them."

A harsh smile crept into the faces of the listeners, and their leader nodded gravely.

"We cannot do better. It will work."

The plan was duly put into execution, and one bitter night Kermode and several others plodded up a frozen creek. It had been snowing hard for the last few hours and he could scarcely see his companions through the driving flakes, while the wail of the wind in the pines above drowned the soft sound of their footsteps. Kermode was tired and very cold, and could not have explained clearly what had induced him to accompany the expedition. Adventure, however, always appealed to him, and he was sorry for Ferguson, who had, he thought, been very shabbily treated. Kermode had a fellow-feeling for anybody in difficulties.

After a while the snow ceased and they could dimly see the dark pines climbing the steep banks that shut them in. It was obvious that if Mitcham's party had entered the deep hollow, they could not well get out of it. The expedition had only to go on or wait until it met them; but Kermode did not envy the man whose duty it would be to ride across the open waste to the lonely post where Sergeant Inglis might be found. Resting, however, was out of the question. They must move to keep from freezing, and though the snow began again, they plodded on, with heads lowered to meet the blast that drove the stinging flakes into their faces.

At length the leader stopped and raised his hand. Standing still, they heard a muffled sound that might have been made by the fall of hoofs ahead, and they hastily turned toward a clump of spruce. The trees concealed them and the sound grew nearer, until they could see the dim shapes of men and horses moving through the driving flakes. Then they left cover and spread out across the creek. The team stopped and an angry voice came out of the snow:

"What's this? What do you want?"

"Yon sled and its load," the leader concisely replied.

"Stand clear!" cried the voice. "Go right ahead, Bill!"

A man sprang forward and seized the near horse's head.

"Stop where you are!" he cried. "We're not looking for trouble, but we want the sled!"

Two others ran out from behind the horses, but the leader of the expedition raised his hand.

"It's six to three, Mitcham, and that's long odds. Ye'll get sled and team when ye claim them in camp. Lift a fist and ye'll give the boys the excuse they're wearying for. I'll ask nothing better."

Mitcham turned to his companions.

"They've got us, boys. Leave them to it," he said.

"Lead the horses, Kermode," directed one of the party, and the team moved on again while the

leader, walking beside the sled, hastily examined its load. Several small cases lay beneath a tarpaulin.

What became of Mitcham and his friends did not appear, for they were left behind in the snow; but the night grew wilder and the cold more biting. For minutes together they could see nothing through the cloud of flakes that drove furiously past them; it was hard to urge the tired horses forward through the deeper drifts and all were thankful when they came to reaches which the savage wind had swept almost clear. They could not, however, leave the creek without their knowing it, and they had a fringe of willows, into which they stumbled now and then, as guide. When, at length, the gorge opened out, there was a high ridge to be crossed, and they had cause to remember the ascent. The route led up through belts of brush and between scattered pines, and leaving it inadvertently every now and then, they got entangled among the scrub. Two of them plodded at the stumbling horses' heads, four pushed the sled, and at the top of every steeper slope every one stopped and gasped for breath. It was now near dawn and they had marched all night after a day of heavy toil.

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The ascent made, they went down the hill at an awkward run, the horses slipping with the sled pressing on them, colliding with small trees, smashing through matted brush, until they heard a hail. It was answered and another body of men appeared and escorted them into camp. Drowsy voices called to them and here and there a man looked out as they passed the lines of shacks and tents, but no word was spoken until they reached their leader's cabin. The cases were carried in and while two of the company took the horses away the others were given hot coffee and afterward sat down to wait for morning. It was very cold and icy draughts crept in, but they were undisturbed until daybreak, when there was a cry outside:

"Here's Mitcham wanting to talk to you!"

A weary man, white with snow, entered and looked eagerly round the shack.

"I've come for those cases," he said, pointing to the pile.

"What right have you to them?" Kermode inquired.

"What right?" cried the other. "They're my property; I bought them!"

Kermode smiled.

"You hear that; you'll remember it, boys."

Mitcham's face grew dark as he saw the trap he had fallen into.

"Anyhow, I want them," he muttered. "You won't be wise to keep them."

"Now see here," said one of the party. "We have a dozen men round this shack, and if there's trouble, we have only to call for more. Every boy knows what to do. Strikes me it wouldn't pay you to bring your hobos along."

Mitcham looked at the others and saw that they were resolute. His enemies were masters of the situation. Bluster and threats would not serve him; but it was Kermode's amusement which caused him the most uneasiness.

"Well," he said, "keep them while you can. You're going to be sorry for this!"

He went out and several of the men broke into a laugh. They had, however, a problem to face later, when they received a sharp message from the foreman demanding their immediate return to work. All were willing to lose a day's pay, but the prompt dismissal which would follow disobedience was a more serious matter.

"The trouble is that if we leave the shack without a guard, Mitcham will steal his liquor back," declared one.

"I think I had better see Mr. Morgan," Kermode suggested, and they let him go.

The young engineer he interviewed listened with a thoughtful air to the request that several of the workmen should be given a day's leave.

"It would be awkward to let these fellows quit," the engineer protested.

"If you would tell the foreman to send the boys I'll mention ahead up the track, so they couldn't get back before evening, and give two of us a day off, it would get over the difficulty."

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When he heard the names the engineer looked hard at Kermode.

"Has this request any connection with the collapse of Mr. Ferguson's church?"

"It has, indirectly. I'm sorry I can't give you an explanation."

"Try to understand how I'm situated. I may have my sympathies, but I can't be a partizan; my business is to see you do your work. Suppose I do as you suggest, will it make any trouble in the camp? I want a straight answer."

"No," said Kermode. "I give you my word that what we mean to do will lead to quietness and good order."

"Then I'll have the boys you mentioned sent up the track; they're a crowd I've had my eye on. One of your friends and you can lie off."

Kermode thanked him and went back to the shack, where he kept watch with the leader of the Presbyterians until two police troopers rode up late in the afternoon. They opened the cases and heard Kermode's story.

"You declare the man Mitcham claimed this liquor as his property?" Sergeant Inglis asked.

"He said he'd bought it. We're ready to swear to that, and we can give you the names of several more who heard him."

"I'll take them down. Where's Mitcham?"

They told him and he closed his notebook.

"You may be sent for from Edmonton later. Don't let these cases out of your sight until Private Cooper calls for them."

He went out and came back later with the trooper and a teamster they had hired, who loaded the cases on a sled. Sergeant Inglis, however, sat still in his saddle, with a watchful eye on Mitcham and another man who stood, handcuffed, at his horse's side. When the police had ridden off with their prisoners, Morgan, the engineer, sent for Kermode.

"I've seen the sergeant and he gave me an outline of the affair," he said. "It was cleverly thought out—I suppose the idea was yours?"

"I can't deny it," returned Kermode modestly.

"Well," said the other, "see that your friends and you begin work as usual to-morrow."

During the next two weeks Ferguson made some progress in repairing the damage to his church. He found several helpers, now that his strongest opponent had been removed. The weather, however, grew more severe and as the frost interfered with operations, men were freely dismissed. One day Morgan and the contractor's clerk sat talking in the latter's office.

"I'll have to cut out two or three teams," he said. "I don't know whom I ought to fire."

"Kermode," Morgan advised promptly.

The clerk looked surprised.

"Foreman reports him as a pretty good teamster. He strikes me as smart and capable," he objected.

"He is. In fact, that's the trouble. I like the man, but you had better get rid of him."

"You're giving me a curious reason."

Morgan smiled.

"I expect our plans for the winter may lead to some trouble with the boys; such work as we can carry on is going to be severe. Now do you think it prudent to provide them with a highly intelligent leader?"

"Guess you're right," the clerk agreed. "He'll have to go, though I'm sorry to part with him."

"I'll send him to another job nearer the coast," said Morgan.

The next day Kermode was informed of this decision and took it good-humoredly. Before leaving the camp he spent an evening with Ferguson, who expressed keen regret at his departure.

"I have an idea that I may have got you into trouble, and it hurts me," the minister said.

Kermode laughed in a reassuring manner.

"It's likely that you're wrong; but I'm not the first man who has found a righteous cause unprofitable."

"That," Ferguson returned gravely, "is in one sense very true."

They sat up late, talking; and the next morning Kermode found means of sending Foster's horses back, and then resumed his journey.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PASSAGE OF THE MOUNTAINS

Kermode had been gone a fortnight when Prescott reached the camp and heard from Ferguson and others of his latest exploit. He smiled as he listened to their stories, but that he should find people willing to talk about the man did not surprise him. Kermode was not likely to pass unnoticed: his talents were of a kind that seized attention. Where he went there was laughter and sometimes strife; he had a trick of winning warm attachment, and even where his departure was not regretted he was remembered.

Ferguson insisted on taking Prescott in, for his comrade's sake, and late one evening he sat talking with him beside the stove. His house was rudely put together, shingle-roofed and walled with shiplap boards that gave out strong resinous odors. The joints were not tight and stinging draughts crept in. Deep snow lay about the camp and the frost was keen.

"I can't venture to predict Kermode's movements," said the clergyman. "It was his intention to make for a camp half-way to the coast, but he may change his mind long before he gets there."

"Yes," Prescott replied; "that's the kind of man he is."

Ferguson smiled.

"You and Kermode strike me as differing in many ways; yet you seem strongly attached to him."

"That's true," Prescott assented. "I can't see that I owe him anything, and he once led me into a piece of foolishness that nobody but himself could have thought of. I knew the thing was crazy, but I did it when he urged me, and I've regretted it ever since. Still, when I meet the fellow I expect I shan't have a word of blame for him."

"He's a man I had a strong liking for, though on many matters our points of view were opposite. However, I dare say it's something to be thankful for that we're not all made alike."

"Kermode's unique," Prescott explained. "I'm of the plodding kind and I find that consequences catch me up. Kermode's different: he plunges into recklessness and the penalty falls on somebody else."

"You don't mean by his connivance?"

"Never! It's the last thing I meant. Kermode never shirks. Bring a thing home to him and he'll face it, but somehow he generally escapes. There's the matter I mentioned—he and I played a fool trick, and while he rambles about the country, flinging a foreman down an embankment, assisting a lady in distress, posing as a temperance reformer, in his usual inconsequent way, I'm deep in trouble, and so are other people who don't deserve it. So far I've always reached the scene of his latest exploit soon after he had left; but the man must be found."

Ferguson laughed.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Follow him to the Pacific, if necessary. As the country isn't opened up, he can't get off the line."

"I'm afraid you're going to have a very rough journey. The track's surveyed and blazed; they're working at it in sections, but there are big gaps where nothing has been done yet, and they have been withdrawing a large number of men. Crossing the mountains is a tough proposition in the winter."

"Kermode didn't seem afraid of it."

"He started two weeks ago, when there had been less snow. You'll find it difficult to get through the passes now."

"Anyway," declared Prescott, "I have to get through."

Ferguson pondered the simple answer. It was, he thought, typical of the man, and the contrast between him and his friend became more forcible. Kermode exercised a curious charm. His gay, careless nature made him excellent company, and he had a strain of somewhat eccentric genius; but he was irresponsible and erratic, one could not depend on him. The Canadian was of different temperament: slower, less subject to impulse, but more stubborn and more consistent. When dealing with him one would know what to expect. He would reason out a purpose and then unwaveringly adhere to it.

"Well," the clergyman said, "you may have to cross a big province; and though it's warmer as you get down to the coast, the weather's often nearly arctic among the ranges, while it's only here and there that you'll have a chance to find shelter. It's a trip that's not to be undertaken rashly. You'll need a fur coat, among other things, and I think I can get you one. You had better take a couple of days' rest so as to start fresh. And now it's time for bed."

Prescott spent the next day with him and left the camp at daybreak on the second morning. He wore a long coat, from which the fur had peeled in patches, and carried a heavy pack besides a small ax. His boots were dilapidated, but he had been unable to replace them. There was sharp frost and when he boarded a construction train he looked back at the camp with keen regret; he shrank from the grim wilds ahead. A haze of smoke hung over the clustering shacks, lights still blinked among them, and already the nipping air was filled with sounds of activity. Then the locomotive shrieked and he turned his face toward the lonely white hills as the cars moved forward with a jerk. It was bitterly cold, though he lay down out of the wind behind the load of rails, where hot cinders rattled about him and now and then stung his face.

At noon the train stopped. Alighting with cramped limbs, Prescott saw that the rails went no farther. A few shacks stood forlornly upon the hillside, a frozen river wound like a white riband through the gorge beneath, and ahead lay a sharply rising waste of rock and snow. His path led across it, and after a word or two with the men on the line he began his journey, breaking through the thin, frozen crust. The sounds behind him grew fainter and ceased; the trail of dingy smoke which had followed him melted away, and he was alone in the wilderness. His course was marked, however, by a pile of stones here, a blazed tree there, and he plodded on all day. When night came he found a hollow free from snow beneath a clump of juniper, and lay awake, shivering under his blankets. White peaks and snow-fields were wrapped in deathly silence: there was not even the howl of a prowling wolf or the splash of falling water.

Rising at dawn, almost too cold to move, he could find no dry wood to make a fire and had serious trouble in getting on his frozen boots; and after a hurried meal he set out again. It was

some time before he felt moderately warm, but with a short rest at noon, he held on until evening was near, when he camped in a deep rift among the rocks filled with small firs. Here he found dry branches, and made his supper, sitting between a sheltering stone and a welcome fire. Soon afterward, he lay down and slept until the piercing cold awakened him near dawn. The fire had burned out to a few red embers; he had some trouble in stirring it into life, and it was bright daylight when he resumed his journey.

He was too tired and generally too cold to retain any clear impression of the next few days' march. There were ranks of peaks above, glittering at times against an intensely blue sky, but more often veiled in leaden cloud, while rolling vapor hid their lower slopes. He skirted tremendous gorges, looked up great hollows filled with climbing trees, followed winding valleys, and at length limped into sight of a lonely camp at the foot of a crag. The light was fading when he reached it, though a lurid sunset glowed behind the black firs on the crest of a ridge, and the place had a desolate look. Most of the shacks were empty, there were rings of branches with a litter of old cans about them where tents had been pitched, but a few toiling figures were scattered about a strip of track. It was comforting to see them, but Prescott was too jaded to notice what they were doing.

Entering a shanty, roughly built of ties and galvanized iron, he found a stove burning, and a Chinaman who told him that supper would be ready soon. After a while the men came in and, asking very few questions, gave him a share of their meal; then he was shown a rude bed of fir branches and swamp hay and told he could sleep there. Prescott lay down and lighted his pipe and then looked about for a while. The place was dimly lighted and filled with rank tobacco smoke, through which he saw the blurred figures of his new companions. Some of them were playing cards under a lamp, some were disputing in harsh voices, and now and then there was a burst of laughter. Once or twice a man went out and an icy draught swept through the shed, but except for that it was delightfully warm. Soon Prescott's pipe dropped from his hand and, failing in a drowsy attempt to find it, he went to sleep.

At breakfast the next morning he learned that a man answering Kermode's description had spent a night there eight or nine days ago. That showed that he was gaining, and he forced his pace all day. At sunset he made a fire beside a frozen lake, and after three or four days of arduous toil reached another camp. From the few men remaining there he learned that Kermode had left the spot a week earlier with a companion whose work had been interfered with by the frost. It was understood that they intended to examine a mineral vein the railroad hand had discovered in a valley some distance off, and when Prescott had ascertained where it lay he set off on their trail. The camp was well supplied with provisions and he bought a quantity.

He felt more cheerful now. It looked as if the end of his long search were near, since there was every reason to believe he would join the men before they could test the claim. On the second day he laboriously ascended a steep slope leading out of a valley he had followed, a broken line of footprints running upward in front of him. This seemed to indicate that the great ridge ahead could be crossed, though when he glanced at the ramparts of dark rock the task looked insuperable. Prescott knew nothing of mountaineering, but he judged that Kermode's companion must be accustomed to the ranges.

The slope grew sharper, there seemed to be an unbroken wall of rock ahead; but, climbing higher, Prescott saw a small smooth track running up the barrier. It was obviously a gully filled with snow and its steepness suggested that the ascent of it might prove beyond his powers; but the footprints led on to where it began. After following them to the spot, Prescott sat down on a stone to gather breath. He looked upward with a sinking heart. The hollow was deep and narrow—a cleft in the vast ridge of rock, which was glazed with ice. In places it looked precipitous, but there seemed to be no way of working round the flank of the mountain. Then Prescott noticed that the snow was pitted with small holes, about two feet apart, from which he concluded that the prospectors had carried a grubhoe, a tool resembling a mountaineer's ice-ax. He might get up by using these footholds.

Before starting he carefully adjusted his pack, and slung the ax where it seemed least likely to do him an injury. Then he found that by laying his mittened hands in the holes above he could steady himself while he found a fresh support for his feet, and for a while he made progress, though the labor of carrying up his load became intense. Coming to a fang of rock which offered a precarious seat, he stopped and wondered how he was to get up the rest of the way. It seemed a vast distance to the top, and he was already distressed by a form of exertion to which he was unaccustomed. Bright sunshine rested on the jagged ridge above, but the gully lay in shadow; and, growing cold, the man went on again. The next few minutes passed uneventfully, except that he made a dangerous slip; and then a stone rushed past him and he heard a sharp crash below. This was a risk he had not counted on. Looking up anxiously, he saw some snow coming down. There was not much of it, but it was traveling ominously fast and he was right in its path. He dared not leave the steps to seek the shelter of the rocks. Driving in his feet to secure a better hold; he waited, wondering whether he would be swept away and hurled down to the bottom with broken bones.

The sliding snow was close upon him; he saw that it was spinning and of a flat round shape, not a ball as he had expected, and then, while he dug in his hands and stiffened every muscle to resist the shock, he received a heavy blow on his lowered shoulder and a wet mass was flung violently into his face. He held on, however, and without looking around, heard the snow rush on down the gully beneath him. After he had climbed a few yards, it seemed possible to reach a projecting spur of rock, and when he had carefully kicked out a hold for one foot he made the

attempt. He had scarcely reached the shelter of the rock when there was a sharp crash above and a great stone leaped by.

Prescott found that he could maintain his position fairly comfortably and he lighted his pipe and sat still to rest and consider, while the downward rush of another stone gave him food for thought. He believed he was half-way up, and after the exertions he had made, it was unthinkable that he should go back and seek another route; besides, he doubted whether he could get down without slipping. It seemed quite as perilous to go on, until he reasoned from the state of the snow, which was not deeply scored, that the stones did not come down continuously. Perhaps the warmth of the sun, helped by a soft chinook wind that had set in had loosened them; but the light was fading off part of the ridge and if he waited a while, the discharge might cease. The trouble was that he was getting very cold. He smoked another pipe, and as he heard no further crashes, he cautiously ventured out and regained the deepest part of the gully. His joints ached, his muscles felt sore, but there was a break in the rocks some distance higher up and he determined to climb to it.

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The effort was severe, but he reached the spot, breathless, and carefully looked about. The sunshine had now vanished from the crest of the rocks and he supposed the stones would soon freeze fast again, but there would be only another hour or two of daylight and he must gain a place of safety before it grew dark. An incautious movement would precipitate him from his insecure refuge and he could not contemplate his remaining there through the night. Then he grew angry with Kermode.

It was difficult to believe this was the easiest way into the valley where the railroad man had made his discovery; the latter, being used to the ranges, had, no doubt, taken it to shorten the distance, and Kermode should have objected. Kermode, however, never paused to think; he cheerfully plunged into the first folly that appealed to him and left other people to bear the consequences. Then, having rested, Prescott saw that there were weak points in this reasoning, since the man he was following must have climbed the slope, and, what was more, that his irritation led to no result. He could consider such matters when he had reached the summit, and in order to do so, he must get on at once.

No more stones came down, but after Prescott had gone some distance a fresh difficulty confronted him. The gully was getting steeper, and the holes had disappeared; he supposed that the snow had softened in the sunshine earlier in the day and slipping down had filled up the recesses. He had, however, discovered that one could kick through the hard crust and make a hole to stand in, provided it were done carefully, and he went up by this means, wondering whether his boots would hold out until he reached the top, and stopping every few yards for breath. It was exhausting work after a long march and he was heavily loaded, but it could not be shirked, and he crawled up, watching the distance shorten foot by foot. Once a step broke away and he slid back a yard before he brought up with hands buried deep in the snow and the perspiration streaming from him in his terror. Still, he was slowly mounting; and at last, worn out and breathless, he reached the narrow ridge of crag and looked down with keen relief on a long slope to a valley filled with forest.

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In front there was a glorious vista of peaks that shone in the evening light, but Prescott was in no mood to think of them. He must get down to the trees, where he could camp in comfort, before darkness fell. Rising after a few minutes' rest, he made the descent and, as dusk crept round him, lighted his fire among the sheltering trunks.

The next day he followed the valley through thick timber and withered underbrush which tore his clothes and delayed his march. There were fallen trunks with spreading branches to be scrambled over, and tangles of thorny canes, but he was cheered by signs that somebody had passed on ahead of him not long before. Later, the forest died out and the bottom of the hollow was strewn with sharp-edged stones, which threatened to tear his worn boots from his feet, and which added seriously to his toil. It was, however, impossible that the prospectors had climbed the crags that hemmed him in, and believing they could not be far in front of him, he held on until late in the afternoon.

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At length he came to a wider stretch, out of which a ravine that looked accessible led, but he gave little thought to it. There were a few small trees about and one of them had recently been felled. He could see the white chips and the place where a fire had burned. A meat-can lay nearby and when Prescott picked it up he found the few fragments adhering to it quite fresh. The men he sought had camped there, but he began to grow anxious, for he could see no signs of them. Laying down his load, he made a hasty examination of the locality and found a spot where the face of a crag was marked by a streak of different material. It was rent in one place, heavy fragments were scattered about, and Prescott saw that they had been blown out with giant-powder.

For a few minutes he eagerly proceeded with his search, but he could find no blankets or provision cache, and when he saw footprints leading toward the ravine the truth dawned on him. The prospectors had left the spot and were not coming back; once more he had arrived too late. It was a cruel disappointment and he sat down in black dejection, looking heavily about. The high summits were wrapped in leaden cloud, the lower rocks towered above him, rugged and forbidding, and a mournful wind wailed through the gorge.

With an effort he forced himself to think. He had provisions for only a day or two; one of the prospectors was obviously an expert mountaineer, which led Prescott to believe that they would travel faster than he was capable of doing. It would be the height of rashness to push on farther into the wilds without a guide, and the first fall of snow would blot out any trail the others might

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have left. Reason warned him that he must turn back; but it was unthinkable that he should descend the gully. He determined to climb the ravine on the morrow.

Growing cold, he fell to work with the ax, and soon had a fire burning in a hollow among the rocks.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEFEAT

The next morning Prescott awakened in the dark and set to work, shivering, to rekindle his fire. Day broke with a transitory brightness while he had breakfast and soon afterward he entered the ravine. It was steep, and filled with ice in places, but freshly dislodged stones and scratches on the rocks showed him that the prospectors had gone that way. The ascent was difficult: it cost him a tense effort now and then to gain a slippery ledge or to scramble up a slab, and he had frequently to stop and consider how he could best force a passage.

He was tired and damp with perspiration when he reached the top and met an icy wind that swept across a tableland. The high plain was strewn with rocky fragments, the peaks above were lost in vapor, but he saw by a glance at the watery sun that it ran roughly west; and footprints led across it with an inclination toward the south. This was comforting, because the line of track ran to the south, and if he could strike that, it would serve as a guide; moreover it confirmed Prescott's conclusion that Kermode, who had evidently found the mineral vein worthless, would hold on toward the sea. He was not the man to haunt familiar ground when a wide, newly opened country lay before him.

Then a few stinging flakes struck Prescott's face, the pale sunshine was blotted out, and a savage blast drove him back to the shelter of the ravine. For an hour he sat, shivering, among the rocks while the gorge was swept by snow. When it ceased he came out; but there was no sign of a footprint now and, to make things worse, the new snow was soft. But he plodded through it, heading southwest, so as to strike the track again, a little farther on.

He spent the day on the high ground; at times toilsomely picking a way across banks of stones buried in snow that hid the dangerous gaps between them. Now and then he sank through the treacherous covering and plunged into a hollow, at the risk of breaking his leg; but walking was easier between these tracts, and when evening came he reached a few large fallen rocks, among which he camped and lay awake, half frozen, without a fire. Starting as soon as day broke, he felt that he must make the surveyed line before dark. He was growing afraid of the white desolation and wanted to get into touch with something that would lead him to the haunts of men.

It was afternoon when he came to a great dip. A valley lay beneath him with a frozen river winding through its depths, and he felt convinced that it was one the track would follow. The trouble, however, was to get down, for the hillside fell away in a vast scarp, broken here and there by dark crags that showed through the snow. There was a belt of timber a long way down, but the slope was too steep for him to reach it, and he walked along the summit in search of a spot from which the descent could be made, until he came to a long declivity that looked a little less sharp. Then, strapping his fur coat on his pack, he kicked a step in the snow and began to climb down, facing inward toward the bank.

For a while, he made steady progress; and then the snow grew harder. Its surface had melted and frozen again, resulting in a crust that could scarcely be penetrated. He thought about his ax, but he could not see how he could use it in cutting steps beneath him without falling down, and this was not the place for hazardous experiments. He went on very cautiously, finding the work of kicking hollows for his feet extremely severe, until, when he supposed that half an hour had passed, he drove his toes in deep and lay down to rest. On looking up, he seemed to have come a very short distance, and when he glanced below he felt appalled at the length of the declivity he must still creep down. His limbs ached; his mittens were worn and his hands badly numbed; and one boot was coming to pieces.

The descent, however, must be continued, and he began to move again, very warily. Presently he found he could not break through the crust with his foot. Clinging hard to his handhold, he lowered himself to feel for a softer spot. His toe went in a little way; he ventured to trust to the slight support; but as he did so the treacherous snow broke beneath him. For a few tense moments his numbed fingers held him to the slope. He tried in terror to kick another hole; the attempt failed, his hands slipped away, and he began to slide downward, the snow driving up into his face. The pace grew rapidly faster; he could not keep himself straight, but slid on his side; then his pack caught something that turned him farther round so that his head was lowest. He could see nothing; his pace grew frightful, and he drove on, unable to make the least effort.

How long this continued he had no idea. It was a terrifying experience; but at length, to his dull astonishment, his speed slackened suddenly and he stopped. He found that he was whole in

limb, and on getting up cautiously he was forced to the conclusion that he was little the worse for his rapid descent. His clothes were packed with snow, but it was easily shaken out. After recovering a little, he saw that he had brought up on a slope that fell less sharply and that it would be possible to walk down it without much trouble. The timber was close ahead, and he smiled as he remembered his horror; it looked as if he might have made the descent uninjured if he had calmly sat down and let himself go.

Moving downward among the trees, he had almost reached the bottom of the valley when he came upon a belt of rugged stones, and in picking a path across them slipped and fell. He was not much hurt, but when he went on again his foot felt sore and he was limping when he reached the river. One or two trees near it had been chopped, and a spur of rock lower down had its summit marked by a pole. He had reached the line of track, and he followed it west, having heard there was a camp farther on, though his informants did not know whether it was now occupied. It was, however, a relief to stop among a clump of spruce at dusk. When he had made a fire he examined his foot. There was no sign of injury except that ankle and instep were rather red, and he went to sleep reassured.

In the morning he was surprised to find that the foot was painful and that the back of his leg felt strained. He would have been tempted to remain in camp only that his provisions were nearly exhausted, and after a meager breakfast he resumed the march. The bottom of the valley was level, the timber thin, but there was a good deal of brush to be struggled through and before long he was forced to take to the winding river. By noon it cost him a determined effort to walk, for his foot was extremely painful and his leg getting sore. As he did not know how far off the camp was, it seemed prudent to save the food he had left, and he limped on, his lips tight-set.

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The snow-covered ice was smooth, but the bends of the river increased the distance wofully; there was a keen wind, and the dark pines stretched on without a break as far as he could see. As he entered each fresh loop of the stream he looked eagerly for an opening or sign of life, but there were only rows of ragged spires, cutting sharply against the sky. He felt inexpressibly lonely and badly afraid; the desolation was growing appalling, and he could not keep on his feet much longer. He had food enough for two scanty meals, and then, if no help came, he must starve.

There was now a pain which grew rapidly worse in his left side; his shoulders ached beneath his load, and every joint was sore with the effort it cost him to save his injured foot. The sun sank lower, and the trees still ran on ahead. Indeed, they were growing thicker, and he could see only a short distance into the avenues between the great colonnades of trunks. The loops of the river doubled more closely; in spite of his exertion he was getting very little farther down the valley; but an attempt to push through the forest led him into such tangles of fallen trunks and branches that he was forced back to the ice.

At length he reached a spot where a fire had swept the bush. Branches and clustering needles had been burned away; the trees ran up in bare, charred columns, black when looked at closely, in the distance a curious silvery gray. Prescott could see ahead between them, and he stopped with his heart beating rapidly, for on the white hillside some distance off stood a few shacks. This was the camp, and in spite of the pain it cost him he increased his pace, driven by keen suspense. He did not know if there were men yonder, and he could see no smoke. The doubt grew tormenting; leaving the stream farther on, he struck into unburned bush that hid the camp from him. There were thorny brakes and thickets of withered ferns, but though progress was excruciatingly painful he smashed through them furiously. He was hot and breathless; it was insufferable that he should be delayed among the timber in anxiety. Breaking out into the open, he sent up a hoarse cry, for a thin trail of vapor curled above one of the shacks. Then a man appeared in the doorway and waved a hand to him.

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Prescott felt suddenly limp and nerveless; now that help was near at hand, he wanted to sit down; but he held on until he limped into the hut, where two men stood awaiting him. They were strong, weather-beaten fellows, dressed in quaintly patched garments, and they looked good-humored.

"Come right in," said one. "Pull that box up to the fire and sit down."

Prescott was glad to obey, and when he had taken off his pack he looked about the shack. It was substantially built: stones and soil had been used in its construction as well as boards and bark. It was warmed by a big open fire and contained a table, besides a few tubs and cases which served as seats. A bunk neatly made of split boards and filled with spruce twigs and swamp hay ran along one end.

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"Can you take me in for a day or two?" he asked. "I've hurt my foot."

"Sure," said the second man. "I noticed you were walking lame. We're well stocked in groceries and Steve got a deer a day or two ago."

"How did you get your stores?"

"The contractor brought them up. There was quite a camp here; company putting in all the preliminary work that could be done with the shovel. They shut down when the frost came, but we figured we'd stay on, and took over part of the supplies. The boss had more truck than he could pack down to the other camps."

"Then there's nobody else about the place?"

"No, sir," said the first man; "they're all gone. It's kind of lonely, but we're doing some chopping for the road, and we'll be right here with money saved when work begins in spring. Bought a

piece of fruit land, part on mortgage, at a snap, and with good luck we'll have it clear when we go back."

The short explanation supplied a clue to the characters of the men, who with an eye to the future preferred to face the rigors of the north rather than to spend the winter hanging round the saloons on the warmer coast.

"Well," inquired the other, "where did you come from?"

Prescott mentioned the last camp he had visited and gave them a few particulars about his journey.

"And so you came down the Long Bench—pretty tough proposition that! And kept the trail on short rations!" one of his hosts remarked. "Suppose you take a smoke, and I'll get supper a little earlier."

Before long he was given a share of a simple but abundant meal, and after it was over sat talking with his hosts. It was dark outside now, but although the men had run out of oil for the lamp, the fire gave them light, and pungent odors issued from the resinous logs. The room was warm and, by comparison with the frozen wilderness, supremely comfortable.

"What's the matter with your foot?" one of the men asked when Prescott took off his boot.

Prescott described how it felt, though he explained that he could find no sign of injury, and the other nodded.

"Ricked it a bit; got one of the ligaments or something kinked," he said. "Known that happen when there wasn't much to show. You had better lie off for a while."

It occurred to Prescott that he might be in much worse quarters, though he shrank from the delay a rest would entail.

"What took you up the gully and over the Bench, anyway?" the man went on.

Prescott explained and then asked: "Have you come across my partner or the other fellow, Hollin?"

"Never seen your partner." The man looked at his comrade and laughed. "But we know Hollin, all right. Got an idea that he's a boss prospector and froze on to the railroad job because it took him into the mountains. Been all round looking for minerals; got fired for it at one or two camps, and never struck anything worth speaking of. It's a point on which he's certainly a crank."

It was characteristic of Kermode, Prescott thought, that he should be willing to accompany a man with a craze of the kind.

"I'd expected to find them here. I understood they didn't mean to go back to the camp at Butler Ridge," he said.

"We haven't seen their tracks, and if they were heading west, they'd have to come down this valley; but I guess nobody could tell where Hollin would make for. Of course, you can't prospect much in winter with everything frozen up and the snow about, but so long as he can trail through the mountains and find a few clean rocks the man will be happy; and I'll allow that he's smart at it. Knows how to fix a camp, and find a deer, if there's one in the country. It's a sure thing he'll have to strike for a camp or store sooner or later; but it's likely he has crossed the line south and is trying to make the Fraser and the settlements along the Canadian Pacific railroad."

It was bad news to Prescott. He knew enough about the Pacific Province to realize that if his host's suppositions were correct, he would have a vast area to search; a region of stony uplands, mountain chains, and rock-walled valleys.

"Would it be possible for me to get through?" he asked.

"No, sir! You don't want to think of it. Guess your partner will be pretty safe with Hollin; but you're a plainsman and you'd sure get lost in a day or two and starve when your grub ran out."

"That's right," agreed the other man. "The thing can't be done."

Prescott fell in with his opinion. It would, he thought, require a number of expert mountaineers to trace the men he sought through the desolation of rock and forest to the south. Besides, British Columbia was well populated along the Canadian Pacific line, from which many avenues of communication opened up, and there would be a strong probability of his missing Kermode.

"Well," he said reluctantly, "perhaps, I had better stop round here in case they keep this track; and my foot's too sore to let me move. Could you put me up for a week or two? I'll try to make it worth your while."

"Stop as long as you want," Steve responded. "We'll have to charge you for the grub, because we paid quite a pile for it, but we'll only strike you for your share."

"Thank you," said Prescott, and the others began to talk of Hollin.

"If that man would let up on prospecting he'd get rich," declared one. "When a survey outfit goes up into the bush, Hollin's picked for the boss packer's job, and when there's a new wagon road to be staked out they generally put him on. A smart man at striking the easiest line through rough country."

"That's so," agreed Steve. "Trouble is that he can't stay with it. Soon as he collects some pay, he goes off on the prospecting trail, and then heads for Vancouver with a bag of specimens that

aren't worth anything. When the mineral men hear of a new Hollin discovery they smile. Guess he's found most everything—gold, copper, zinc, and platinum—and never made fifty cents out of them, 'cept once when, so the boys say, a mining company fellow gave him five dollars to promise he wouldn't worry him again. Now they've orders in all the offices that if Hollin comes round with any more specimens they're not to let him in."

Prescott laughed. The man he had heard described was Kermode's companion, and he could imagine their wandering up and down the province, one as irresponsible as the other; meeting with strange experiences, stubbornly braving the perils of the wilds; making themselves a nuisance to business men in the cities. The matter had, however, a more serious aspect. Prescott had spent some time on the useless search and he could not continue it throughout the winter. It would be futile to speculate on the movements of men so erratic as those he had followed. He could not neglect his farm, and he had a heavy crop to haul in and sell: this was a duty that must be attended to.

If he went back without Jernyngham, and Curtis still clung to his theory, the police might give him trouble; but he must run that risk. Though convinced of it, he had no means of proving that Jernyngham was wandering through British Columbia in company with a crazy prospector.

After a while he grew drowsy and got into the bunk, where he lay down, enjoying the warmth and softness of the spruce twigs until he went to sleep.

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CHAPTER XIX

PRESCOTT'S RETURN

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It was Saturday evening, clear and cold, though the frost was not intense. A number of the farmers and their wives had driven in to Sebastian to meet their friends and make their weekly purchases. A row of light rigs stood outside the livery-stable, voices and laughter rose from the sidewalks; the town looked cheerful and almost picturesque with its roofs and tall elevator towers cutting against the soft night sky.

A full moon hung above them, but its silvery radiance was paled by other lights. Warm gleams shone out from the store windows upon the hard-trodden snow; a train of lighted cars stood at the station, and the intense white glare of the head-lamp mingled with the beam flung far across the prairie by a freight locomotive on a side-track. Groups of people strolled up and down the low platform, waiting to see the train go out, and their voices rang merrily on the frosty air. From one of the great shadowy elevators there came a whirr of wheels.

When the train rolled away into the wilderness, Muriel Hurst entered the hotel and went upstairs to the parlor where Colston and her sister were sitting. The room was furnished in defective taste, but it was warm and brightly lighted, and the girl had got accustomed to the smell of warm iron diffused by the stove and the odor of burning kerosene. Colston occupied an easy-chair, and when Muriel took off her furs he looked up with a smile, noticing the fine color the nipping air had brought into her face. She looked braced and vigorous, but it struck him that she wore a thoughtful expression.

"Did you buy all you wanted?" he asked.

"I got what I came for." Muriel sat down and handed her sister a parcel. "I think that ought to match. Has Harry been lounging there since supper? Isn't he the picture of comfortable laziness?"

Colston laughed. He was still very neatly dressed, but he looked harder than he had when he first reached the prairie and his face was brown.

"I'm content, and that's a great thing," he rejoined. "Indeed, I'll confess that I could enjoy our stay here, except for the damping effect of our friends' trouble. It's astonishing how little one misses the comforts we insist on in England, and I'm coming to take an interest in the visits we pay among the ranches and our weekly trip to Sebastian. Then nobody could maintain that your sister looks any the worse for her experience. I'm beginning to think she might pass for a wheat-grower's wife."

"I heard Mrs. Johnson ask when you were going to take a farm," Muriel retorted. "It would be difficult to imagine you tramping down a furrow behind a plow or driving one of those smelly gasoline tractors; but you'll be able to pose before your constituents as an authority on colonial questions when you go home."

"I'm afraid they'll throw me over unless they see me soon; but there's nothing else to take me back, and I'd feel we were deserting our friends in their distress."

"We can't leave them yet," Mrs. Colston broke in. "The suspense is preying upon Jernyngham. He's getting dangerously moody; I know Gertrude feels anxious about him."

A curious expression crept into Muriel's eyes.

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"Believing what he does, it's natural that he should clamor for justice, but he's becoming possessed by a feverish cruelty. It's mastering him, destroying his judgment."

"You're alluding to his suspicions of Prescott?"

Muriel's eyes sparkled as she took up the challenge.

"You know as well as I do that they're altogether wrong! It's impossible that he should be guilty!"

"One would like to think so," her sister responded with dry reserve. "But it's a pity he ran away."

Muriel could not deny this. She had retained her faith in Prescott, but his silence about the motive for an absence that must tell against him troubled her. It was strange that he had given her no hint, and she felt hurt.

"He may have gone because he could not bear to be distrusted," she said. "You are both sorry for Jernyngham, but don't you think the man he unjustly suspects deserves some pity?"

"Well," said Colston, "I've tried to keep an open mind. Prejudice, of course, should not be pandered to; but one is as likely to be led astray by too strong a partiality for the suspected person." He paused before he added: "However, I envy you your confidence; I liked the man."

"The worst of it is that the matter may go dragging on until it wears Gertrude and her father out," Mrs. Colston remarked. "It would be a relief in some ways to learn the truth, however bad it is."

"Mr. Prescott has no reason to dread the truth's coming out," said Muriel staunchly.

Then a maid came in to announce that their team was ready, and, putting on her furs, Muriel went down in advance of the others to see that her purchases had been placed together. After she had gone, Mrs. Colston looked at her husband.

"I think it would be advisable to mention Prescott as seldom as possible."

"So do I," Colston agreed. "I wonder whether you have noticed anything unusual in the relations between Muriel and Gertrude of late? They used to be good friends in England."

"I have remarked some signs of strain. But it is not a matter you could be expected to take an interest in."

"Of course," Colston rejoined deprecatingly, and went down with his wife.

Leslie's team and a smart sleigh, which Jernyngham had had sent out from Toronto, stood at the door, and after he had helped his wife and Muriel in, Colston took the reins. When they had jolted across the track, the snow was beaten smooth along the trail; the team was fresh after resting, and it was a brilliant night. They set off at an exhilarating speed, and though their faces tingled they kept warm beneath their furs and driving-ropes. Far in front of them spread the prairie, gleaming white beneath the moon; no cloud stained the vault of soft deep blue, and the drumming of the hoofs rang out in merry rhythm. The crisp cold, which was less marked than usual, stirred the blood.

They passed a buggy, drawn by a good horse, and later a light wagon, for the snow does not, as a rule, lie deep on the western prairie and the farmers largely continue the use of wheels. After that for some time they were alone on the waste, until as they approached a tract of broken country a wagon appeared on the crest of a rise, with the double span of horses in front of it cutting sharply black against the snow. It came on slowly, heavily loaded with bags of grain, and then the dark shape of a man who walked beside the team grew visible. As they came closer, Colston turned his horses out of the trail to let the wagon pass, and then started as the moonlight fell on the teamster's face. It was Prescott.

For a moment he hesitated, and then pulled up, acknowledging the man's greeting with a lifted hand. Mrs. Colston, however, said nothing, and Prescott stood quietly by his horses' heads, until Muriel called him forward and gave him her hand.

"When did you get back?" she asked.

"Late last night. We broke the wheat bin this morning, and I'm taking the first load in."

"But where were you?"

"In Alberta and British Columbia most of the time."

He volunteered no further information and there was an awkward pause, for Prescott had noticed that Colston had been undecided whether to drive on or not. Mrs. Colston sat farthest from him, so that he could not see her, but she had not addressed him yet. It was clear that his appearance had affected them unpleasantly.

"When we next meet, you must tell us about your trip," said Muriel.

"We should be interested to hear about it," Colston added lamely, and Prescott forced a smile. Muriel was the only one who had treated him on the old friendly footing; and he could hardly visit the Leslie homestead, even if he were invited, while Jernyngham was there.

"I may see you some time, and I mustn't keep you now," he responded.

He started his team, and Colston turned to his companions.

"I'll confess that I've had a great surprise."

"Of course, you imagined that Mr. Prescott had gone for good!" said Muriel with scorn.

"I'm afraid I had some idea of that nature. He would hardly have come back if he were guilty."

"Oh," said Muriel mockingly, "you really can't tell what an unscrupulous, bold man might do."

"Spare me," Colston begged with a laugh. "After all, it looks as if you have been right." He turned to his wife. "What do you think?"

"Mr. Prescott's guilt or innocence is a question I can't decide; but in making us believe he was Cyril Jernyngham he did a very wrong and foolish thing. That Cyril may have urged him to do so is no excuse."

"Leaving Mr. Prescott out, I think Cyril's idea was a very generous one," Muriel declared.

"How can you believe that?"

"He must have wished to save his father and sister pain, and he knew the trick would cost him a good deal. For one thing, it would prevent his going home to be reinstated, because of course if he had done so, we would have seen he was not the man we had met in Canada. He meant to stay here, refusing to benefit by the change in his affairs, out of consideration for his relatives."

"And you approve his passing off this western farmer for a Jernyngham?" Mrs. Colston asked.

"Oh, that!" Muriel's laugh was scornful. "You were satisfied with the man until you knew his name was Prescott. How was it that you didn't miss the inherent superiority of the Jernynghams? Besides, I can't think Cyril suffered by getting his friend to represent him. Though people won't talk very freely, I've picked up some information since I've been here, enough to show what kind of man Cyril was. He hadn't much to boast of, and one must do him the justice to admit that he seems to have recognized it. You probably know, though you hid it from me, that on the evening he should have met us he was lying in the hotel after getting badly hurt in a drunken brawl among some riotous Orangemen."

"I can't have any reflections cast upon Orangemen," Colston objected. "There are a large number in my constituency; most worthy people, for whom I've a strong respect."

"You have a respect for their votes, you mean," Muriel rejoined. "You know you're really ritualistic High Church. If your constituents knew as much about St. Cuthbert's as I do, they would turn you out."

"I have never hid my convictions," Colston declared. "Anyway, I have ascertained that the greater proportion of the Orangemen were sober."

"Then," retorted Muriel, "I'm sorry that Cyril was not. But there are more important points to consider."

"That is very true," said Mrs. Colston. "Will you tell Jernyngham that we have seen Prescott, Harry?"

Colston hesitated.

"No; I don't think so. I'm afraid of the effect it may have on him; and he won't be up when we get in. All the same, he's bound to hear the news from somebody else very soon."

Neither of the others answered, and they drove on in silence until the lights of the Leslie homestead blinked across the snow. The cheerfulness which had marked the party when they set out had gone; they felt a sense of constraint, and Muriel wondered uneasily whether she had spoken with too much freedom.

The next morning they were sitting with Jernyngham and Gertrude when a neighboring rancher came in.

"I thought Leslie might be here," he explained. "Don't mean to intrude."

Colston knew the man and he asked him to sit down. Jernyngham glanced up from the Winnipeg paper he was reading. His face was worn and had set into a fixed, harsh expression, but his manner conveyed a hint of eagerness; of late it had suggested that he was continually expecting something.

"I drove over to give Leslie a message," the newcomer continued. "I guess you have heard that Prescott's back."

Jernyngham started and dropped the paper.

"Prescott back? You must be mistaken!"

"No, sir! Spoke to him on the trail last night. He was hauling in a load to the settlement, and I was driving home half an hour after Mr. Colston."

"There's only one trail," said Jernyngham, looking hard at Colston. "You must have met the fellow. Why didn't you tell me?"

Colston showed confusion.

"To tell the truth, I was afraid the news might distress and excite you. You couldn't do anything until Monday, and I thought it better to let you spend to-day in peace."

"In peace!" Jernyngham laughed in a jarring manner. "Tormented as I am by suspense that grows beyond endurance!" His eyes glittered and the lines on his face deepened. "And I'm to be kept in ignorance while the villain who robbed and killed my son goes about his work undisturbed!"

There was an awkward silence for a few moments. Mrs. Colston looked distressed, and Gertrude regarded Muriel with a long searching glance. The girl felt that she was being suspected of abetting her brother-in-law for some ulterior purpose. She was of sanguine temperament and wayward temper, and her blood ran warm; but she held in check the anger that she burned to give expression to. Then their visitor, whom they had forgotten, broke in:

"Now, sir, you're getting ahead too fast. There's nothing proved against Prescott, and I and others know he never did the thing!" He paused and Muriel, regardless of her companions, flung him a grateful glance as he went on: "Even Curtis can't bring it home to him!"

"Curtis," said Jernyngham contemptuously, "is a cautious fool! I'll communicate with his chiefs at Regina." He got up with a decided air. "I'll start for Sebastian at once. Where's Leslie? I must see him about a team."

"You stay where you are," said the farmer, with rude sympathy. "I heard that one of the police bosses will be at the settlement to-morrow and you can see him then; Curtis took a room for him at the hotel. I'm telling you because the sooner all this muss is cleared up the better, and it won't hurt Prescott."

He went out and Jernyngham, without speaking to the others, picked up his paper. Muriel took a book from a shelf, but although she determinedly tried to fix her attention on it, she could make no sense of what she read. It was a dreary morning; Colston was soon driven out, and the others were oppressed by a feeling of constraint and tension. They were glad when Jernyngham and Gertrude started for Sebastian in the afternoon. After they had gone, Colston looked at his wife and sister-in-law dolefully.

"This kind of thing will tell upon your nerves; I'm beginning to feel it," he said. "We must have a long drive to-morrow to get rid of the depression. Those people on the ranch by the bluff pressed us to come back again."

"There are many excuses for our friends; you couldn't expect them to be cheerful," Mrs. Colston replied.

"That's very true; one must try to remember it. It seems our duty to remain and comfort them as much as possible; but I can't say that they're always very grateful. Indeed, I have felt hurt by Gertrude's reserve, though, considering how trying all this must be for her, one can't take exception to it."

"Gertrude knows her brother is alive!" said Muriel coldly.

Her sister cast a keen glance at her, while Colston, made a sign of expostulation.

"I scarcely think you have any right to say that; but I'll confess that I'm wavering in my opinions—Prescott's return has had its effect on me. In fact, the mystery's getting deeper and more fascinating; I feel impelled to wait and see it unraveled."

"That is hardly the way to regard it," his wife rebuked him. "I would rather remember that the Jernynghams have a strong claim on our sympathy."

"It's the main consideration, of course. But we'll decide on the drive to-morrow. It has been a depressing day."

CHAPTER XX

MURIEL RELIEVES HER MIND

On the Monday morning, Jernyngham was shown into the parlor of the hotel where a commissioned officer of the police sat waiting for him. He had keen, observant eyes, but his manner was quiet, and Jernyngham endeavored to control his impatience.

"I suppose you know that Prescott has returned to his farm?" he said, taking the chair the other pointed to.

"I have been informed so," the officer replied.

"Then may I ask what you mean to do?"

"We have come to no decision."

"But your men have a warrant for him!"

The officer changed his position and his expression hinted at forbearance.

"That is so. On the whole, I think it should not have been issued."

"You must not let the fellow's return influence you unduly."

"Very true," said the other with a calm which Jernyngham found maddening. "It would be unwise to infer too much from that."

"He is a bold man; he has, no doubt, counted on the effect his coming back would have," Jernyngham urged.

"It's possible," the officer agreed.

Jernyngham's nerves had given way beneath the strain he had borne, and he now stood up, trembling with anger.

"Am I to understand that you intend to leave the fellow alone? Now, when he is within your reach, you will not arrest him? The scoundrel killed my son!"

"Might I suggest your sitting down again?" said the officer calmly. "Let me try to put the matter before you as we look at it. To begin with, we can't very well press the charge you make against Prescott without some proof of the victim's death, which has not been discovered yet. The muskeg, I must remind you, was drained and nothing found. The handsome reward you offered led to no result, though every man in the district who had any time to spare spent it in searching the bluffs. Corporal Curtis has made systematic investigations, but they have been fruitless."

"Corporal Curtis is a man of whose intelligence I have a very poor opinion!" said Jernyngham hotly.

His companion smiled.

"That's a point upon which I don't altogether share your views."

"In short, you intend to let the matter drop! I must protest against such a scandalous failure of justice! But you shall not let it drop; I warn you that I shall apply to Ottawa, where there are people who can put upon you the pressure that seems to be needed!"

A look of weariness crept into the officer's face.

"You have my sympathy, Mr. Jernyngham, but you can't be allowed to interfere with the Northwest Police."

Jernyngham pulled himself together.

"I had no wish to be offensive, though I meant what I said. Suppose this fellow goes off again—for good—as soon as he has sold his wheat?"

"That will have to be guarded against. He will be watched; if he leaves his farm, he will be followed."

"He gave you the slip neatly on a previous occasion."

"Quite true," said the officer. "Our men are not infallible. I think I can promise that it will not happen again." Then he rose. "I have some business waiting and you must excuse me. I can assure you that nothing which promises to throw any light upon the matter will be neglected."

He opened the door and politely but firmly bowed out his visitor. Then he called Curtis, who was waiting below.

"I dare say you can guess Mr. Jernyngham's errand," he said. "Unless we can hit on the truth before long, you'll have that gentleman in the guard-room."

Curtis looked astonished and his superior smiled compassionately.

"I mean as a sufferer from mental derangement. Don't be communicative, and confine yourself to reassuring generalities, if you come across him. His mind's morbidly fixed on punishing Prescott. I don't think he can be convinced that the man is innocent."

"I can't help meeting him, sir. He spends his time following me about. In a way, one can't blame him for what he thinks."

"Though it doesn't agree with your conclusions? Sit down; we have a number of things to talk about."

"Well, sir," said Curtis, "this is certainly a mixed-up case. I've said nothing all along to disturb people's belief that it was Prescott we were after, but if I had to corral one of the two, I'd get Wandle. The land agency man gave us a good description of him."

His superior nodded thoughtfully.

"Prescott impersonated Cyril Jernyngham before his supposed death, and Wandle personated him afterward; the latter with the more obvious motive. The point is that there's no evidence of collusion, but rather disagreement, between the two. Of course, we could arrest Wandle now."

"Yes, sir. As soon as the agent identified him, we could prove forgery and falsification of the land sale record. He'd be safe in the guard-room or a penitentiary."

"Just so; we will have him there sooner or later, but if he's guilty of the more serious charge, he'd have no opportunity for giving himself away. I'd rather he was left at large and you kept your eye on him. The same applies to Prescott. Now I've been making a fresh study of the diagram of the footsteps near the muskeg, and I can see no fault in the conclusions you arrived at—only the remains can't be found."

"Sure, that's a weak point, sir. But I might mention the case of the person who was found in a bluff a few miles from home after they'd searched the district for six months."

"It has been in my mind. But you have other matters to report on. What about the disturbance on the Indian reservation?"

While they discussed it, Jernyngham set out for the Leslie homestead and on his arrival found Gertrude alone. Sitting down with a shiver, he looked at her dejectedly.

"I have failed again. They will do nothing; there's no satisfaction to be had," he said. "I drove out my son by arbitrary harshness, and now the only reparation I might have made is denied me."

"You were harsh," assented Gertrude. "I have begun to realize it since we came to Canada—one sees things differently here. But, in a sense, I think you were not to be blamed; you acted in the belief that you were right."

She had seldom ventured to address him with so much candor and she was surprised at his calmness.

"Yes," he said, "it is some relief to remember that; but I was wrong."

"Then shouldn't it make you more careful not to fall into a similar error again? You have a fixed idea in your mind and the way you dwell on it is breaking you down; seeing you suffer is wearing me. Can't you believe that there is room for doubt?"

"I wish I could," he said with some gentleness, recognizing the anxious appeal in her voice. "But I imagined you were as convinced as I am of Prescott's guilt."

"Oh," she replied miserably, "I believed I was; but I don't know what to think!"

He noticed the distress in her face with uncomprehending sympathy. He was fond of her, in his stern, reserved fashion, and knew she must deeply feel the loss of her brother.

"As soon as he saw he was suspected, Prescott ran away," he continued. "That must count against him. If he had had any motive except the wish to escape, he would have mentioned it."

Gertrude sat silent, tormented by confused emotions. Prescott had told her he was going to hunt for Cyril, and until she had seen his devotion to Muriel she had felt that she must believe in him; then her mind had been filled with jealousy and doubt. She thought she hated him; after all, he might be guilty. It was not her part to speak in his defense; though she felt she was acting treacherously, she could not stand up for him.

"It is possible that the police were wrong about Cyril," she said at length.

"I'm afraid not," said Jernyngham. "It might be urged that Prescott has come back; but I believe that was only to sell his wheat." He broke into a harsh laugh. "One must admit that the fellow has courage; but he won't find it easy to escape again. Every move of his will be watched."

Gertrude sat very still for a few moments, her lips tightly pressed together. Then she made a gesture of weariness.

"Oh," she said, "it's all so hard to bear! There's nothing but doubt and suspense; not a ray of comfort!"

Getting up languidly she went out and left her father lost in thought.

An hour or two afterward, Prescott sat near the stove in his homestead, moodily making entries in an account-book, when he heard voices in the passage and looked up with a start. The next moment the door opened and Muriel Hurst came in. His heart throbbed furiously at the sight of her; she looked excited and eager; her rich furs enhanced her charm. He thought she made a wonderfully attractive picture in the small, simply furnished room, but he laid a strong restraint upon himself as he rose.

"I felt that I had to come; I wanted to show that your friends still trusted you," she said impulsively.

He made no move to bring her a chair.

"It was a generous thought, but, considering everything, I don't know that it was wise. Did you tell Colston or your sister that you were coming?"

"No," she answered with a trace of confusion; "I left rather in a hurry." Then she broke into a forced laugh. "This isn't the welcome I expected!"

Prescott's eyes gleamed.

"You know I'm glad to see you."

"Well," she said, sitting down with a hint of defiance in her air, "that's the most important thing; though the confession had to be extorted from you. It looked as if you wanted to get rid of me."

"I felt I ought to."

Muriel looked at him with amusement.

"Duty against inclination! It's a pity the former was beaten. But aren't you falling into our way of thinking rather fast?"

"That isn't strange. I've had English ideas impressed on me pretty forcibly during the last few months. But you made a statement that surprised me. Does Colston trust me?"

"He wants to."

"That implies a doubt. And your sister; is she on my side?"

"She's reserving her opinion."

"You can't say that the Jernynghams are convinced of my innocence."

"No," said Muriel. "I think they're cruelly and unreasonably bitter."

"Then that leaves only one person with unshaken faith." His eyes rested on the girl with deep gratitude and tenderness. "Miss Hurst, I think I may say it's quite enough."

She looked up fearlessly, with heightened color.

"We won't pay each other compliments. Will you tell me why you went away?"

"Yes; I went to look for Cyril Jernyngham."

Muriel made an abrupt movement and her eyes sparkled with relief which she did not try to hide.

"Oh," she said, "that's such a complete explanation; it answers everything! But why didn't you tell people the reason you were going? You must have known that stealing away, as you did, would count against you!"

"I told Miss Jernyngham."

"Gertrude knew?" Muriel started. Then her face hardened. "After all, that doesn't matter; there are much more important things. You didn't find Cyril?"

"I followed him across three provinces and lost him in the end."

"Ah!" she said. "How unfortunate, how terribly disappointing! But tell me all you did; I'm not asking from mere curiosity." She hesitated. "I think you owe me that."

He told her the story of his wanderings and what he had learned about Kermodé's adventures. She listened with eager attention, and laughed now and then.

"It's convincing on the face of it," she declared. "One feels that everything is exactly what Cyril Jernyngham must have done. Will you tell his father?"

"No," Prescott answered gravely. "He wouldn't believe the tale."

"But I feel it can't be doubted, after what I have heard of Cyril's character and his conduct in England."

"You have an open mind. I think you hate injustice; you try to be fair. That, I guess, is why you came to see me."

Muriel glanced at him sharply, and then smiled.

"I suppose it was; I felt that you have been badly treated. But I only meant to stay a minute or two, and you seem to be busy."

He did not deny it. Conscious as he was of her charm and his longing for her, he feared to detain her lest he should be driven into some rash avowal.

"I'm very grateful for your confidence," he answered slowly.

"Well," said Muriel, "I must go." She rose, but stood still a moment. "Mr. Prescott, it hurts me to see suspicion fall on my friends. You must clear yourself somehow."

"Ah," he said moodily, "how am I to set about it?"

"For one thing, you must not go away again. That would look bad." She hesitated. "And, from a few words I heard, I fear it would bring the police after you."

"It seems very probable; I'll stay while I'm allowed," he said with some bitterness and turned toward the door with her. Then a little color crept into his face as she held out her hand. "Miss Hurst," he added, "you are a very staunch friend."

Muriel smiled.

"It really looks as if staunchness were one of my virtues; but you see I venture to act on my opinions without paying much attention to what other people think. After all, that would be foolish, wouldn't it?"

Then she got into the sleigh and left him wondering what she could have meant. He knew her friends regarded him as a man of inferior station, who, if cleared from suspicion, might perhaps be tolerated so long as he recognized his limitations and did not presume. Had Muriel wished to hint that she differed from them in this respect? The thought of it set his heart to beating fast and when he went back to his books he found it singularly difficult to fix his mind on them.

Muriel drove rapidly to the Leslie homestead and, reaching it after dark, joined the others at supper. During the meal, a reference to Jernyngham's interview with the police officer gave her the opportunity she was waiting for.

"When Mr. Prescott went away it told badly against him, because people didn't know what his object was," she said.

She fixed her eyes on Gertrude, but the latter's face was expressionless as she moved her plate.

"He went to find Cyril," she added.

Mrs. Colston looked up sharply; her husband started.

"If true, it's a strong point in his favor," Colston declared.

Gertrude still made no sign; but her father broke into an incredulous smile.

"An excellent motive! It's a pity he didn't mention it before he went! It would have carried more

weight then!"

There was an awkward silence; and then Muriel said firmly:

"Still, that was why he went away."

Jernyngham looked hard at her and made a gesture which suggested that the matter would not bear discussion. Then Colston began to talk to her, and he was glad when the meal was finished. Muriel waited until she found Gertrude alone in her room.

"You knew Mr. Prescott went to look for your brother, and yet you would not say a word," she said.

"Ah!" exclaimed Gertrude sharply. "So you have seen him! You drove over this afternoon—one might have expected that."

Muriel's eyes sparkled, but she answered calmly:

"Yes, I went to see him; but you're evading the point. What reason could you have had for trying to injure an innocent man?"

Gertrude made an uneasy movement.

"Aren't you taking too much for granted? To begin with, his innocence is very doubtful."

"Yet, I think you must have been convinced of it. That he told you why he was going proves that you were on friendly terms, which would have been impossible if you had thought him guilty. What has made you change?"

The girl's voice was stinging scornful. It looked as if she suspected something, and Gertrude broke into a cold smile.

"Oh," she said, "the man is clever; he has a way of creeping into one's confidence. He appears to have had no trouble in gaining yours. After all, however, if my father is right, I have a duty to my brother's memory."

"Your father is so possessed and carried away by an idea that one can almost forgive him his injustice and cruelty. You have not the same excuse!"

Gertrude turned toward her with a formal manner.

"I think you have gone far enough. Do you intend to tell the others what you have said to me?"

"Oh, no," answered Muriel. "It would serve no purpose. But I feel that sooner or later you will be sorry for what you have done."

Then she went out, leaving Gertrude alone with her reflections.

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CHAPTER XXI

WANDLE TAKES PRECAUTIONS

Bright sunshine streamed down upon the glittering plain, tempering the frost, when Wandle stood outside his house one morning, wondering how he should employ himself during the day. He had hauled his wheat in to the elevators, and when that is done the western farmer has now and then some leisure, because the frozen ground renders many of his usual operations impossible. Wandle had a stack of cordwood ready cut, and though he needed some logs for an addition to his stable which he meant to build, the thinness of the snow, which had been disturbed by a strong wind, would make the work of hauling them home too difficult. He was, however, an active man, who rarely wasted time or money; and as he looked about, the ash-heap caught his eye. It was rather large and near his house, and he determined to remove it, now that he had nothing better to do.

In a few minutes he was hard at work with a pick, and succeeded, with some difficulty, in breaking through the frozen crust. The moisture, however, had not penetrated far enough into the fine wood-ash for the rest to freeze, so that he was soon able to use the shovel and during the next half-hour he flung a quantity of the stuff into his wagon. As he did so he looked out for Jernyngham's cash-box, and grew surprised when it did not appear. When he had hauled the load away and deposited it in a swampy place he was getting anxious. The box could not have escaped his notice, because he had spread the ash thinly; he had, he thought, dug far enough into the pile to have reached it; but there was still no sign of it. This was disconcerting, and he worked until he had largely reduced the heap, and he scattered the next load so that every bit of rubbish among it could be seen. Then he stopped in dismay to think. He had certainly thrown the box among the ash, and it was gone; the only inference was that somebody had afterward dug it up and taken it away.

Wandle realized this with a shock, but he was too keen-witted to give way to alarm and leave his task unfinished. He must remove the whole pile, in order to give no cause for suspicion that he had been excavating in search of something; and the sooner it was done the better. It was noon

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when the work was finished and he entered the house, where there was something else to be done. He was a methodical man and had a place for each of his belongings. He began by examining the position of every article in a cupboard. None seemed to have been disturbed, which was reassuring, and Wandle proceeded to empty a chest in which he kept his clothing. He had reached the bottom of it when a pair of light summer shoes caught his eye and his face became intent. They were not where he had placed them; he remembered having fitted them in between some other things at the opposite end of the chest. This confirmed his worst suspicions, but he carefully laid back each garment before he sat down to consider.

It was obvious that the police had searched his house, and had taken the cash-box away, but he was careful not to let his fears overcome his judgment. The box was of a cheap and common pattern; it would be difficult to identify it as having belonged to Jernyngham. He was more troubled by the evidence that he was being watched by the police because it might result in their discovering the sale of land he had made. This must be guarded against, as the offense was serious, and would, moreover, connect him with Jernyngham's disappearance; but Wandle would not be driven into any rash and precipitate action by his alarm. He was a cool, ready-witted, avaricious man, who had found industry profitable, and he had no intention of leaving the farm he had spent so much work on. Flight would mean ruin: he could not dispose of his property before he went without attracting attention, and it would, in all probability, lead to his arrest. He must stay and face the matter out.

First of all, he tried to estimate the risk of his being recognized as the man who had sold Jernyngham's land. If the suspicions of the agent he had dealt with were aroused, he might describe his customer to the police. Wandle was glad his appearance was by no means striking. When he sold the land, he had, however, worn a newly made suit of a rather vivid brown, which the man would probably remember. Wandle had bought it on a business visit to Brandon, which was a long way off, and the police could not have seen it when searching his house, because they had done so in his absence and when he left the farm to drive in to the settlement he had put on the clothes. There was a risk that somebody in Sebastian might remember how he was dressed, but, as he had been there only once or twice in the past few months, he did not think it was likely.

The garments would have to be sacrificed, which was unfortunate, because clothing is dear in western Canada; but Wandle thought of a better means of getting rid of them, than destroying them. It was obvious that the suspicions of the police must fall on himself or Prescott, and he preferred that the latter should be implicated. After a while, he saw what could be done, provided there was wind enough to obliterate his footsteps in the snow or there should be another fall.

He had to wait a few days; and then one evening he made up the clothes into a bundle, saddled a horse, and rode off across the prairie toward the Prescott homestead. It was very cold and he would have been more comfortable wrapped in a driving-robe in his buggy; but the moon now and then shone through the rifts in the clouds, and a rig could not be hidden or driven in among thick trees.

A long bluff ran close up to the homestead, and when Wandle reached its outer end he got down and walked beside his horse, keeping the wood between him and the farm trail. It was important that he should not be seen. The horse would attract no attention, because Prescott had a number, and hardy, range-bred horses are often left to run loose through the winter. Still, clear moonlight streamed through between the slender trees, and there was a glow from the windows of the house. As Wandle drew nearer it he moved with greater caution. He was fortunate in having done so, for he stopped with a start as two black mounted figures cut against the sky not far in front of him. They were clearly visible as they crossed an opening, and though he stood in shadow beside a denser growth of trees his heart beat faster as he watched them. They were riding slowly, keeping out of view of the house, which was significant, because had they been neighbors of Prescott's returning from a visit to him they would have taken no trouble to avoid being seen. These were police troopers, watching the homestead.

Presently one of them spoke to the other, and Wandle recognized Private Stanton's voice. Indeed, it was ominously distinct, and Wandle, standing very still with a firm hand on the bridle, passed a few anxious moments; a movement of his horse might betray him. The troopers, however, drew abreast without glancing toward him and the tension slackened as they slowly moved away. What they expected to find he could not tell, but he was on the whole pleased to see them hanging round the bluff. He waited a while after the faint sound they had made died away; and then, tying his horse to a branch, he crept quietly into the bluff.

There were belts of shadow among the trees; he got entangled among nut bushes and thickets, but creeping on toward the house, he reached a more open space and found a hollow nearly filled with withered leaves. There he stopped, wondering whether it would be safe to strike a match; but he knew that something must be risked and he got a light and bent down, shielding it with his hands. The leaves lay thickly together, a foot or two in depth, and the place looked suitable for his purpose.

A stream of light suddenly broke out from the door of the homestead and Wandle's hand closed quickly on the match; somebody was crossing from the house to the stable with a lantern. He could see the man's dark figure plainly, though he could not recognize him, and he waited until a door was noisily opened. Then he scraped the leaves aside and laid the brown clothes in the hollow. He stayed beside it until the man with the lantern returned to the house, and then he crept back through the bluff and led his horse toward its end, where he mounted and rode to

the next farm. After spending an hour with its owner, arranging for a journey to a bluff where unusually large logs could be found, he rode home content. Everything had gone as he wished; there would, he thought, be snow enough before morning to cover any tracks he had left, and he could, if necessary, account for his having been in the neighborhood of the Prescott farm.

During the next week, Wandle watched the weather, which continued fine after a few snow showers. A heavy fall might hide the clothes until spring, but he could think of no means of leading up to their discovery. To give the police a hint would fix their suspicions on himself, and he wondered how one could be conveyed to them indirectly. Chance provided him with an opportunity.

Gertrude Jernyngham borrowed Leslie's team one afternoon and set out for a drive. Troubled as she was, she had of late found the strain of maintaining a tranquil demeanor before her friends growing too much for her, and it was trying to spend the greater portion of her time in Muriel's society. She was filled with a jealous hatred of the girl, and felt that it would be a relief to be alone a while. The air was still, bright sunshine flooded the plain, the thick driving-robe kept her comfortably warm; and, lost in painful thought, she had driven farther than she intended when she turned back. On doing so, she noticed that she had left the beaten trail and she looked about timidly. The sun was low, a gray dimness had crept across the eastern half of the prairie where the homestead lay and a piercing wind was springing up. There was nobody in sight and no sign of a house, and she could not remember which of the bluffs that stretched in wavy lines across the waste she had passed.

She drove on toward the east, eagerly looking for the trail, while the horse broke through the thin snow-crust and the sleigh ran heavily, until she reached a slope leading to a frozen swamp. It was of some extent, and she grew anxious, for she had not seen the spot before. The country ahead was more broken, rolling in low rises with short pines on their summits, and it was with unfeigned satisfaction that she saw a man crossing one of the ridges. He answered when she called and in a few minutes she stopped close beside him. He was a tall man, wearing an old fur coat and dilapidated fur cap; a rancher, she thought.

"Can you tell me where Leslie's house is?" she asked.

"Sure," said Wandle, pointing toward the east. "But as it will be dark before you get there, you had better let me put you on the trail. You'll have to cross these sandhills, and as the snow's blown off in places, it's rough traveling."

Gertrude thanked him, and she was glad that he led the team as they crossed the broken belt, picking out the smoothest course among the clumps of birches and low steep ridges. At times he had difficulty in urging the horses up a bank of frozen sand, but after a while he looked around at her.

"You're Miss Jernyngham?" he said. "Guess you must have had a mighty trying time?"

His tone was respectful and, though he was a stranger, Gertrude could not resent the allusion to her troubles. She had generally found the western ranchers blunt.

"Yes," she replied; "my father and I have had much to bear."

Wandle made a gesture of sympathy.

"The mystery's the worst—it's easier to face a trouble one knows all about. What have the police been doing lately?"

"I don't know; they have told us nothing for some time."

"You find them kind of disappointing?"

"I believe my father does."

The man said nothing for a while, and then looked around again.

"Well," he ventured, "it strikes me there's one man Curtis ought to keep his eye on."

Gertrude started and Wandle studied her face. He was observant and quick to draw a conclusion, and he read something that surprised him in her eyes. It was, he thought, a deeper feeling than suspicion; Miss Jernyngham knew whom he meant and had some reason for being very bitter against Prescott.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

"All I've heard looks black against him," he answered with an air of reflection. "What does your father think?"

"He is perplexed and distressed," said Gertrude coldly, deciding that the man must not be allowed to go too far.

Wandle guessed her thoughts, but he was not to be daunted.

"That's natural. He must be anxious to learn the truth, and the police haven't found out much yet—looks as if they were getting tired."

Gertrude hesitated, while he led the horses round a clump of birches. It was painful and undignified to discuss the matter with a stranger, but his manner was suggestive; she felt that he had something to tell. Perhaps it was her duty to encourage him, and her suspicions of Prescott drove her on. Wandle waited, knowing that she would speak.

"Is there anything that might be useful they have neglected doing?"

"It's hard to say. I'll allow that they've worked through the muskeg and the bluffs pretty thoroughly; but do you know if they've made a good search round Prescott's house?"

"No," said Gertrude eagerly; "I can't tell you that. But why should they look there?"

Wandle considered. It would be awkward if she mentioned that she had had a hint from him, but he did not think this would happen. There was a greater probability of her acting as if the idea had originated with her. He let the team stop and looked at her impressively.

"It strikes me as quite a likely place. I've heard of people hiding things they wanted to get rid of in a bluff. You put it to your father and see how the notion strikes him."

"I'll think of it," Gertrude replied coldly; but Wandle knew that she would do as he had suggested.

He said nothing further until they had crossed another rise or two, when he stopped and pointed to a bluff not far away.

"When you make those trees you'll strike the trail and it's pretty well beaten. It will take you straight in to Leslie's."

Gertrude thanked him and drove on. It was getting dark, and a bitter wind swept the waste, but at first she was scarcely conscious of the cold, for her thoughts were busy. She felt that she had done wrong in allowing the man to make the suggestion. Somehow it seemed to involve her in a plot against Prescott; but of late she had tried to convince herself of his guilt. After all, it was her duty to have the fullest investigation made and the fellow had spoken in a significant manner. One could imagine that he knew more than he had said.

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Darkness closed in on the empty plain, the wind stung her face, the loneliness grew intense, and she began to shiver in a mood of black depression. The mystery of her brother's disappearance filled her with keen anxiety; now she could no longer believe Prescott's assurance that he was not dead. A little while ago she had trusted him and her cold nature had suddenly expanded in the warmth of love, but the transforming glow had suddenly died out, leaving her crushed, humiliated, and very bitter. Even if her fears about Cyril proved unfounded, she had nothing to look forward to except a life that had grown meaningless and dreary; the brief passion she had yielded to would never be stirred again. She was growing hard and cruel; her keenest desire was to punish the man who had, as she thought of it, deceived her.

At length a light began to blink in the gloom ahead and soon afterward she got down at the homestead, feeling very cramped and cold; but an hour or two passed before she had an opportunity for speaking to her father alone. It was easy to lead him on to talk of Cyril's disappearance, and by and by she asked if the neighborhood of Prescott's homestead had been searched. He caught at the idea.

"It's hard to understand why I didn't think of that!" he cried. "I have lost all confidence in Curtis. What he is doing, or if he means to let the matter drop, I don't know; but if Prescott has hidden anything that might tell against him, it will of course be in the bluff! I'll go over and examine every hollow among the bushes, without the police."

His expression grew eager and Gertrude, knowing that she had said enough, left him quietly.

CHAPTER XXII

JERNYNGHAM MAKES A DISCOVERY

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A piercing wind swept the lonely waste when Jernyngham left the homestead in the afternoon. He went on foot, because it was no great distance to the Prescott farm, and he had no wish to attract notice by driving up in the sleigh. It was his intention to enter the bluff quietly a little while before it got dark and, after searching it, to walk home. By doing so he would run less risk of being seen, for it was undesirable that he should put Prescott on his guard. He had said nothing about his plan to any one except Gertrude, which was unfortunate, because Leslie, who could read the signs of the weather, would have dissuaded him.

Jernyngham felt uneasy as he glanced across the plain. There was something unusual in the light: every clump of scrub and bush in the foreground stood out with a curious hard distinctness, though the distance was blurred and dim. There was no horizon; the bluffs a few miles off had faded into a hazy shapelessness. The sky was uniformly gray, except in the north, where it darkened to a deep leaden color; the cold struck through the man like a knife. He was, however, not to be deterred; snow was coming and a heavy fall might make an effective search impossible for the remainder of the winter. There was something inexorable in his nature; his views were narrow, but he was true to them and ruled himself and his dependents in accordance with a few fixed principles. This was why he had driven out his son, and was now with the same grim consistency bent on avenging him. He had a duty and he meant to discharge it, in spite of raging blizzard or biting frost. Indeed, if need be, he was willing to lay down the dreary life which had of late grown valueless to him. Yet he was not without tenderness, and as

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he plodded on over the frozen snow, he thought of the lost outcast with wistful regret.

He reached the bluff, and stopped a few moments, slightly breathless, among the first of the trees. They were small and their branches cut in sharp, intricate tracery against the sky; farther back, the rows of slender trunks ran together in a hazy mass, though they failed to keep out the wind, and once or twice a fine flake touched the old man's face with a cold that stung. He pulled his fur cap lower down and set about the search. For half an hour he scrambled among thick nut bushes, kicking aside the snow beneath them here and there; and then he plunged knee-deep into the withered grass where a sloo had dried. The snow was thin in the wood, but it hid the iron-hard ground so that he could not tell if it had been disturbed. It was obvious that the chances were against his discovering anything, but he persevered, working steadily nearer to the homestead, of which he once or twice caught a glimpse where the trees were thinner.

At length he stopped suddenly and cast a quick glance around. He had heard a sharp crack behind him, but it was not repeated and there was little to be seen. While he listened, the wind wailed among the branches and the sloo grass rustled eerily. The patch of sky above him was growing darker, and the wood looked, inexpressibly dreary; but as the light was going, there was more reason for his making use of it. Though he was getting tired, he pushed on; avoiding fallen trunks and branches where he could, and floundering through thickets, he came to a small hollow which traversed the bluff. As it was nearly filled with drifted snow, he stepped down upon its white surface and, breaking through, sank above his boots in withered leaves. These, he thought, would effectively hide anything laid among them until it rotted and crumbled into their decay. He followed up the hollow, kicking the snow aside. He fancied that he heard the snapping sound again; but he was too eager to feel much curiosity about the cause of it, and there was nothing to be seen. The light was dying out rapidly, heavy snow was coming, and he must make the best use of his time.

After a while, his foot struck something which did not yield as the leaves had done, and dropping on his knees he dragged it out. A thrill of excitement ran through him as he saw that it was a suit of clothes and made out in the gathering dusk that their color was brown. Then, as he rose with grim satisfaction, he saw with a start two indistinct figures watching him a dozen yards away. They moved forward, and he recognized the first of them as Curtis.

"Mr. Jernyngham?" said the corporal.

"Yes," said Jernyngham. "Who did you think it was?"

"Well," returned Curtis dryly, "we didn't expect to find you. What brought you here?"

"I've been doing your work with more success than seems to have attended your efforts." He pointed to the clothes. "To my mind, this is conclusive."

An icy blast that set them shivering went roaring through the wood, but they were too intent to heed it, and Curtis picked up one of the garments. He could see only that it was a jacket, for darkness was closing in suddenly.

"I'll allow it's kind of suggestive," he admitted guardedly.

Jernyngham broke into a contemptuous laugh.

"How was the man who sold my son's land dressed?"

"Smartly, in new clothes. The land agent remembered that they were a reddish brown."

"That's the color of the thing in your hand. There was more light when I pulled it out of the leaves yonder. Are you convinced now?"

"It's certainly enough to make one think."

"To think, but not to act! You seem strangely content with the former! Isn't it plain that Prescott sold the land, and then, remembering that he had worn a suit of rather unusual color which might help to identify him, hid it in the bluff? Having other people in the house, he was, no doubt, afraid to burn the clothes."

Curtis folded up the garments and laid them on his arm.

"Well," he said, "it sounds quite probable; but there are discrepancies. I'll take these things along, and I guess you had better make for the homestead and ask them to let you in. We'll have a lively blizzard down on us very soon."

The trees bent above him as he spoke, the wood was filled with sound, and fine flakes drove past in swirls. Then, as the wild gust subsided, they heard a galloping horse going by outside the bluff and Curtis swung sharply round toward his comrade.

"It's that blamed ranger of yours broken loose!" he cried. "Get after him with my horse!"

The next moment the police had vanished and Jernyngham was left alone, listening to the crackle of undergrowth, which was lost in a furious uproar as the wood was swept by another gust. Then the thrashing trees were blotted out by a white haze which stung his face with an intolerable cold and filled his eyes. For a minute or two he could see nothing, though he was conscious of a tumult of sound and broken twigs came raining down upon him; then, lowering his head, he stumbled forward between blurred trees, ignorant of where he was going. He struck one or two of the trees and blundered into thickets, but at last he struggled out of the wood and stopped for a few moments in dismay.

The light had gone; he could scarcely see a yard ahead, through the thick white cloud that rushed past him. The wind buffeted him cruelly, threatening to fling him down; the awful cold

dulled his senses. He had not intended to seek shelter at the homestead—the idea was repugnant—and he hardly thought he meant to do so now, but, overwhelmed by the blizzard, he could not stand still and freeze. Struggling heavily forward, he found himself in the open; all trace of the wood had vanished; he could not tell where he was heading, but he must continue moving to keep life in him. He could no longer reason collectedly. He had not been trained to physical endurance, and he was getting old; in the grip of the storm he was helpless. By and by his steps grew feebler and his breath harder to get. How long he stumbled on he could not remember; but at length he was sensible of a faint brightness in the snow ahead and he made toward it in a half-dazed fashion. It seemed to die out, leaving him in a state of dull despair, but a few moments later something barred his way and stretching out his mittened hand it fell upon the lapped boarding of a house. There must be a door, he reasoned, and he groped along the wall until his hand fell forward into a shallow recess. Then he knocked savagely.

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There was no response. The gale shrieked about the building, flinging the snow against it in clouds, and he realized that any noise he made was not likely to be heard. He fumbled for a latch, and found a knob which his numbed fingers failed to turn. Then in a fury he struck the door again, each blow growing feebler than the last, until the cold overcame him and he slipped down into the snow. He could not get up; even the desire to do so grew fainter, and he sank into oblivion.

It did not last, however, and the return to consciousness was agonizing. A strong light shone about him, though he could see nothing clearly, and he felt as if a boiling fluid were trying to creep through his half-frozen limbs; his hands and feet, in particular, tingled beyond endurance, which, had he known it, was a favorable sign. Then somebody gave him a hot drink and he heard voices which he vaguely recognized, though he could not tell to whom they belonged. A little later, he was lifted up and carried into a different room, where somebody laid him down and wrapped clothing about him. The tingling pain passed away, he felt delightfully warm, and that was all that he was conscious of as he sank into heavy slumber.

It was daylight when he awakened, clear-headed and comfortable, and recognized the room as the one he had previously occupied in Prescott's house. It was obvious that he had slept for twelve or fourteen hours; and seeing his clothes laid out, dry, upon a chair, he got up and dressed. Then he went down to the living-room, where Prescott rose as he came in.

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"You don't look much the worse," the rancher said. "You had a fortunate escape."

"How did I get here?" Jernyngham asked, leaning on the back of a chair, for he felt shaky still.

"That's more than I can tell. Svendsen found you outside the door when he tried to get across to the stable. You couldn't have been there long: a few minutes, I guess, though we didn't hear you. Do your feet and hands feel right?"

Jernyngham was glad that his host made no inquiries as to what had brought him into the neighborhood.

"Thank you, yes," he said. "I must assure you that I had no intention of seeking shelter in your house."

"So I should imagine," Prescott answered smiling. "However, there ought to be a truce between even the deadliest enemies where there's a blizzard raging and the temperature's forty below. Though I can't say you have treated me well, I'm glad you didn't get frozen, and if you'll sit down, I'll tell Mrs. Svendsen to bring you in some breakfast."

"With what there is between us, you could hardly expect me to sit at your table."

"That's a comfortable chair you have your hand on. Bring it nearer the stove and let's try to look at the thing sensibly," Prescott persuaded. "I'll confess that I'd have excused your visit, if it could have been avoided, but as you already owe Svendsen and me something, it would be rather forcing matters for you to drive away hungry. That strikes me as about the limit of wrong-headedness, particularly as I'm not suggesting that we should make friends."

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The elder man was possessed by a fixed idea and his prejudices were strong, but he was, nevertheless, a judge of character, and the rancher's manner impressed him. He took the chair.

"I believe I owe my life to you or your hired man. I find the situation embarrassing."

"It would be intolerable, if you were not mistaken about another point," Prescott said calmly. "Now I want your attention. I'm not anxious for your good opinion—I don't know that I'd take it as a gift, after the way you have persecuted me—but I've a pity for you that softens my resentment."

Jernyngham moved abruptly, but Prescott raised his hand.

"Let me get through! I believe you're honest; you're acting from a sense of duty, which is why I tell you that you're tormenting yourself without a cause. I had no hand in your son's disappearance, and it's my firm conviction that he's alive now and wandering through British Columbia with a mineral prospector."

"What proof have you of this?"

"None that would satisfy you; nothing but my word, and I give you that solemnly. Make your own inquires among my neighbors whether it's to be believed."

For several moments Jernyngham fixed his eyes on him, and his suspicions began to melt away. Truth had rung in Prescott's voice and it was stamped on his face; no man, he thought, could lie and look as this rancher did. Even the discovery of the brown clothes appeared less damaging.

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"Then there's much to be explained," he said slowly.

"That's so. It will all come to light some day. And now, it's a bitter morning, the drifts are deep, and the trail lost in snow; Svendsen will have some trouble in driving you to Leslie's, and you can't go without food."

Prescott called to Mrs. Svendsen, and she presently brought in breakfast. Jernyngham ate a little before he got into the buggy and was driven away. He reached the Leslie homestead greatly disturbed. The painful mystery was as deep as ever, but he was inclined to think he had been following a false clue; the man on whom all his suspicions had centered might be innocent. It was so seldom that he changed his mind that he felt lost in a maze of doubt, and in his perplexity he told Gertrude what he had found and related his conversation with Prescott. They were alone and she listened with fixed attention, studiously hiding her feelings behind an inscrutable expression.

"I don't know what to think; for perhaps the first time in my life, I'm utterly at a loss and need a lead," he said. "Everything we have learned about the man tells against him, and yet I felt I could not doubt his unsupported assurance. There was a genuine pride in the way he referred me to his neighbors for his character for truthfulness and one must admit that a number of them have an unshakable belief in him. Then Colston's wavering; and Muriel has shown her confidence in the fellow in a striking manner."

"Ah!" said Gertrude sharply. "You have noticed that?"

"I could hardly fail to do so. It is no affair of mine and perhaps a breach of good manners to mention it, but if I were in Colston's place, I should feel disturbed about the way in which his sister-in-law has taken Prescott's part."

"Why?"

"The reason should be obvious. Leaving the man's guilt or innocence out of the question, there is his position; I needn't enlarge on it. Muriel's family is an old and honored one; it would be insufferable that she should break away from its traditions. Then we know what her upbringing has been. Could one calmly contemplate her throwing herself away on a working farmer?"

He had appealed to his daughter's strongest prejudices, which had for a while sunk into abeyance and then sprung into life again. All that he had said about Muriel applied with equal force to her. She had yielded to a mad infatuation, and returning sanity had brought her a crushing sense of shame. She might have made a costly sacrifice for the rancher's sake, flinging away all she had hitherto valued; she had sought him, humbled herself to charm him, and he had never spared a tender thought for her. Despising herself, her jealous rage and wounded pride could only be appeased by his punishment.

"Prescott," she said coldly, "is a dangerous man; I have never met anybody so insinuating and plausible. When he speaks to you, it's very hard to disbelieve him; his manner's convincing."

"I felt that," said her father with a troubled air.

"Then shouldn't it put you on your guard, and make you test his statements? Is it wise to let them influence you before they're confirmed?"

"It was foolish of me to be impressed; but still——"

Gertrude checked him.

"With us suspicion is a duty. Try to think! Cyril had his failings, but you were harsh to him. You showed him no pity; you drove him out."

"It's true," admitted Jernyngham in a hoarse voice. "I've regretted it deeply."

She knew she had not appealed in vain to her father's grief and she meant to work upon his desire for retribution.

"Cyril came here and fell into Prescott's hands. Instead of his meeting Colston, the rancher personated him. He was the last man to see him; he knew where he had hidden his money; soon afterward he bought a costly machine."

"I know all this," said Jernyngham wearily.

"There seems to be some danger of your forgetting it! Let me go on! Prescott took over control of Cyril's farm. He passed himself off for him a second time and sold land of his; you found the clothes he wore hidden near his house. Could you have any proofs more conclusive?"

Jernyngham flung her a swift glance.

"You believed him once. You are very bitter now."

"Yes," she said, "I have admitted that he is plausible; he deceived me. Perhaps that has made me more relentless; but I have lost my brother, and I loved him."

Her father's face grew very stern, and he clenched his hand.

"I have lost my son, and I wronged him."

Then there was silence for a few moments; but Gertrude knew she had succeeded. Her father had been wavering, but she had stirred him to passion, and his thoughts had suddenly returned to the groove they would not leave again. The fixed idea had once more possessed him; unavailing sorrow and longing for justice would drive him on along the course he had chosen.

"You have reminded me of my duty," he said with grim forcefulness. "I shall not fail in it."

Then he got up and left her sitting still, lost in painful reflection. His motives were honest and blameless; but she had not this consolation. She tried to find comfort in the thought that if Prescott were innocent, he had nothing to fear.

CHAPTER XXIII

A NIGHT RIDE

It was six o'clock in the evening. Curtis had just finished his supper and sat drowsily content in his quarters at the police post after being out in the frost all day. The temperature had steadily fallen since morning and the cold was now intensified by a breeze that drove scattered clouds across the moon and flung fine snow against the board walls, but the stove, which glowed a dull red, kept the room comfortable. A nicked lamp shed down a cheerful light, and the tired corporal looked forward to a long night's rest. Private Stanton sat near him, cleaning a carbine.

"It's curious you have heard nothing from Regina since you sent up those clothes," he remarked. "It looked pretty bad for Prescott."

"I don't know," said Curtis. "Have you ever seen him with that suit on?"

"No."

"Nor has anybody else, so far as I can learn. There's another point—the land agent talked of a tall, stoutish man. You wouldn't call Prescott that."

"Those clothes were 'most as good as new; he might have only had them on the once," Stanton persisted.

"That's what struck me; I don't know how they looked so good, if they'd been lying where Jernyngham found them, since last summer."

"It's a thing I might have thought of."

"You have a good deal to learn yet." Curtis smiled tolerantly.

"Anyhow, I found you a photograph of Prescott, and you were glad to send it along to Regina. What do you think our bosses are doing about it?"

"Lying low, like sensible men; the more we find out about this case, the more puzzling it gets. You think you have pretty good eyes, don't you?"

"They're as good as anybody's I've come across yet."

"Well, you searched the bluff several times in daylight and didn't see those clothes. Jernyngham comes along when it is getting dark and finds them. How do you account for that?"

"I've quit guessing; I'll leave the thing to you. Anyhow, I've had about enough of Jernyngham; talked to me like a sergeant instructor last time I met him, and you'd have felt proud if you'd seen the way he smiled when I told him he had better go to you."

"We'll leave it at that," said Curtis. "The man's making me tired, and he's worse than he was a month ago. Where's that Brandon paper?"

While Stanton looked for it there was a sound of wheels and a hail outside, and a stinging draught swept in when the trooper opened the door. A fur-wrapped man sat in a wagon holding up an envelope.

"For Curtis; come for it," he said. "Operator asked me to bring it along. I'm 'most too cold to get down and I can't let the team stand."

The envelope slipped from his numbed fingers as Stanton tried to take it.

"Dropped near the wheel. My hand's 'most frozen, though I've good thick mittens on. It's about the coldest night I've been out in."

He drove on, and Stanton hurried in and flung the door to before he handed the telegram to Curtis.

When the corporal opened it his face grew intent.

"It's from Sergeant Crane," he said. "Glover was seen this morning near Norton, heading east on the Sand Belt trail."

Stanton's face fell. He had been in the saddle the greater part of the day, and the prospect of spending the night in pursuit of Glover did not appeal to him, though he knew it could not be avoided. The man was a notorious thief, whose last exploit had shown some ingenuity. Appearing at the house of a prosperous farmer, he had shown him a letter from a railroad contractor asking for the use of his best Clydesdale team on tempting terms. The farmer let the horses go and saw no more of them, while the contractor repudiated the letter. Glover was also supposed to have had a hand in one or two more serious affairs.

"I guess we'll have to get after him," said the trooper. "Where'll he make for?"

"Jepson's, sure. I don't know another house near the Sand Belt he could reach to-night, and Jepson's most as slippery a tough as Glover is."

"It's a mighty long ride," said Stanton, "My ranger will stand for it; I don't know about your gray."

"He'll have to make it," Curtis answered shortly. "Get your saddle on."

When Stanton went out Curtis stood up regretfully, for he was aching from a long journey in the stinging cold and the room looked very comfortable. An effort was required to leave it, and he had not much expectation of making a capture that would stand to his credit. Jepson and his brother were cunning rogues; Glover had escaped once or twice already, and Curtis realized that the chances were in favor of his returning after a fruitless ride. Nevertheless, his duty was plain; he had been trained to disregard fatigue and most physical weaknesses, and he went out resignedly into the arctic frost.

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They set off a few minutes later, and Curtis had the depressing feeling that he was riding a worn-out mount, though there was some consolation in the thought that the range of the service carbine might, in case of necessity, make up for his lack of speed. When he met the biting north wind that swept the plain the warmth seemed to leave his body; his mittened hands stiffened on the bridle, and it was only resolution that kept him in the saddle. He would run less risk of frost-bite if he walked, but time would not permit this and the claims of the service are more important than the loss of a trooper's feet or hands. If he were crippled and incapacitated, there was a small pension; it was his business to face the risks of the weather.

They rode on with lowered heads, fine snow stinging their faces now and then, and though its touch was inexpressibly painful they were glad they retained the power of feeling. When that went, more serious trouble would begin. For a while a half moon shone down, and their black shadows sped on before them across the glittering plain, but by and by clouds drove up and the prairie grew dim. It changed to a stretch of soft grayish-blue, with the trail they followed running across it a narrow stretch of darker color. The light, however, was not wholly obscured; they could see a bluff stand out, a bank of shadow, a mile away. Once they saw the cheerful lights of a farm in the distance and a longing for warmth and the company of their fellow-creatures seized them, but this was a desire that must be subdued, and, leaving the beaten trail they pressed on into the waste. Save for the faint, doleful sound the wind made it was dauntingly silent and desolate. There was not a bush to break its gray surface, and the frost was intense. They bore it uncomplainingly for an hour or two, and then Stanton broke out:

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"I'll have to get down or I'll lose my foot! I'll run a while beside my horse and then catch you up."

Curtis nodded and trotted on, breasting the wind which, so far as he could judge from his sensations, was turning him into ice. He could hear Stanton behind him, but that was the only sound of life in the vast desolation. After a while the trooper came up at a gallop, and Curtis called to him sharply:

"Any better?"

"No feeling in my foot yet," said Stanton. "I'm anxious about it, but I couldn't drop too far behind you. We have no time to lose."

"That's so," Curtis answered. "Glover will pull out from Jepson's long before morning. He won't rest much until he's a day's ride from the nearest post."

They went on, and some time later the moon shone through again, flooding the plain with light. It was welcome because they were now entering the Sand Belt where scrub trees were scattered among little hills. Pushing through it, they came to a taller ridge late at night, and Curtis drew bridle on its summit. A faint, warm gleam appeared on the snow about a mile away.

"Jepson's," said Curtis. "Looks as if he had some reason for sitting up quite a while after he ought to be in bed."

Stanton glanced thoughtfully down the slope in front. It was smooth and unbroken, a long, gradual descent, and he knew the farm stood on the flat at its foot. A straggling poplar bluff grew close up to the back of the buildings, but there was nothing that would cover the approach of the police, and he had no doubt that a watch was being kept.

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"It's a pity the moon's so bright," he remarked. "There's a cloud or two driving up, but I don't know that they'll cover it."

"We can't wait. This is my notion—you'll turn back a piece and work down to the ravine that runs east behind the homestead. Stop when you can find cover and watch out well. I'll have to ride straight in."

"You want to be careful. There'll be three of them in the place, counting Glover, and they're a tough crowd."

Curtis smiled.

"Jepson has a pretty long head. He'll bluff, if he can, but he won't get himself into trouble for his partner. The thing's not serious enough for that."

"Anyway, you want to keep your eye on them," Stanton persisted. "Glover'll sure make for the ravine if he breaks out."

Turning his horse, he disappeared behind the ridge, while Curtis rode on toward the farm. Glancing up at the moon, he saw that the clouds were nearer it, though he could not be certain that they would obscure the light. This was unfortunate, because he knew that he and his horse would stand out sharply against the smooth expanse of snow. The light ahead grew brighter as he trotted on, urging his jaded mount in order to give the inmates of the homestead as short a warning as possible. Suddenly another patch of brightness appeared. It was a narrow streak at first, but it widened into an oblong and then went out. Somebody had opened the door of the homestead, and the next moment the first gleam faded and all was dark. Curtis was inclined to think this a mistake on Jepson's part, but he kept a very keen watch as the buildings grew into plainer shape against the shadowy bluff. He knew he must have been visible some minutes earlier.

At length he rode up to the little square house, which rose abruptly from the plain without fence or yard. It was dark and silent, and he was glad to remember that it had only one door, though there were one or two buildings close behind it. He was so numbed that it was difficult to dismount, but he got down clumsily and beat on the door for several minutes without getting an answer. This confirmed his suspicions, for he was convinced that Jepson had heard his vigorous knocking. Then the moonlight, which might have been useful now, died away, and the plain faded into obscurity. Curtis was making another attack on the door when a window above was flung up and a man leaned out, holding what looked suggestively like a rifle.

"Stand back from that door!" he cried. "What in thunder do you want?"

"Drop your gun!" said Curtis. "Come down right now and let me in!"

"I guess not! If you don't light out of this mighty quick, you'll get hurt!"

"Quit fooling, Jepson! You know who I am!"

"Seem to know your voice now," said the other, leaning farther out. "Why, it's Curtis!" He laid down the rifle and laughed. "You were near getting plugged. Figured you were one of those blamed rustlers—the country's full of them—Barton back at the muskeg lost a steer last week. What I want to know is—why the police don't get after them? Guess it would be considerably more useful than walking round the stations with a quirt under your arm."

The man was not talkative as a rule, and Curtis surmised that he wished to delay him.

"Come down!" he said sternly.

"I'll be along quick as I can," the other answered, and shut the window.

While he waited, Curtis listened with strained attention. He was inclined to think that Glover had already left the house, which must nevertheless be searched, but he could hear nothing except the dreary wail of wind in the neighboring bluff. His fingers were so numbed that he could scarcely hold his carbine, his horse stood wearily with drooping head, and when a minute or two had passed Curtis struck the door violently. It opened, and Jepson stood in the entrance, holding a lamp.

"All alone?" he remarked good-humoredly. "Where's your partner? But come in; it's fierce to-night."

"Then stand out of my way. I've come for Glover."

Jepson laughed.

"Looked as if you were after somebody. He isn't here, but you had better see for yourself. Walk right in; you're welcome to find him."

The house contained four small rooms, which had nothing in them that would hide a man, and in a minute or two Curtis sprang out of the door and scrambled to his saddle. He did not think Glover would seek refuge in any of the outbuildings, and he rode toward the thin bluff that hid the ravine. The man might have reached the trees, unseen, by keeping the house between himself and the slope down which Curtis had come. He had not left the house long before he heard the sharp drumming of a gallop, and drove his horse at the belt of timber. All had turned out as he had expected. Stanton had headed off Glover as he slipped away down the ravine, and the outlaw had broken out to the north, making for a tract of lonely, bluff-strewn country. He was now between the corporal and the trooper, and his capture might be looked for, provided that Curtis's mount could bear a sharp gallop, which was doubtful.

The sides of the ravine were steep and clothed with brush, there were fallen logs in the fringing bluff, but Curtis urged his jaded horse mercilessly toward the timber, and went through it with rotten branches smashing under him. Once or twice the beast stumbled, but it kept its feet, and in a few more moments they reeled down the declivity. A fall might result in the rider's getting a broken leg and afterward freezing to death, but Curtis took risks of this nature lightly, and, reaching the bottom safely, somewhat to his surprise, he struggled up the opposite ascent.

From the summit he saw two dark, mounted figures pressing across the open plain some distance apart. By riding straight out from the ravine he thought that he could cut off the leader. His weariness had fallen from him, the mad drumming of hoofs fired his blood, and as he burst out of the timber at a gallop the moon came through. The fugitive seemed to hear him, for he altered his course a little—he could not swerve much without approaching Stanton—and for a few minutes Curtis shortened the distance between them. Then his horse began to flag; it looked as if Glover might escape, after all, though he must still draw nearer to the trooper before he got away.

Curtis, roughly calculating speed and distance, pulled up his horse. Springing from the saddle, he flung himself down in the snow, and for a few seconds gripped his carbine tight. Then there was a flash and little spirts of snow leaped up one after another ahead of the outlaw. Curtis pressed down the rear sight and fired again; but Glover was still riding hard, with Stanton dropping behind him. At the third shot Glover's horse went down in a struggling heap, hiding its rider. A few moments later the man reappeared, and began to run, but he stopped as Stanton came down on him at a gallop, and Curtis got up hastily. Glover made a sign of submission, and the next minute Stanton sprang to the ground beside him.

"Hold up your hands!" he ordered sharply, and there was a clink as the irons snapped to.

After that the trooper turned to Curtis, who was hurrying toward them.

"Lend me your carbine; mine's clean."

He walked to the fallen horse, which was struggling feebly, and, stooping down he examined it. Then there was a crash and a puff of smoke, and he rejoined the corporal.

"Nothing else that could be done," he explained.

Curtis spoke to the prisoner.

"Come along. You had better not try to break away."

They went back to the homestead where they found Jepson waiting for them. He looked disturbed.

"I told you he wasn't here," he said. "How was I to know he was hiding in the ravine?"

Curtis gave him a searching glance.

"We'll consider that later. I want your team and wagon, some blankets, and driving-ropes."

"Am I bound to outfit the police?"

"I guess you had better. Your record's none too good."

He led his prisoner into the kitchen, where the stove was burning, and, laying his carbine on the table, he loosed the handcuffs and bade the man take off his long coat.

"Go through his pockets, Stanton," he said.

The trooper did as he was told, but nothing of any importance was produced. The man was not armed, and there were only a few silver coins and bills for small amounts in his possession. Curtis stood wearily, regarding him with a thoughtful smile.

"Where did you get that jacket, Glover?" he asked.

"Where do you generally get such things? At the store."

"Just so," said Curtis. "I can't see why you didn't buy one that fitted you." He turned suddenly to Jepson. "Bring me his jacket."

The farmer made an abrupt movement, and then seemed to pull himself up, and stood still.

"I've no use for that kind of fooling; he has it on!"

"I don't think so," said Curtis meaningly. "Give Stanton a light and he'll look for it."

The trooper came back in a few minutes with a garment which he had found under a bed, and Curtis bade him put it on the prisoner.

"Right size, same stuff as the trousers, and worn about as much," he remarked. "Now you can take it off and search it."

There was nothing in the pockets, but after a careful examination Stanton felt a lump inside the lining. He ripped that, and took out a wad of carefully folded bills. On opening them, he found that they were for twenty dollars each, and clean. The corporal's face grew suddenly intent.

"Where did you get them?" he asked.

"You can find out!" muttered Glover, who had shown signs of dismay.

Curtis turned to Jepson.

"It looks as if he trusted you farther than I would; but harness your team quick, and if your brother's hanging round outside, tell him that he'll run up against trouble if he interferes."

They sat down and waited until the farmer brought a wagon to the door, and then they drove away through the stinging cold with their prisoner.

CHAPTER XXIV

MURIEL PROVES OBDURATE

Some time after leaving Jepson's Curtis was joined by two police troopers, despatched by the sergeant who had telegraphed to him. He handed over his prisoner and the wagon to them, though he asked permission to keep the wad of bills. Then Stanton unhitched the jaded horses from the back of the vehicle, and while the others drove back to the west he and Curtis rode on to the post. Reaching it, half frozen, in the morning, they filled up the stove and went to sleep until supper time. When the meal was over they sat down to smoke and talk.

Stanton felt lazily good-humored. A sound sleep had refreshed him, and though his limbs still ached, he was enjoying the pleasant, physical reaction which usually succeeds fatigue and exposure to the arctic frost. What was better, he had assisted in the successful completion of an arduous piece of work. Curtis lay back in a chair opposite him, pipe in mouth, his expression suggesting quiet satisfaction.

"Toes feeling pretty good?" he inquired by and by.

"I'm glad to say they are, though I thought I was in for trouble," Stanton said with a deprecatory smile. "I allow that frost-bite's a thing I'm easy scared about, after the patrol I made with Stafford through the northern bush last winter. Got his foot wet with mushy snow crossing a rapid where the ice was working, and it froze bad; had to pack him the last two hundred miles on the sled, with the dogs getting used up, and the grub running out. They paid him off at Regina and sent him home; but Stafford will never put on an ordinary boot again."

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"A frozen foot's bad enough, if you have to walk until it galls," Curtis admitted. "A hand's easier looked after, though I've three fingers I'm never quite sure of. That's one reason it took so much shooting before I plugged Glover's horse."

"You were pretty cute about his jacket," Stanton remarked.

"That was easy enough. The thing was too big for him and newer than his trousers. Soon as I noticed it, I knew I'd dropped on to something worth following up."

"I can't see what you made of it, and you haven't told me yet."

"I was too dog-goned cold and tired to talk; wanted to make the post and get to sleep. However, though I gave Crane's boys no hint, I'll show you what I've been figuring on. Consider yourself a jury and tell me how it strikes you. You have as much intelligence as the general run of them."

"If I hadn't any more than the kind of jurymen we're usually up against, I'd quit the service," Stanton declared.

The corporal's eyes twinkled.

"If you'll learn to think and not hustle, you'll make a useful man some day. Anyhow, the first thing I caught on to was that Glover had taken off his jacket because there was something in it he didn't want us to find. Next, that it was money or valuables, because he could have put any small thing into the stove or hid it in the snow before he lit out. Now, Glover knew it was kind of dangerous to leave his jacket with Jepson, who might find the bills, and as he couldn't tell you were in the ravine he must have thought he had a good chance of getting clear away; but, for all that, he wouldn't risk taking the wad along. Guess there's only one explanation—he'd a reason for being mighty afraid of those bills falling into our hands. That was plain enough when I asked him about his jacket."

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"Yes," Stanton said thoughtfully; "I guess you have got it right. But what was his reason? He knows Crane can have him sent up for horse-stealing."

Curtis, opening a drawer, took out a slip of paper with some numbers on it, and then laid the wad of bills on the table.

"Twenty dollars each, Merchants' Bank, and quite clean," he said.

"It was a five-dollar bill on the same bank we found at the muskeg!" cried Stanton, starting.

"It was." Curtis took up the list. "Now here are the numbers of the twenty-dollar bills Morant at Sebastian got from the bank a day or two before he made the deal with Jernyngham; it was with those bills he paid him the night he disappeared." He paused and added significantly, "I guess we have got some of them here."

This proved to be correct when they had compared them with the list. Then Curtis leaned back in his chair and filled his pipe.

"It's a mighty curious case," he remarked.

"Sure," replied Stanton. "You get no farther with it. You have points against three different men, and it's pretty clear that they haven't been working together. They can't all have killed the man."

"That's true. Well, I've made a report for Regina, and they'll keep Glover safe until we want him. I can't tell what our chiefs will do; but as Glover's not likely to tell them anything, I guess they'll hold this matter over until we find out more." He locked up the money. "Now we'll quit talking about it. I want to give my mind a rest."

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Curtis had few of the qualities needed for the making of a great detective; he was merely a painstaking, determined man, with a capacity for earnest work, which is perhaps more useful than genius in the ranks of the Northwest Police. He could tirelessly follow the dog-sleds, sometimes on the scantiest rations, for hundreds of miles over the snow, sleeping in the open in the arctic frost. He had made long forced marches to succor improvident settlers starving far out in the wilds; in the fierce heat of summer he made his patrols, watching the progress of the

grass-fires, sternly exacting from the ranchers the plowing of the needed guards; and cattle-thieves prudently avoided the district that he ruled with firm benevolence. The man was a worthy type of his people, the new nation that is rising in the West: forceful, steadfast, direct, and, as a rule, devoid of mental subtleties. He admitted that the Jernyngham mystery, every clue to which broke off as he began to follow it, was harassing him.

While he spent the evening, lounging in well-earned leisure beside the stove, Mrs. Colston was talking seriously to her sister in a room of the Leslie homestead. Owing to the number of its inmates, she had found it difficult to get a word with the girl alone, and now that an opportunity had come, she felt that she must make the most of it.

"Muriel," she said, "do you think it's judicious to speak so strongly in Prescott's favor as you have done of late? You were rude to Gertrude last night."

The girl colored. She had, as a matter of fact, lost her temper, which was generally quick.

"I hate injustice!" she broke out. "Gertrude and her father make such an unfair use of everything they can find against him, and I think Gertrude's the worse of the two." She looked hard at her sister. "She shows a rancor against the man which even the disappearance of her brother doesn't account for."

The same idea had occurred to Mrs. Colston, but it was a side issue and she was not to be drawn away from the point.

"You stick to the word disappearance," she said.

"Yes," Muriel answered steadily. "Cyril Jernyngham isn't dead!"

"You have only Prescott's word for that."

Muriel made no answer for a few moments; then she looked up with a resolute expression.

"I'm satisfied with it!"

Her sister understood this as a challenge. She had indulged in hints and indirect warnings, and they had been disregarded. The situation now needed more drastic treatment.

"That," she said, "is a significant admission; I can't let it pass. Your prejudice in favor of the man has, of course, been noticeable; you have even let him see it. Don't you realize what damaging conclusions one might draw from it?"

"Damaging?" Muriel's eyes were fixed on her sister, though her face was hot. "As you have been thinking of all this for some time, perhaps you had better explain and get it over."

Mrs. Colston leaned forward with a severe expression.

"I feel that some candor is necessary. You have taken the man's side openly; you have sympathized with him; I might even say that you have led him on."

Muriel's wayward temperament drove her to the verge of an outbreak, but with an effort at self-control, she sat still, and her sister resumed:

"Besides his lying under suspicion, the man is a mere working farmer, imperfectly educated, forced to live in a most primitive manner, thinking of nothing but his crops and horses."

"He is not imperfectly educated! As a matter of fact, he knows more about most things than we do; but that's not important. Mind, I'm admitting nothing of all that you suggest, but you might have said that I'm a penniless girl, living on your husband's charity. I must confess that he gives it very willingly."

"That is precisely why I'm anxious about your future." Mrs. Colston's voice softened to a tone of genuine solicitude. "Of course, we are glad to have you—Harry has always been fond of you—but, for your sake, I could wish you a completer life in a home of your own. But so much depends on the choice you make."

"Yes; a very great deal depends on that. I'm expected, of course, to make a brilliant match!"

"Not necessarily brilliant, but there are things we have always enjoyed which must be looked for—a good name, position, the right to meet people brought up as we have been, on an equal footing."

Muriel broke in upon her with a strained laugh.

"Once, for a little while, it looked as if we should have to do without them, and somehow I wasn't very much alarmed. But your list's rather short and incomplete. There are one or two quite as important things you might have added to it; though perhaps I'm exacting."

There was silence for a few moments, and a faint flicker of color crept into Mrs. Colston's face while the girl mused. Her sister had got all she asked for, but Muriel suspected that she was not content; now and then, indeed, she had seen a hint of weariness in her expression. Harry Colston made a model husband in some respects, but he had his limitations. His virtues were commonplace and sometimes tedious; his intelligence was less than his wife's. Muriel was fond of him, but his unwavering good-nature and placidity irritated her. She was inclined to be sorry for her sister in some ways.

"Muriel," Mrs. Colston resumed gently, "your happiness means a good deal to me. A mistake might cost you dear, and, after all, one cannot have everything."

"That is obviously true. I suppose it's a question of what one values most, or perhaps what most strongly appeals to one's fancy. It would be difficult to fix an accurate standard for judging

suitors by, wouldn't it?" Then her tone grew scornful. "Besides, as those who are eligible aren't numerous, a girl's expected to wait with an encouraging smile and thankfully take what comes."

Mrs. Colston looked at her reproachfully.

"You're hardly just, my dear; I only urge you to be prudent now."

"Prudence is such a cold-blooded thing! I'm afraid I never had it. After all, what seems wise to me might appear to be folly to you. I think if ever what looks like a chance of happiness is offered me, I shall take all risks and clutch at it."

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She picked up a book, as if to intimate that she had no more to say, and Mrs. Colston wondered whether her worst fears were justified or whether Muriel had been behaving with unusual perverseness. In either case, she might make things worse by laboring the subject. She hesitated a moment and then went out in search of her husband.

"Harry," she said, "we have been away a long while. Don't you think it is time to go home?"

"No," he answered; "I haven't thought so. What suggested the idea?"

It was obvious that he had no suspicion of her motive, and she was not prepared to explain that she wished to place Muriel beyond Prescott's reach.

"Well," she said lamely, "aren't you rather neglecting your duties?"

"No," Colston replied with a smile; "as they're to a large extent merely formal ones, I believe they can wait a little longer without much harm being done."

Mrs. Colston was surprised. She had not expected such an admission from her husband, though she agreed with him. Harry was not, as a rule, susceptible to new impressions, but there was a subtle influence in the simple life on the prairies which altered one's point of view and led to one's forming a new estimate of values. She had felt this. Things which had seemed essential in England somehow lost their importance in Canada.

"Besides," he resumed, "you will remember that I made arrangements to be away a year, if necessary, and perhaps if I make the most of my opportunities in this country, I may have something worth while to say when we go home again."

This was more in his usual vein; but his wife did not encourage him. Harry was apt to grow tiresome in his improving mood.

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"But you don't think of staying the full year?" she asked in alarm.

"Oh, no; we might wait another week or two, or even a month more. It wouldn't be the thing to desert Jernyngham; and, as we're mixed up in it, I feel it would be better to see the matter through." He smiled at his wife with cumbrous gallantry. "Then, though you always look charming, you're now unusually fresh and fit; there's no doubt that the place agrees with you."

Mrs. Colston could not deny it. She yielded for the present, deciding to wait until some turn of events rendered him more amenable. In spite of his good humor, Harry was obstinate and often hard to move.

She went to join Gertrude, while Muriel, sitting alone where she had been left, laid down her book, and let her eyes range slowly round the room, trying to analyze the impression it made on her. There was no carpet on the floor; the walls were made of mill-dressed boards which had cracked with the dryness and smelt of turpentine. The furniture consisted of a few bent-hardwood chairs and a rickety table covered with a gaudy cloth. The nicked lamp, which diffused an unpleasant odor, was of florid but very inartistic design; the plain stove stood in an ugly iron tray, and its galvanized pipe ran up, unconcealed, to the ceiling. A black distillate had trickled down from a bend in it, and stained the floor.

Muriel realized that had she been expected to live in such a place in England it would have struck her as comfortless, and almost squalid; but now, perhaps by contrast with the frozen desolation without, it looked cheerful, and had a homelike air. This, she thought, was significant, and she followed up the train of ideas to which it led. She had a practical, independent bent; she liked to handle and investigate things for herself, to get into close and intimate touch with life. At home, this had not often been possible; she was too sheltered and, in a sense, too secluded. The people she met were conventional, acting in accordance with a recognized code, concealing their feelings. If she rode or drove, somebody got ready the horse for her; it was the same with the car. When she strolled through an English garden, she might pluck a flower or take pleasure in the smoothness of the lawn, but it was always with the feeling that others had planted and mown. She could take no active part in things; there was little that she could really do.

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It was different on the Western prairie. Here men and women showed anger or sorrow or gladness more or less openly. One could realize their emotions, and this, instead of deterring, attracted her; one came to close grips with the primitive influences of human nature. Then they were strenuous people, toiling stubbornly, rejoicing in tangible results that their hands and brains had produced. Woman was man's real helpmate, not a companion for his idle hours. She kept his house, and in time of pressure drove his horses; she had her say in determining the count of the cattle and the bushels of seed, and it was sometimes conceded that her judgment was the better.

But this was only one aspect of the subject that filled the girl's thoughts. She knew that Prescott loved her and she was glad of it; but here she stopped. She was sanguine, impulsive, courageous, but, with all that could be said for it, the change she must face if he claimed her

was a startling one. Besides, he must clear himself of suspicion, and because the part of a mere looker-on was uncongenial, there was a course which she would urge on him. She must see him and convince him of the necessity for it. Soon after she had made up her mind on this point, Jernyngham and Colston came in, and she had to talk to them.

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CHAPTER XXV

A WOMAN'S INFLUENCE

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Muriel found it needful to wait several days for an opportunity for speaking to Prescott. It did not seem advisable to visit his house again, and she was at a loss for a means of meeting him when she overheard Leslie tell his wife that he would ask Prescott, who was going to Sebastian the next morning, to bring out some stores they required. The next day Muriel borrowed a team and, contenting herself with an intimation that she was going for a long drive, set off for the settlement. It would be time enough to confess her object if her sister taxed her with it, and there were one or two purchases she really wished to make.

She had never gone so far alone, though she had occasionally driven to an outlying farm, and the expedition had in it the zest of adventure. Moreover, she was boldly going to undertake a very unusual task in showing Prescott what he ought to do. So far, she had been an interested spectator of the drama of life, but now she would participate in it, exercising such powers as she possessed, and the thought was additionally fascinating because among her intimate friends she could not pick out a man who owed much to a woman's guidance. Her sister had some mental gifts, but Harry Colston, disregarding her in a good-humored but dogged fashion, did what he thought best; while the idea of Jernyngham's deferring to Gertrude was frankly ridiculous. Neither man had much ability; indeed, it was, as a rule, the dullest men who were most convinced of their superior sense. Prescott far surpassed them in intellect; but she pulled herself up. She was not going to dwell on Prescott's virtues unduly, and she had not convinced him yet.

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The team gave her no trouble, the trail was good, and reaching Sebastian safely, she spent some time in a drygoods store, and afterward went to the hotel, where supper was being served. She would not have waited for it, only that she had seen nothing of Prescott, and she had the excuse that the team must have a rest. On entering the big dining-room she was inclined to regret that meals can rarely be had in private in the West, although, by the favor of a waitress, she succeeded in obtaining a small table to herself. There were only two women present, clerks in the store, she believed, but the room was nearly filled with men. Among them were ranchers with faces darkened by the glare of the snow, some of them wearing shabby coats from which the fur was coming off, though the room was warm; a few railroad hands who laid sooty mittens on the table; the smart station-agent; a number of storekeepers and clerks. Now and then boisterous laughter rang out, and one group indulged in rather pointed banter, while the way that several of them used their knives and forks left much to be desired; but nobody regarded the girl with marked attention. For all that, she was sensible of some relief when Prescott came in and moved toward her table.

"May I take this place?" he asked.

"Of course," she said.

After speaking to a waitress, he inquired whether Colston or her sister were at the hotel.

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"No; I drove in alone."

She saw his surprise, which suggested that her task might prove more difficult than she had imagined.

"Well," he said, "the trail's pretty good and there's a moon to-night; but didn't you hesitate about getting supper here by yourself?"

"Not very much; there was really no reason why I should hesitate."

"That's true. But you had your doubts?"

"They were foolish," Muriel told him. "Why are you so curious?"

"I'm interested." He indicated the room and its occupants. "These people, their manners, and surroundings are typical of the New West."

"Do you feel that you ought to defend them?"

"Oh, no! They don't need it. They have their faults and their virtues, and neither are mean. They've the makings of a big nation and they're doing great work to-day. However, you had certainly no cause for uneasiness; there's not a man in the place who would have shown you the least disrespect."

"After all," Muriel contended, "they're not your people. You came from Montreal; your ideas and

habits are more like ours than theirs."

"They're mine by adoption; I've thrown in my lot with them." He fixed his eyes on her. "Do you know the secret of making colonization a success? In a way, it's a hard truth, but it's this—there must be no looking back. The old ties must be cut loose once for all; a man must think of the land in which he prospers as his home; it's not a square deal to run back with the money he has made in it. He must grow up with the rising nation he becomes a member of."

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"Yes," Muriel conceded slowly; "I think that is so. But it's harder for a woman."

"And yet have you seen any one who looked unhappy?"

"No," she admitted with thoughtful candor. "The few I have got to know seem to have an importance that perhaps is not very common at home. For instance, I heard Leslie giving his wife his reasons for thinking of buying some Hereford cattle, and his respect for her opinion impressed me."

Prescott smiled.

"If I were going to sell those beasts, I'd rather make the deal with her husband."

Then he changed the subject and they talked in a lighter vein until the room began to empty and a waitress came to collect the plates.

"Don't they close this place as soon as supper is finished?" Muriel asked, trying to overcome her diffidence. "Where can I have a word or two with you? I was afraid that somebody might overhear us here."

"The parlor would be best," he answered in some surprise. "The boys prefer the downstairs room and the bar. I'll tell the man about my horse, and then I'll be there."

Muriel found the few minutes she had to wait trying, but she gathered her courage when he joined her.

"Sit down," she said with an air of decision. "I'd better begin at once, and the thing is serious. What have you done to clear yourself, since I last saw you?"

His searching glance filled her with misgivings; without being subtle, he was by no means dull, and he must be curious about her motive in asking him. To her relief, however, he confined himself to the point she had raised.

"Nothing. I don't see what can be done."

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"Then are you content to remain suspected?"

"No; I'm not content! But as I seem to be helpless, the fools who can only judge by appearances and the others who are quick to think the worst of me must believe what they like. Anyway, their opinion doesn't count for much."

"How can people judge except by appearances?" Muriel argued. "Besides, do you divide everybody you know into those two classes?"

He looked hard at her and, to her annoyance, she grew confused.

"No," he said slowly; "that would be very wrong—I was too quick. There are a few with generous minds who haven't turned against me and I'm very grateful."

"It might have been enough if you had said they had sense; but don't you feel you owe them something? Is it fair to keep silence and do nothing while they fight your battle?"

"Are there people who are doing so?"

"Yes," Muriel answered steadily. "You oughtn't to doubt it. You're wronging your friends."

His expression betokened a strong effort at self-control.

"Well," he said, "it seems I have a duty to them, but how I'm to get about it is more than I know."

"Have you thought of telling the police about your journey to British Columbia and what you learned about Cyril Jernyngham?"

"I'm afraid they wouldn't believe me. Then there's the trouble that the man I followed called himself Kermodé."

"Never mind. Tell them; tell everybody you know."

"It would be useless," Prescott said doggedly.

"You're wrong," Muriel persisted. "When a thing is talked about enough, people begin to believe it. Besides, it would give your supporters an argument against the doubtful. I'm afraid they need one after the finding of the clothes."

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"The clothes? What clothes?"

Muriel's faith in Prescott had never been shaken, but his surprise caused her keen satisfaction, and she told him all she knew about Jernyngham's discovery.

"Still, I don't see what finding them there could signify," he said when she had finished.

"Then you don't know that a day or two after Cyril Jernyngham disappeared, a man dressed in clothes like those found, sold some land of his at a place called Navarino?"

Prescott started.

"It's the first I've heard of it. There's some villainy here; the things must have been hidden near my house with the object of strengthening suspicion against me!"

"Of course! But you can't think that Jernyngham had a hand in it?"

"Oh, no! The man is trying to ruin me, but that kind of meanness isn't in his line. Perhaps I'd better say that I never had clothes like those and that I sold no land of Cyril's."

"Mr. Prescott," Muriel murmured shyly, "it isn't necessary to tell me this; I never doubted it."

"Thank you," he answered shortly, but there was trouble in his voice and the girl thought she knew what his reticence cost.

"Well," she said, "you will tell other people this and go to see Corporal Curtis? You agreed that women have some power here, and, even if you're not convinced, you will do what I ask because I wish it?"

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"You have my promise."

He walked toward the window and stood looking out for a moment or two before he turned to her again.

"Don't you think you had better start for home? The moon looks hazy. May I drive out with you?"

Muriel had shrunk from the long journey in the dark, and she readily agreed.

"I'll tell them to bring your team round," he said, moving toward the door. "Get off as soon as you're ready, and I'll come along when I've collected a few things I bought."

The girl let him go, appreciating his consideration, for she guessed his thoughts. He was under suspicion and would give the tatlers in the town nothing on which to base conjectures. It hurt her pride, however, to admit that such precautions had better be taken.

Leaving the hotel, she found the trail smooth when she had crossed the track, but after she passed the last of the fences the waste looked very dreary. The moon was dimmed by thin, driving clouds, and the deep silence grew depressing; the loneliness weighed on her, and she began to listen eagerly for the beat of hoofs. For a time she heard nothing and she had grown angry with Prescott for delaying when a measured drumming stole out of the distance and her feeling of cheerfulness and security returned. Its significance was not lost on her: she was learning to depend on the man, to long for his society. Then, for no obvious reason, she urged the team and kept ahead for a while. When he came up with an explanation about a missing package, she laughed half-mockingly, and on the whole felt glad that the narrowness of the trail, which compelled him to follow, made conversation difficult.

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An hour after she left the settlement the moon was hidden and fine snow began to fall. It grew thicker, gradually covering the trail, until Muriel had some difficulty in distinguishing it. The sleigh was running heavily, and after a while Prescott told her to stop.

"I'll go ahead, and then you can follow my buggy," he said. "There won't be much snow."

Muriel felt that there was quite enough to have made her very anxious had she been alone, but when he passed and took his place in front she drove on in confidence. She remembered that this was not a new feeling. He was a man who could be trusted; one felt safe with him. Now and then she could hardly see the buggy and she was glad of his cheery laugh and the somewhat inconsequent remarks he flung back to her when the haze of driving flakes grew thicker. So far as she could see, the trail now differed in nothing from the rest of the wilderness, but he held on without hesitation, and she felt no surprise when once or twice a belt of trees she remembered loomed up. They made better progress when the snow ceased, and at length Prescott stopped his horse and she saw a faint blink of light some distance off.

"That's Leslie's," he said. "Shall I drive to the house with you?"

"No, that isn't needful, thank you."

"Then I'll wait until I see the door open. I'll look up Curtis in the morning."

Muriel turned off toward the farm, where she found Colston and her sister disturbed by her absence.

"Where have you been?" Mrs. Colston asked. "You have frightened us. Harry would have driven out to look for you if he had known which way to go."

"I went to the settlement. I bought the things we spoke about, and I met Mr. Prescott, who brought me home." Muriel spoke in a tone that discouraged further questions. "Now I'm very cold, Harry, you might shake the snow from those furs."

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She left them soon afterward, pleading fatigue, and went to sleep, feeling satisfied with what she had done and knowing that Prescott would keep his promise.

Her confidence was justified, for on the following day he drove over to the police post and found Curtis alone.

"I've come to tell you something and I'll ask you to let me get through before you begin to talk," he said.

Curtis showed no surprise and indicated a chair.

"Sit there and go ahead."

He listened with close attention while Prescott described his journey and recounted all that he had learned about Kermode.

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier?" Curtis asked.

"I couldn't imagine that you would believe it."

"Then what makes you think I'll believe it now?"

"To be honest, I don't care whether you do or not."

Curtis sat silent a few moments.

"What you have told me amounts to this," he then summed up: "you have heard of a man who seems to look like Cyril Jernyngham."

"It's as much to the purpose that he acts like him. I've told you all I learned about his doings and you can judge for yourself. You knew the man."

"So do you," said Curtis pointedly.

Prescott smiled.

"Leave it at that. I want you to find out whether I'm correct or not. You made some inquiries along the new line?"

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"We didn't go far west," Curtis admitted. "There were difficulties, and we couldn't see much reason for the search. It was quite clear to me that Jernyngham was knocked out near the muskeg." He looked hard at Prescott. "It isn't easy to change that opinion."

"It seems your duty to test it. Even if the thing costs some trouble, can't you instruct your people in Alberta to find out whether a man called Kermode worked in any of the construction camps, and if they're satisfied that he answers Jernyngham's description, to have him followed up in British Columbia?"

"There's a point you haven't got hold of," Curtis replied. "When you struck a camp, asking after your partner, the boys were ready to talk to you; but it's quite different when a trooper comes along. I wouldn't have much use for anything they told him."

Prescott realized the truth of this. Traveling on foot in search of a working comrade, he had been received by the railroad hands as one of themselves; but he knew that men with checkered careers which would not bear investigation found refuge among the toilers on the new lines, and that even those who had nothing to fear would consider reticence becoming when questioned by the police. The only excuse for loquacity would be the sending of an inquisitive constable on a fruitless expedition.

"Then can't you try the bosses?" he asked.

"I guess they're not likely to have found out much about the man, and the boys wouldn't tell them. However, I'll send up a report and see what can be done."

"Thanks," said Prescott, and then asked bluntly: "What do you make of the brown clothes?"

"So you heard they were found!" said Curtis with some dryness. "I haven't done figuring on the matter yet."

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"I don't suppose I'd help you by saying that they don't belong to me."

Curtis looked at him thoughtfully but made no answer for a while. Then:

"Did you ever see anybody wearing a suit like that?" he asked.

"Well," Prescott answered, "I believe I once did, but I can't think who it was. I've been trying hard to remember all day and it may come back."

He got up and Curtis walked to the door with him.

"Frost's keeping pretty keen," he remarked.

Prescott drove away, and the corporal was smoking near the stove when Stanton came in.

"You look as if you'd been studying the Jernyngham case," he said. "I'll allow it's enough to get on your nerves."

"Prescott's been here," replied Curtis. "He's heard those blamed clothes were found, and that's going to make us trouble. We've had Jernyngham interfering and mussing up the tracks, and now Prescott's getting ready to butt in. I expect he'll be off to Navarino very soon, and we can't stop him unless we arrest him, which I'm not ready to do."

"Did he tell you he was going?"

"It wasn't needed; I've been figuring out the thing."

"Well," remarked Stanton with a thoughtful air, "he wouldn't let that land agent see him if he'd been guilty."

Curtis reserved his opinion.

"You're getting smart," he said with a grin. "Still, you don't want to hustle."

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"Hustle?" Stanton rejoined scornfully. "Jernyngham was killed last summer and we haven't corralled anybody yet!"

"That's so," Curtis assented tranquilly, "I've heard of the boys getting the right man nearly two

CHAPTER XXVI

PRESCOTT MAKES INQUIRIES

Supper was over and Laxton, the land agent, sat in the rotunda of the leading hotel at Navarino. It was a handsome building, worthy of the new town which had sprung into existence on the discovery that a wide belt of somewhat arid country, hitherto passed over by settlers, was capable of growing excellent wheat. As soon as this was proved, rude shacks and mean frame houses had been torn down, and banks, stores, and hotels, of stone or steel and cement rose in their places. Great irrigation ditches were dug and a period of feverish prosperity began.

Though the frost was almost arctic outside, the rotunda was pleasantly warm and was dimmed, in spite of its glaring lamps, with a haze of cigar smoke. In front of the great plate-glass windows rows of men sat in tilted chairs, their feet on a brass rail, basking in the dry heat of the radiators. Drummers and land speculators were busy writing and consulting maps at the tables farther back among the ornate columns, and the place was filled with the hum of eager voices. The town was crowded with homestead-selectors, and many, braving the rigors of winter, were camping on their new possessions in frail tents and rude board shacks, ready to begin work in the spring. Indeed, determined men had slept in the snow on the sidewalks outside the land offices to secure first attention in the morning when cheap locations were offered for settlement.

Laxton had had a tiring day, and he was leaning back lazily in his chair, watching the crowd, when a man entered the turnstile-door, which was fitted with glass valves to keep out the cold. He looked about the room as if in search of somebody; and then after speaking to the clerk came toward the land agent. Laxton glanced at him without much interest, having already as much business on his hands as he could manage. The stranger wore an old fur-coat and looked like a rancher.

“Mr. Laxton, I believe,” he said, taking the next chair.

The land agent nodded and the other continued:

“My name’s Prescott. I’ve come over from Sebastian to have a talk with you.”

“I suppose I’ll have to spare you a few minutes,” said Laxton with more resignation than curiosity.

“In the first place, I want to ask if you have ever seen me before?”

Laxton looked at him with greater interest. The man’s brown face was eager, his eyes were keen, with a sparkle in them that hinted at determination.

“Well,” he said, “I can’t recollect it.”

“Would you be willing to swear to that?”

“Don’t know that I’d go quite so far; I don’t see why I should.”

Prescott took out a sheet of paper with some writing on it.

“Do you recognize that hand?”

“No,” said the agent decidedly. “It’s a bold style that one ought to notice, but I don’t think I’ve seen it.” Then he looked up sharply. “What you getting after?”

“I’ll explain in a minute. Let me say that I’ve examined the land sale record here, and have found a deal registered that you were concerned in. It was made in the name of Cyril Jernyngham.”

Laxton started.

“Look here,” he said, “I’ve had a lot of trouble over this thing since I was fool enough to write to the police; in fact, I’ve had enough of the Jernyngham case.” He broke off for a moment as a light dawned on him and then went on: “It’s a sure thing I haven’t met you, but, when I think, there was a young lad something like you among others in blanket-coats in a photograph a sergeant brought me. Montreal snowshoe or toboggan club, I guess.”

“I don’t know how the police got it. But what did you tell the sergeant?”

“Said it was no use showing me a photograph like that, because I didn’t trade with kids.”

“Then, as I’m the man the police suspect of selling that land of Jernyngham’s, it would be a great favor if you’ll tell me candidly what you know about the matter.”

“Hang up your coat,” said Laxton; “I’ll do what I can. Anyway, you’re not the fellow I made the deal with.”

He drew out a cigar-case when Prescott came back.

"Take a smoke and go ahead. I'm willing to talk."

"First of all, turn over the paper I gave you and look at the signature."

"Cyril Jernyngham!" exclaimed Laxton, astonished. "I see your point—the hand ought to be the same as that on the sale registration form, and I might have been expected to recognize it, but I can't remember all the writing I see. However, we'll compare it with the other signature tomorrow."

"When you do so, you'll find a difference."

"Ah!" said Laxton. "Then whose hand is this?"

"Cyril Jernyngham's. It was written in my presence, and what's more important, in the presence of another man. Now will you tell me what the fellow who made the deal with you was like?"

Laxton did so, and Prescott thought the description indicated Wandle, though he was not the only man in the neighborhood of Sebastian to whom it might apply.

"Did you notice how he was dressed?" he asked.

"He had on a suit of new brown clothes."

Prescott sat still, his brows knitted, his right hand clenched. The reason why the clothes had been hidden near his house was obvious, but there was something else: a blurred memory that was growing into shape. Ever since he had heard about them from Muriel, he had been trying to think where he had seen the clothes, and at last he seemed to hold a clue. In another few moments it led him to the truth; everything was clear. He had once met Wandle driving toward the settlement wearing such a suit, and by good fortune he had shortly afterward been overtaken by a farmer who must have seen the man. In his excitement he struck the table.

"Now I know!" he cried. "The man who forged Jernyngham's name hid his clothes near my house to fix the thing on me. I owe you a good deal for your help in a puzzling matter."

The agent was sympathetic, and after Prescott had given him an outline of his connection with the case, they sat talking over its details. Laxton had a keen intelligence and his comments on several points were valuable. When Prescott went to sleep it was with a weight off his mind; but his mood changed the next day and he traveled back to Sebastian in a very grim humor.

Open and just as he was in all his dealings, Wandle's treachery infuriated him. There would, he felt, have been more extenuation for the trick had the man killed Jernyngham, but that he should conspire to throw the blackest suspicion on a neighbor in order to enjoy the proceeds of a petty theft was abominable. He must be made to suffer for it. However, Prescott did not mean to trouble the police. He had had enough of their cautious methods. He determined to secure a proof of Wandle's guilt, unassisted, without further loss of time, and to do this he must obtain a specimen of the man's writing to compare with that on the land sale documents. There was, he thought, a way of getting it.

Reaching Sebastian in the evening, he was going to the livery-stable to hire a team when he met an acquaintance who offered to drive him home. As the man would pass within a mile or two of Wandle's homestead and there was a farm in the neighborhood where he might borrow a horse, Prescott agreed. His companion found him preoccupied during the journey. He put him down at a fork of the trail, and Prescott, walking on quickly through the darkness, saw Wandle's team standing harnessed when he reached the house. This was a sign that their owner had recently come home, and Prescott, opening the door without knocking, abruptly entered the kitchen. The lamp was lighted and Wandle, standing near it with his fur-coat still on, looked startled. Prescott was sensible of a burning desire to grapple with him and extort a confession by force, but there was a risk of the crude method defeating its object, and with strong self-denial he determined to set to work prudently.

"I see you have just come in, and I'm anxious to get home, so I won't keep you more than a few minutes," he said.

"How did you come?" Wandle asked. "I didn't hear a team."

"Harper drove me out. I walked up the cross trail; but that doesn't matter. The last time we had a talk we fell out over the straightening up of Jernyngham's affairs."

"That's so; you still owe me a hundred dollars."

"I don't admit it," said Prescott, who had laid his plans on the expectation of this claim being made. "Anyhow, the dispute has been dragging on and it's time we put an end to it. It was the small items you wanted to charge Jernyngham with that I objected to, and I may have cut some of them down too hard. Suppose you write me out a list."

"I can tell you them right away."

"Put them down on paper; then we can figure them out more easily."

"Don't know if I've any ink," said Wandle. "Haven't you a notebook in your wallet? You used to carry one."

Prescott made a mistake in putting his hand into his pocket, which showed that he had the book, but he remembered that it would not suit his purpose to produce it.

"I'm not going to make out your bill," he said. "That's your business. Give me a proper list of the

disputed expenses and we'll see what can be done."

He was a poor diplomatist and erred in showing too keen a desire to secure a specimen of the other's handwriting, which is a delicate thing to press an unskilful forger for. Wandle was on his guard, though he carefully hid all sign of uneasiness.

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"Well," he said, "I'll send you a list over in a day or two; after all, if I think them over, I may be able to knock something off one or two of the items. But now you're here, I want to say that you were pretty mean about that cultivator. They're not sold at the price you allowed me."

This was intended to lead Prescott away from the main point and it succeeded, because, being at a loss for an excuse for demanding the list immediately, he was willing to speak of something else while he thought of one.

"You're wrong," he said curtly. "You can get them at any big dealer's. I looked in at a western store where they stock those machines, yesterday, and the fellow gave me his schedule."

He had taken off his mittens, but his hands were stiff with cold, and when he felt in his pocket he dropped several of the papers he brought out. The back of a catalogue fell uppermost, and it bore the words, "Hasty's high-grade implements, Navarino." Near this lay an envelope printed with the name of a Navarino hotel.

There was nothing to show that Wandle had noticed them—he stood some distance off on the opposite side of the table—but Prescott was too eager in gathering them up. Opening the catalogue, he read out a description of the cultivator and the price.

"Taking the cash discount, it comes to a dollar less than what I was ready to pay you," he said. "Now make out the list and we'll try to get the thing fixed up before I go."

Wandle sat down for a few moments, for he had received a shock. His suspicions had already been aroused, and Prescott's motive in going to Navarino was obvious; besides, he thought he had read Laxton's name on the envelope. He could expect no mercy—Prescott's face was ominously grim—and there was no doubt that, having seen Laxton, he knew who had hidden the brown clothes. The game was up, but, shaken by fear and rage as he was, he rose calmly from his seat.

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"Well, since you insist on it, I guess I'll have to write the thing; but I can't leave my team standing in the frost. Sit down and take a smoke while I put them in."

Prescott could not object to this. He lighted his pipe when Wandle left him. He heard the door shut and the horses being led away, for the stable stood at some little distance from the house, and after that no further sound reached him. Mastering his impatience, he began to consider what he would best do when Wandle had given him the list. He supposed he ought to hand it over to Curtis, but he was more inclined to go back to Navarino and compare the writing with the signature on the documents relating to the sale. Then, having proof of the forgery, he would communicate with the police. He was sensible of a curious thrill at the thought that the suspicion which had tainted him would shortly be dispelled.

After a while it occurred to him that Wandle should have returned, but he reflected that the man might be detained by some small task. After waiting some minutes longer, he walked to the door, but finding that he could not see the entrance to the stable, he stood still, irresolute. He thought he had been firm enough, and to betray any further eagerness would be injudicious. The matter must be handled delicately, lest Wandle take alarm.

When he had smoked out his pipe, Prescott could no longer restrain his impatience. He hurried toward the stable. The moonlight fell on the front of the building and the door was open; but Prescott stopped with a start, for all was dark inside and there was no sign of the vehicle in which the rancher had driven home. A worse surprise awaited him, for when he ran inside and struck a match it was clear that Wandle and his team had gone.

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Prescott dropped the match and stood still a few moments, in savage fury. There was no doubt that he had been cleverly tricked; Wandle, guessing his object, had quietly driven away as soon as he had led the team clear of the house. Moreover, Prescott had good cause for believing that he would not come back. With an effort, he pulled himself together. To give rein to his anger and disappointment would serve no purpose; but he had no horse with which to begin the pursuit. He remembered having told Wandle so when he first entered the house. Striking another match, he lighted a lantern he found and eagerly looked about. A plow team occupied two of the stalls, and though they were heavy Clydesdales with no speed in them, they would be capable of traveling faster than a man on foot. As he could not find a saddle, he ran back to the house and returned with a blanket. A bit and bridle hung on a nail, he found a girth, but his hands were cold and he spent some time adjusting straps and fastening on the blanket before he led one of the horses out and mounted.

The moonlight was clear enough to show him that there were no fresh wheelmarks in the snow. Wandle had kept to the trail, and Prescott surmised that he would travel south toward the American boundary. Although he feared he would lose ground steadily, he meant to follow, since there was a chance of the fugitive's being delayed by some accident, which would enable him to come up. It was extremely cold, Prescott was not dressed for riding, and the folded blanket made a very bad saddle. At times pale moonlight shone down, but more often it died away, obscured by thin cloud. The trail, however, was plain and the big Clydesdale was covering the ground. Prescott's hands and feet grew numbed, and there was a risk in this, but he trotted steadily on.

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After a while he heard two horsemen following him. He did not pull up; time was precious, and if the others wished to overtake him, he had no doubt that they could do so. During the next few minutes it became evident that they were gaining, and he heard a cry which he answered without stopping. Then, as the moon came through, another shout reached him, sharp and commanding:

"Stop, before we drop you!"

This was not to be disregarded. Pulling up, he turned his horse. Two mounted men rode furiously down on him, loose snow flying about their horses, and one poised a carbine across his saddle. Struggling to check his horse, he swept past, shouting to his comrade:

"Hold on! It's Prescott!"

They were a little distance ahead when they stopped and trotted back, and Prescott waited until Curtis pulled up at his side.

"Where were you going?" cried the corporal.

"After Wandle."

"I might have guessed!" said Curtis savagely, and turned to Stanton. "This explains the thing."

"How far is he ahead of you?" Stanton asked.

"He got off half an hour before I did, as near as I can guess."

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They sat silent for a moment or two, breathless and crestfallen, their horses distressed.

"Let's get into the lee of the bluff yonder; this wind's keen," Curtis said.

"You're losing time," Prescott objected.

"We've lost it," Curtis told him grimly. "My mount has been out since noon, and it's near midnight now. Stanton's isn't much fresher."

Prescott rode with them to the bluff, where they got down.

"That's a relief; it's quite a while since I could feel the bridle," said Curtis, turning to Prescott.

"How did you scare Wandle off? Be as quick as you can!"

Prescott briefly related what led to his call at the farm and the corporal's face was filled with scornful anger.

"This is what comes of you blamed amateurs butting in!" he remarked. "Jernyngham was bad enough, but he can't come near you at mussing up our plans. Guess you don't know that we've been watching Wandle for some weeks, ready to corral him, and you start him off like this, without warning."

"I'd reason to believe you were watching me," Prescott dryly rejoined.

"Oh, well," said Curtis, "that's another matter. Anyhow, I had trailed Wandle to Kelly's place since dark, and I'd trotted round to see if he'd got back to his homestead when I found that he had gone. Stanton and I were prospecting out this way when we struck your trail."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"We'll make the next farm and try to borrow horses. Then I'll ride to the railroad and get the wires to work. Stanton will keep the trail by Long Lake."

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"Then I'll push right on by the Traverse. There's a ranch I should make by daylight where I might get a mount. I'm going to see the thing through."

Curtis considered this.

"Well," he said, "I guess you can't do much harm, and Wandle may not have gone by the lake after all. You can pick up Stanton if you find out anything, and I'll try to join you from one of the stations along the line."

They mounted, and on reaching the trail forks where they must separate, Prescott turned to Curtis.

"Aren't you afraid of letting me out of your sight?" he asked.

"No, sir," Curtis answered with a smile. "You're not quite so important to us now; and I'm not running much risk, anyway, considering the horse you've got."

CHAPTER XXVII

STARTLING NEWS

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It was noon on the day after Wandle's flight, and Jernyngham was sitting with his friends in a room of the Leslie homestead when Muriel, looking out of the window, saw Prescott's hired man

ride up at a gallop. His haste and his anxious expression when he dismounted alarmed her, but her companions had not noticed him, and she waited, listening to the murmur of voices that presently reached her from an adjoining room. They ceased in a few minutes, she saw the man ride away as fast as he had come, and soon afterward Leslie opened the door. He was a talkative person and looked as if he had something of importance to relate.

"Svendsen has been over to ask if I saw Prescott when I was in at the settlement yesterday," he said. "When I told him that I hadn't, he seemed mighty disturbed."

Muriel's heart throbbed painfully, but she waited for one of the others to speak, and Jernyngham, laying down his paper, glanced up sharply.

"Why?" he asked.

This was all the encouragement Leslie needed.

"I'll tell you, so far as I've got the hang of the thing; I thought you'd like to know. It seems Prescott has been away somewhere for a few days and should have got home last night. He came in on the train in the evening, and Harper drove him out and dropped him at Wandle's trail; Prescott said he wanted to see the man. Well, he didn't get home, and Svendsen, who'd been to Harper's this morning, found Wandle gone and three of his horses missing. Then he found out from Watson, who stayed at the hotel last night, that Curtis rode in on a played-out horse before it was light, and kept the night operator busy for a while with the wires. Seems to me the thing has a curious look."

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For a moment or two nobody spoke. Muriel felt dismayed by the news, and she glanced at the others, trying to read their thoughts. Colston looked troubled, Gertrude's face was hard and stamped with a kind of cruel satisfaction, Jernyngham was very grim.

"Is that all you know about the matter?" Jernyngham asked.

"I guess so," Leslie answered. "Still, Svendsen did allow he thought he'd seen Stanton hanging about the homestead yesterday evening."

"Thank you," said Jernyngham with cold politeness. "I'll want the team after dinner."

Seeing no excuse for remaining, the rancher went out, and Jernyngham turned to the others. His brows were knitted and his eyes gleamed ominously.

"There's no mystery about the matter; the man has gone for good," he said. "In spite of the assurances they gave me, these fools of police have let him slip through their fingers. That he saw Wandle before he bolted proves collusion between them. It was a thing I half suspected, but Curtis, of course, did not agree with me."

Muriel was recovering from the shock. Though things looked very bad, she could not believe that Prescott had run away. He had promised to call on Curtis and her confidence in him was unshaken.

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"He went away by train a day or two ago, and if he had had anything to fear, he would have made his escape then," she said.

Mrs. Colston cast a warning glance at her, as if begging her to say nothing more, but Jernyngham curtly answered her remark.

"The man probably wanted to sell his property where it would excite less notice than at Sebastian. Then I suppose he found it needful to see his confederate."

"They could have gone off together in the first instance," Colston objected.

Jernyngham made an impatient gesture.

"I was merely suggesting an explanation; the point is not important. The fellow has bolted; but I've reason for believing he won't get across the boundary!"

He broke off, tearing the newspaper as he opened it, and there was an awkward silence until Mrs. Leslie brought in dinner. Jernyngham ate very little, and after spending a few minutes in his room, he drove off in the sleigh. Somewhat later, Colston met Gertrude in a passage and stopped her. He thought she looked anxious.

"I'm sorry I couldn't calm your father, but I was afraid that anything I might say would only make him more excited," he told her. "I meant to go with him, but he wouldn't permit it."

"No," she said, "there was nothing that you could do; but I'm badly disturbed." She paused irresolutely, and then resumed: "He has taken a magazine pistol, though I believe it's the first time he has carried it."

Colston looked grave. He determined, if possible, to abstract the pistol and hide it on Jernyngham's return.

"I'm very sorry. It must be trying for you. Indeed, I wonder anxiously where all this is leading us."

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"The horrible mystery will be cleared up on Prescott's arrest," Gertrude said in a harsh voice. "I think that can't be long deferred."

She left him troubled by her expression, and he and the others spent a dreary afternoon and evening. It was late when Jernyngham returned, looking worn but very stern.

"From what I've learned, word has been sent to every police trooper between here and the frontier," he said, and broke into a grim smile. "Prescott's chance of escape is a very poor one."

He made a scanty meal, without seeming to notice what he ate, and afterward sat silent. The others seldom spoke and when a word was exchanged there was strain in their voices. The snapping of the poplar billets in the stove seemed to emphasize the quiet and jarred on their nerves, while Muriel, tormented by fears on Prescott's account, found the suspense and constraint almost intolerable. She was thankful when bedtime came, though she could not sleep. Her troubled thoughts were with her lover, and she wondered what perils he was exposed to on the snowy wilds.

As it happened, Prescott was riding steadily through the stinging frost. He had been unable to obtain a fresh horse, but he had borrowed a saddle, and the Clydesdale, though far from fast, possessed good staying powers. For all that, he had been forced to rest part of the day at an outlying farm, and while there a man brought him word from Stanton, whose line of travel ran roughly parallel with his, three or four leagues to the west. The trooper's horse had gone badly lame, and Prescott was instructed to push on while Stanton sought another mount.

It was a very bitter night, but the young rancher was used to cold, and, riding alone in the moonlight, he made the best pace he could across the white desolation. There was no sign of life on it. Nothing moved in the reeds beside the frozen ponds and the shadowy bluffs he passed; no sound but the thud of heavy hoofs broke the overwhelming silence. By and by he left the trees behind, and pressed on into a vast glittering plain which ran back to the horizon, unbroken by a bush, and inexpressibly lonely.

In the early morning he reached a homestead where he rested until the afternoon. He chafed at the delay, but as the Clydesdale was badly jaded, it could not be avoided, and Wandle would have to stop now and then, unless he could hire fresh horses, which might be difficult. Starting again, he came to a small wooden settlement in the evening and rode first to the livery-stable. The telephone wires, which were being stretched across the prairie, had not reached the place, and he surmised that the police had been unable to communicate with it. The liveryman was busy in one of the stalls, but he came out and answered Prescott's question.

"Yes," he said, "a fellow like the one you speak of came in here about an hour ago. His team looked pretty used up and he wanted to hire another, but I couldn't deal. Keep my horses hauling cordwood through the winter, and the only team I have in the stable is ordered by a drummer for to-morrow."

"Can't you find me a mount? I'll pay you what you like."

"No, sir," said the other. "When I engage to drive a man round, I've got to make good. If I didn't, it would soon ruin my trade."

Seeing he was not to be moved, Prescott asked:

"How do you strike the south trail?"

"Go straight through the town. It forks in about three miles, and you can take either branch. They're both pretty bad, but the west one's the shorter and the worse."

"What's between the forks?"

"A big patch of broken country—sandhills and bluffs. About eight miles on, the other trail runs in again."

"Are there any homesteads on the way?"

"Nothing near the trail. There's a shack where two fellows cutting cordwood camp."

Prescott considered when he had thanked the man. He was tired and his horse was far from fresh, but he understood that Wandle's team was in a worse condition. There was a possibility of his overtaking him, if he pushed on at once. Leaving the stable, he meant to walk a short distance to ease his aching limbs, but he saw a mounted man trotting up the street and called out as he recognized Stanton.

"I thought I might get news of you here," said the trooper, pulling up. "Have you found out anything?"

Prescott told him what he had heard, and Stanton nodded.

"Then we had better get on. The horse I've got is pretty fresh."

In another minute or two they had left the lights of the settlement behind and Prescott prepared for a third night on the trail. His eyes were heavy, long exposure to extreme cold had had its effect on him, and the warmth seemed to be dying out of his exhausted body. After a while they came to a straggling clump of birches with blurred masses of taller trees behind, where the trail broke in two. Stanton dismounted and struck a few matches, examining the snow carefully.

"Nothing to show which way Wandle's gone," he reported. "Somebody's been along with a bob-sled not long ago and rubbed out his tracks. Anyhow, I'll take the shorter fork."

They separated; the trooper riding on in the moonlight and Prescott entering the gloom of the trees. He soon found the trail remarkably uneven. So far as he could make out, it skirted a number of low, thickly timbered ridges, swinging sharply up and down. In places it slanted awkwardly toward one edge; in others it was covered with stiff, dwarf scrub. One or two of the descents to frozen creeks were alarmingly steep and the Clydesdale stumbled now and then, but it kept its feet and Prescott felt that, everything considered, he was making a satisfactory pace. Stanton, he supposed, was two or three miles to the west of him, following the opposite edge of the high ground, but there was nothing to indicate which of them was the nearer to Wandle.

He rode on, wishing the light were better, for the faint gleam of the moon among the trees confused his sight and made it difficult to distinguish the trail, while to leave it might lead to his plunging down some precipitous gully. At length he saw a yellow glow ahead, and soon afterward came upon a shack in an opening. Small logs were strewn about it and among them stood tall piles of cordwood. The door opened as he rode up and a man's dark figure appeared in the entrance.

"Have you seen a rig going south?" Prescott asked.

"I heard one, about seven or eight minutes ago. The fellow didn't seem to be driving quick."

"Thanks," responded Prescott, and rode off with a feeling of satisfaction.

He had gained on Wandle, who had probably been delayed by some mischance on the trail. If the Clydesdale could be urged to a faster pace, he might overtake him, but this must be done before the fugitive could hire a fresh team. Next, he began to wonder what progress Stanton had made, for the relative positions of Wandle and the constable were now important. If Stanton were far enough ahead, he would reach the spot where the trails united before the absconder, in which case they would have him between them and it would be better for Prescott to save his horse's strength, because speed might be required. On the contrary, if Stanton were not yet abreast of him, he ought to push on as fast as possible. Wandle, he was glad to remember, could not know how closely he was being followed.

Turning the matter over in his mind, he rode at a moderate pace while the rough track wound deeper into the bluff. The partial obscurity was now extremely puzzling. Here and there a slender trunk glimmered in the faint moonlight that streamed down between the branches, and patches of brightness lay across the path, but this intensified the darkness of the background. It was hard to tell which of the dim avenues that kept opening up was the trail; the state of the short scrub could no longer be used as a guide, for the cordwood cutters had not penetrated so far with their sled.

Prescott knew that he must go forward, however; and he was gazing anxiously ahead with eyes that ached from long exposure to the reflection from the snow when the Clydesdale stumbled violently. He had scarcely time to clear his feet of the stirrups before the beast went down and he was flung into a clump of brush with a force that nearly drove the breath out of him. For a few moments he lay still, dimly conscious that the horse was struggling in the snow; and then, rousing himself with an effort, he got up unsteadily. He felt badly shaken, but he saw the horse scramble to its feet without assistance and stand trembling, looking about for him.

Neither he nor the animal seemed to be seriously injured, but he felt incapable of mounting and waited a while, wondering what he should do. He was tired out and was sensible of a depressing lassitude, the result of nervous strain. Then, as the bitter cold nipped him, a reaction set in. Wandle, he remembered, had with detestable cunning plotted to ruin him; it might be difficult to clear himself unless the man were arrested. For the sake of the girl who had maintained his innocence with steadfast faith, the suspicion under which he labored must be dispelled. Prescott was seized by a fit of fury against his betrayer. Nerved by it, he got into the saddle and rode on, urging the Clydesdale savagely through the wood.

Half an hour later he heard a measured drumming sound and Stanton's voice answered his hail. Then a horseman rode out of a gap in the trees and pulled up near him.

"I suppose you have seen nothing of Wandle?" Prescott asked.

"Not a sign," said Stanton shortly. "Have you?"

Prescott raised his hand and sat listening while he struggled with his rage and disappointment. The night was still; he thought he would hear any sound there might be a long distance off, but nothing broke the silence.

"I learned from a chopper that I wasn't far behind him, and I half expected you would have headed him off. I can't think he has passed this spot."

"We'll try to fix that."

Stanton dismounted and struck several matches. The flame burned steadily, but it showed none of the marks for which he searched the beaten snow with practised eyes.

"No," he said, "I'd stake a month's pay that the fellow's not ahead."

They looked at each other, frankly puzzled; and then Prescott broke out angrily:

"Where can the blasted rustler be?"

"Couldn't have left the bluffs on my side without my seeing him, and if he'd doubled back on his tracks, you'd have met him," Curtis remarked.

"He's not likely to be hiding in the woods. He'd freeze without a proper outfit, which he can't have got."

They grappled with the problem in silence for a minute or two.

"We'll take the back trail," Stanton decided. "The fellow must have broken out for open country on your side. I guess he knows where there's a homestead where he might find a team."

Prescott agreed, and they rode off wearily the way he had come, shivering with the cold that had seized them while they waited. The expectant excitement which had animated them for the past hour had gone and was followed by a reaction. Their bodies were half frozen, their minds

worked heavily, but both were conscious of a grim resolve. It was the trooper's duty to bear crushing fatigue and stinging frost, one that was sternly demanded of him; and the rancher had a stronger motive. He must clear himself for Muriel's sake, and he was filled with rage against the man who had tried to betray him. He would go on, if necessary, until his hands and feet froze or the big Clydesdale fell.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE END OF THE PURSUIT

When they had ridden some distance through the wood, Stanton checked his horse.

"Hold on!" he cried. "Here's a bit of an opening in the brush!"

He moved away a few yards, and then called out:

"Looks mighty like a trail. I guess you didn't notice it when you came along."

Prescott admitted that he had not done so, which was not surprising. There was little to distinguish the gap between the nut bushes from others that opened up all round; but Stanton seemed satisfied that he was right.

"Somebody has driven out this way not long ago," he explained.

"It doesn't follow that the man was Wandle."

"Why, no. Still, I guess it's likely; and if there's a trail, it leads to a homestead. Anyway, we'll track it up."

When they reached the open prairie, the moonlight showed faint wheelmarks running on before them to the east. The country was open and empty; a wide plain, with one slight rise some miles away that cut with a white gleam against the deep blue of the sky. They headed toward it wearily, following the track, and drew bridle when they gained the summit. A half-moon floated rather low in the western sky, glittering keen with frost, and they could see that the prairie ahead of them was more rolling and broken. Dusky smears of bluffs checkered its white surface here and there, and a low irregular dark line ran across it. Prescott supposed this to be a small timber growing along the edge of a ravine. Beyond it, in the distance, a faint glimmer of yellow light caught and held his eye. It was the one touch of warm color in the chill and lifeless waste of white and blue.

"A homestead," said Stanton. "We'll ride as far as the ravine together; and then I guess I'll make for the farm alone. If Wandle's been there looking for horses, he'll strike south and take the trail we left, farther on. You'll head down that way and watch out to cut him off if he lights out before I come up."

Prescott understood the maneuver. By driving east the fugitive had lost ground, and if he could push on fast enough, Prescott might reach a position from which he could either run him down or turn him back into the hands of the trooper.

When they came to the ravine and descended the deep shadowy hollow, they parted company, Prescott following the opposite brink, because Wandle would have to cross it lower down to regain the south trail. Once or twice he left it for a while when the gorge twisted in a big loop away from him, but he could see nothing of his companion. They had commanded a wide sweep of plain when they crossed the rise, but now that he was on low ground, the scattered bluffs obstructed his view. Indeed, he fancied from their position that they would prevent Stanton's seeing the farm. Once he stopped and listened with strained attention, but he could hear only the faint sighing of a light wind among the trees he skirted and the snapping of a twig, made by what means he could not tell, for there was no sign of life in all the frozen wilds. It was very dreary, and Prescott had little expectation of overtaking Wandle after the time they had lost, but he doggedly rode on.

At length an indistinct sound, too regular for the wind to account for, reached him, and grew louder when he pulled up his horse. It was a dull, measured throbbing, and he knew it to be the beat of hoofs. It was drawing nearer, but it might be made by Stanton riding to join him, and he headed so as to clear one of the bluffs which prevented his seeing far across the plain. On passing the end of the timber he saw another taller patch half a mile off, which hid most of the prairie between him and the farm, and knowing that time might be valuable he clung to the ravine, urging the jaded Clydesdale to its fastest pace, which was very moderate. He had gone about a mile, opening up the flat waste beyond the second bluff, when the black shape of a team and rig appeared on it. The team was being driven furiously, and in another few moments Prescott was not surprised to see a horseman sweep out from the gloom of the trees behind them. It was, however, soon obvious that the trooper was not gaining ground; Wandle had got fresh horses, his rig was light, while Stanton's mount had already carried him a long way. Prescott's Clydesdale had been harder taxed, but he knew he could not spare the beast. Wandle must have seen him, but he was holding straight on, and this could only be because he was

following a trail which led to the easiest crossing of the ravine. The man would shrink from the risk of getting entangled among thick timber with his team.

Prescott would have found speed difficult, even had he been mounted on a fresh horse. The snow was thin, but it was loose and dusty beneath the crust, through which the hoofs broke, while Wandle was making excellent progress along a beaten trail. Still, Prescott was nearer to the point the man was making for, and if he could reach it first, Wandle could not escape. Riding with savage determination, he sped on, the snow flying up behind him, the thrill of the pursuit firing his blood and filling him with fierce excitement. Wandle's fresh team was going at a gallop, the hoofs beating out a sharp drumming that mingled with the furious rattle of wheels, and through these sounds broke a rapid, pounding thud which told that Stanton was following hard behind. The trooper was, however, less close than he had been; too far, Prescott thought, to use his carbine; and as he mercilessly drove his beast he feared that he could scarcely reach the trail in time. He was closing with the rig and could see Wandle savagely lash his team; the trouble was that instead of riding to cut off the fugitive, in another few minutes he would be behind him, which was a very different thing.

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While he plied the quirt he saw the rig vanish among the trees close ahead. They stretched out some distance into the prairie, and he might not be too late yet, if he were willing to take a serious risk. He did not think the trail ran straight down into the ravine—the hollow was too deep for that—it would descend the slope obliquely and might trend toward him. If so, he should still be able to intercept the rig by cutting off the corner and riding straight down the steep bank through the timber. The odds were in favor of his killing the horse and breaking his own neck, but this did not count, and the next moment there was a crash as the Clydesdale rushed through a brake. A branch struck Prescott's leg a heavy blow, but he was too numbed to feel much pain, and as he swung round a bush that threatened to tear him from the saddle he could look down between the trees. Then he was filled with exultation, for the trail had turned his way. Below him, but farther from the bottom of the dipping track than he was, Wandle's horses were plunging downhill at a furious gallop, the rig jolting behind them, the driver leaning forward and using the whip. There was no sign of Stanton except the pounding of hoofs that rose among the trees.

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Then the slope grew dangerously sharp and Prescott set his teeth. The Clydesdale flinched from the descent, but it was too jaded to struggle hard, and the next moment it stumbled and slid over the edge. They went down, slipping over ground as hard as granite under its thin coat of snow, smashing through nut bushes, tearing off low branches. Prescott saw Wandle turn his head and look up at him. Then the fugitive sent up a hoarse cry of rage and warning, too late. If he could stop his team, which was very doubtful, he might escape the threatened collision; but this would involve his capture by Stanton, and he lashed his horses and went on, while Prescott and the great plow horse came madly rushing down at him. He looked at them again, with a breathless yell; then he let the reins fall and seized a seat rail.

The Clydesdale struck the light off-side horse, hurling it upon its fellow, breaking the pole. Both lost their footing and were driven round. Prescott, flung upon the backs of the horses, grasped the front of the rig, which ran on a yard or two and overturned with a crash. The Clydesdale went down among the wreckage, another horse was on its side, kicking savagely; and Stanton, hurrying up, saw Prescott crawl slowly clear of it. Seizing him, he lifted him to his feet, and to his great surprise the man leaned against a tree with a half-dazed laugh.

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"Well," he gasped, "I'm not in pieces, anyway!"

"Then you ought to be!" said Stanton, too startled to congratulate him on his escape. "But where's Wandle?"

Prescott seemed unable to answer and the trooper, looking round, saw Wandle lying in the snow; but before he could reach him the man began to raise himself on his elbow. This was disconcerting, for Stanton had thought him dead.

"Well," the trooper said stupidly, "what's the matter with you?"

"I don't know," Wandle replied weakly. "Don't feel like talking; let me alone."

Stanton had no fear of his escaping, so he went back to the horses. One of them stood trembling, attached to the rig by the deranged harness; the other still lay kicking, while the big Clydesdale rolled to and fro, with its leg through a wrenched-off wheel. It was astonishing that none of them was killed. Prescott apparently needed no assistance, and Stanton felt that he required some occupation to calm himself. Accordingly, he freed the Clydesdale of the broken wheel, narrowly escaping a kick which would have broken his ribs. The horse was a valuable one and must not be left in danger, and after a few minutes of severe exertion Stanton got it on its feet. Then he turned to the fallen driving horse and began, at some risk, to cut away its harness. Prescott came to help him, and together they raised the beast. Then Stanton sat down heavily on the wreckage.

"Well," he remarked, "that was the blamest fool trick, your riding down the grade; they wouldn't expect that kind of work from us in the service! What I can't account for is that you look none the worse."

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Prescott, standing shakily in the moonlight, smiled. "It is surprising; but hadn't you better look after Wandle? He seems to be getting up."

Wandle was cautiously getting on his feet, and the trooper watched him until he moved a pace or two.

"You don't look very broke up," he said. "Do you feel as if you could walk?"

"I believe I could ride," Wandle answered sullenly.

"Well, I guess you won't. You have given us trouble enough already, and you'll be warmer on your feet." Then he drew out a paper. "This is my warrant. It's my duty to arrest you—"

Wandle listened coolly to the formula, in which he was charged with fraudulently selling Jernyngham's land and forging his name. Indeed, Prescott fancied that he was relieved to find that nothing more serious had been brought against him.

"Well," he said, "you'll hear my defense when it's ready. What's to be done now?"

"Head back to the homestead where you got the team. Think you can lead one of them? It's either that or I'll put the handcuffs on you—make your choice." Stanton turned to Prescott. "It will be warmer walking, and I've ridden about enough."

The suggestion was agreed to, and after looping up the cut harness awkwardly with numbed fingers, they set off; Wandle going first, holding one horse's head, Prescott following with two, and the trooper bringing up the rear. When they reached the farm, to the astonishment of its occupants, they were given quarters in the kitchen, where a big stove was burning. Soon afterward, Prescott and Wandle lay down on the wooden floor, wrapped in blankets supplied them by the farmer, and Prescott sank into heavy sleep. Stanton, sitting upright in an uncomfortable chair, kept watch with his carbine laid handy on the table. He spent the night in a tense struggle to keep awake, and when Prescott got up at dawn the trooper's face was haggard and his eyes half closed, but he was still on guard.

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After breakfast, they borrowed a saddle for Wandle and set out on the return journey, meeting Curtis, who had ridden from the railroad, at the first settlement they reached. Prescott left the others there, and rode toward the station the corporal had just left, taking some telegrams Curtis asked him to despatch. He spent an afternoon and a night in the little wooden town, and went on again the next day by a local train.

While Prescott was on the way, Jernyngham drove to Sebastian with Gertrude. The girl had insisted on accompanying him. Soon after they left the homestead Colston, who was trying to read a paper from which his interest wandered, looked up at his wife.

"It's fine weather and not quite so cold," he said. "Suppose we go to the settlement and get supper there? I've no doubt there's something you or Muriel would like to buy."

"As it happens, there is," Mrs. Colston replied. "But I don't think that's all you have in your mind."

"The fact is, I'm disturbed about Jernyngham," Colston admitted. "He has been in an extremely restless mood since Prescott disappeared."

"I have noticed that. But do you know why he has gone to Sebastian to-day?"

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"He told me. One of the police authorities, whom he has seen already, is staying at the hotel to-night. Jernyngham means to get hold of him and insist upon an explanation of what they are doing."

Muriel leaned forward in her chair. She looked anxious, for no news of anything that had happened since Wandle's flight had reached the neighborhood. It was only known that the police were in pursuit of him; and local opinion was divided as to whether Prescott was also a fugitive or, knowing more about the matter than anybody else, had offered Curtis his assistance.

"I think you ought to go," she said. "And you may hear something."

"Well," Colston replied, "I'll confess that I'm curious, though I'm going mainly on Jernyngham's account." He turned to his wife. "Don't you think it's advisable?"

"I do, and it would be better if we all went. Then you will have an excuse for following Jernyngham and can watch him without making the thing too marked. It's a pity you didn't succeed in getting the pistol away from him."

"I've done what I could. I had another try this morning, but he caught me looking for it and I believe he guessed what I was after, because he was unusually short with me. It's my opinion that he has taken to wearing the thing; so far as I can discover, it's nowhere in the house. One hesitates about ransacking his room."

"It is not in the house, and he is not to be trusted with it," Muriel said quietly.

Colston cast a surprised glance at her.

"Oh! You seem to know. I've no doubt you are cleverer with your fingers than I am and wouldn't be so afraid of leaving your tracks."

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"Gertrude knows where the pistol is and she thought it necessary to go with her father," Mrs. Colston said significantly. "We'll get off as soon as you have asked Leslie for the buggy; I wish it had been the sleigh."

They drove away in half an hour; but Jernyngham reached the settlement some time before they did. Leaving Gertrude at a drygoods store, he went to the hotel, where the commissioned officer of police had a room. The officer was acquainted with all that Prescott had told Curtis about his absence in search of the missing man, and had been advised by telegraph of the assistance he had rendered in Wandle's arrest. This was, however, a matter that must stand in abeyance until he saw Curtis, for he had come down to investigate some complaints about the reservation

Indians, who were in a restless, discontented state, and the business demanded careful thought and handling. He was studying the report of a local constable when there was a knock at the door, and he looked up with annoyance as Jernyngham came in. The man had his sympathy, but he was troublesome.

"I'm afraid I can't spare you more than a minute or two," he said. "I'm expecting a constable I've sent for."

"One would have imagined that my business was of the first importance," Jernyngham rejoined. "Have you any news of the fugitives?"

"Wandle has been arrested."

"Ah! That's satisfactory, though I don't think it will carry us very far. His attempt to escape with Prescott, however, makes it obvious that they were confederates."

The officer let this remark pass, for he was anxious to get rid of his visitor. Jernyngham was piqued by his silence.

"I suppose you have not apprehended Prescott yet?" he resumed.

"No," answered the other shortly. "He will remain at liberty."

There was a knock at the door and a trooper looked in and withdrew.

"Mr. Jernyngham," said the officer, "if you will make an appointment to meet me on my return from the reservation, I will be at your service, but you must excuse me now. I have some instructions to give the constable, who has a long ride before him."

"A minute, please; I'll be brief. Am I to understand that you have no intention of seizing Prescott?"

"That is what I meant. So far as I can determine at present, we shall not interfere with him."

Jernyngham's haggard face grew red with anger.

"What are your grounds for this extraordinary decision?" he demanded.

"A strong presumption of his innocence."

"Preposterous!" Jernyngham broke out. "The scoundrel killed my son, and you refuse to move any further against him! I must carry the matter to Ottawa; you leave me no recourse."

The officer rapped on the table and the trooper entered.

"Come and see me when I get back, Mr. Jernyngham, and we'll talk over the thing again. I have other business which demands urgent attention now."

Jernyngham's face was deeply colored and the swollen veins showed on his forehead.

"Understand that I insist on Prescott's arrest! I will, spare no effort to secure it through your superiors!"

Seeing that he was in no mood to listen to reason, the officer let him go, and Jernyngham walked slowly to the lobby downstairs. There were a number of men in it, but two or three strolled into the bar and the others drew away from him when he sat down. They were not without compassion, but they shrank from the grim look in the man's worn face. For a while he sat still, resting one elbow on a table, and trying to arrange his confused thoughts. He knew nothing of Prescott's interview with Curtis or the reason for his visit to Wandle on the night of the latter's flight; the discovery of the brown clothes occupied the most prominent place in his mind, and convinced him of Prescott's guilt.

Then he began to consider how he could best bring pressure to bear on the administration in Ottawa. From inquiries he had made, it appeared less easy than he had supposed. It was, he had been told, unusual for anybody to interfere with the Northwest Police, who had been entrusted with extensive powers; and there was a strong probability of his failing to obtain satisfaction. It was, however, unthinkable that Prescott should escape. Jernyngham's poignant sense of loss and regret for past harshness to his son had merged into an overwhelming desire for vengeance on the man whom he regarded as Cyril's murderer. He was left without an ally; the organized means of justice had signally broken down; but the man should not go unpunished.

Tormented by his thoughts, he went out in search of Gertrude.

CHAPTER XXIX

JERNYNGHAM BREAKS DOWN

Colston and his party were leaving the hotel, with Jernyngham and Gertrude a few paces in front of them. A big lamp hung beneath the veranda, and the light from the windows streamed out on the snow. While Colston held the door open for his wife and Muriel to pass through a

man came hurriedly along the sidewalk and Colston started.

"Be quick!" he cried to Muriel. "It's Prescott!"

Letting the door swing to, he moved hastily forward, and then stopped, seeing that he was too late to prevent the meeting. Jernyngham had recognized the newcomer.

"Mr. Prescott," the old man cried, "a word with you!"

Prescott stopped with a troubled face a few yards away.

"If you insist, I'm at your service."

Colston drew nearer. Jernyngham's tone had alarmed him, and it's ominous harshness was more marked when he resumed:

"For the last time, I ask you, where is my son?"

"I wish I knew," said Prescott quietly. "I believe he's in British Columbia, but it's a big province and I lost trace of him there."

"It's a lie!" Jernyngham cried, hoarse with fury. "Your tricks won't serve you; I'll have the truth!"

"Be calm, Mr. Jernyngham," Colston begged, touching his arm. "We'll have a crowd here in a few moments. Come back into the hotel."

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He was violently pushed away. Jernyngham's eyes glittered, his face was grimly set; it was obvious that his self-control had deserted him. Seeing that he could not be reasoned with, Colston left him alone and waited, ready to interfere if necessary. The man, he thought, was in a dangerous mood; the situation was liable to have alarming developments.

"Why don't you speak?" Jernyngham stormed at Prescott. "You shall not leave the spot until we hear your confession!"

Prescott stood still, looking at him steadily, with pity in his face. He made a striking figure in the glare of light, finely posed, with no sign of shrinking. The others had fixed their eyes on him, and did not notice Muriel move quietly through the shadow of the wooden pillars.

"I have nothing to confess," he said.

Jernyngham's fur coat was open and his hand dropped quickly to a pocket. As he brought it out Colston sprang forward, a moment too late; but Muriel was before him, her hand on the man's arm. There was a flash, a sharp report, and blue smoke curled up toward the veranda, but Prescott stood still, untouched.

"Be quick!" screamed Muriel. "He's trying to fire again!"

There was no time to be particular. Colston seized the elder man, dragging him backward several paces before he wrenched the pistol from him. Then he paused, breathless, looking about in a half-dazed fashion. Everything had happened with startling suddenness, and the scene under the veranda was an impressive one. His wife clutched one of the pillars as if unnerved. Gertrude leaned against the sidewalk rail, her face tense with horror, and Jernyngham stood with a slackness of carriage which suggested that power of thought and physical force had suddenly left him.

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"Jack, are you hurt?" cried Muriel clinging to Prescott.

The tension was relieved by the appearance of the commissioned officer, who sprang out of the hotel with the constable close behind him.

"Shut the door and keep them in!" he ordered.

The constable obeyed, but his efforts were wasted, for men were already hurrying out through the separate entrance to the bar and from an adjoining store. Others ran out from the houses, and the street was rapidly filling with an eager crowd.

"Stand back there!" called the officer sharply. Then he turned to the group under the veranda. "Now what's this? I heard a shot!"

"Yes," said Colston, pulling himself together, though his manner was confused; "there was one. I don't know how it happened—it was a surprise to us all. I don't think the pistol's safe; it goes off too easily. However, the most important thing is that nobody is hurt."

"That's fortunate. I'll take the weapon from you," replied the officer dryly.

When Colston had given it to him, as if glad to be rid of it, the officer noted the positions and attitudes of the others before he turned to Prescott.

"Can you tell me anything?" he asked.

"I don't think so," Prescott answered. "Of course, I saw the flash, but the bullet didn't come anywhere near me."

Then Gertrude's nerve gave way. All that had happened was her work; she had, when her father was wavering and questioning the justice of his suspicions, driven them back more firmly into his mind, and as a result of this he had come near to killing an innocent man. Overwhelmed by the thought, she swayed unsteadily and fell back against the rails.

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"Miss Jernyngham is fainting!" Mrs. Colston cried, hurrying toward her.

"Bring her in!" said the officer; and when this was done, with Colston's assistance, he called to

the constable:

"Stand at the door; keep everybody out!"

The big lobby was cleared, and the officer gravely watched the way the actors of the scene arranged themselves. Prescott stood well apart from the others with Muriel at his side. She was flushed and overstrung, but her pose and expression suggested that she was defying the rest, and she cast a hard, unsympathetic glance at Gertrude, who sat limply, with clenched hands. Colston, looking embarrassed and unhappy, sat near his wife, who had preserved some composure. Jernyngham leaned against the counter, dejected and apparently half dazed.

"Before you go any farther, I'd better tell you that I fired the shot," he said brokenly.

"When I came out, the pistol was in Mr. Colston's hand," the officer pointed out in a meaning tone.

"That's true," Colston broke in. "I took it from him, for fear of an accident. Mr. Jernyngham was in a very nervous and excited state. He has, of course, been bearing a heavy strain, and I imagine you must have said something that rather upset his balance."

"I was perfectly sensible!" Jernyngham harshly interrupted him. "I found I could get no assistance from the police; it looked as if my son's death must go unavenged!"

Colston raised his hand to check him. Jernyngham could not be allowed to explain his action, as he seemed bent on doing.

"No! no!" he said soothingly, "you mustn't think of it! Please let me speak." He addressed the officer. "You can see the nervous state Mr. Jernyngham is in—very natural, of course, but I think it should appeal to your consideration."

The officer reflected. He had been brought up in the old country, and could sympathize with the people before him; they deserved pity, and he had no wish to humiliate them. Moreover, Miss Hurst, whom he admired, seemed to be involved. These reasons could not be allowed to carry much weight, but there were others. It was obvious that Jernyngham was hardly responsible for his actions; the man's worn and haggard face showed that he had been severely tried. Justice would not be served by probing the matter too deeply, and Colston's attitude indicated that this would be difficult.

"As you seem to be the one who had the narrowest escape, Mr. Prescott, have you any complaint to make?" he said.

"None whatever. I'm sorry the thing has made so much stir."

"It was my duty to investigate it. But I think that a charge of unlawfully carrying dangerous weapons, which is punishable by a fine, will meet the case." He turned to the trooper. "You will attend to the matter in due course, Constable Slade."

Then he bowed to the company and went out, leaving Colston to deal with the situation with the assistance of his wife, who thought it desirable to break up the party as soon as possible.

"The teams must be ready, and it's too cold to keep them standing," she remarked.

"They're outside," said Colston. "We'll be mobbed by an inquisitive crowd, if we don't get off at once. Gertrude, bring your father."

Gertrude led Jernyngham to the door, and Colston turned back to Prescott.

"It was very regretable," he said. "We are grateful for your forbearance."

Then his wife joined him, calling to Muriel.

"Be quick! The people haven't gone away; the street's full!"

Muriel, disregarding her, looked at Prescott, who had spoken to nobody except the officer. His face was troubled, but he made no attempt to detain her.

"I believe you saved my life," he said. "I can't thank you now. May I call to-morrow?"

"We should be glad to see you," Mrs. Colston broke in hurriedly; "but, with Mr. Jernyngham at the homestead, wouldn't it be embarrassing? Muriel, we really can't wait."

The girl smiled at Prescott.

"Yes," she said quietly, "come when you wish."

Then her sister, knowing that she was beaten, drew her firmly away.

They went out and Prescott sat down, feeling that he had done right and yet half ashamed of his reserve, for he had seen that Muriel had expected him to claim her and was ready to acknowledge him before her friends. This, however, was when she was overstrung and under the influence of strong excitement; the sacrifice she did not shrink from making was a heavy one, and she must have an opportunity for considering it calmly. He was not long left undisturbed, for men flocked in, anxious for an account of the affair, but he put them off with evasive answers and, making his escape, hurried to the livery-stable where he hired a team.

The next afternoon he drove to Leslie's in a quietly exultant mood. His long fight was over; nature had beaten him, and he was glad to yield, though he had not done so under sudden stress of passion. During his search for Jernyngham and afterward sitting by his stove on bitter nights, he had come to see that if the girl he desired loved him, no merely prudential reasons ought to separate them. He had feared to drag her down, to rob her of things she valued, but he

now saw that she might, after all, hold them of little account. He was, for his station, a prosperous man; his wife need suffer no real deprivation; he had a firm belief in the future of his adopted country, and knew that in a little while all the amenities of civilized life could be enjoyed in it. Wandle's trial would free him of suspicion; when he had stood facing Jernyngham, Muriel had revealed her love for him, and since it could not be doubted, he need not hesitate. It was her right to choose whether she would marry him. Only she must clearly realize all that this would imply.

He had expected some opposition from Mrs. Colston, but, when it was inevitable, she could gracefully bear defeat. Moreover, she had never agreed with Jernyngham's suspicions of Prescott, and in some respects he impressed her favorably. There was no reserve in her greeting when he reached the homestead.

"The less that is said about last night, the better, but I can't pass over it without expressing our gratitude for the position you took," she said. "Harry has driven Jernyngham out in the sleigh—he has been in a curious limp state all morning—and Gertrude has not yet got over the shock."

"It must have been very trying for Miss Jernyngham."

"No doubt." There was not much pity in Mrs. Colston's voice, for she could guess how matters stood. "However, I am disengaged and I believe Muriel will be here directly."

Prescott followed her into a room and made an effort to talk to her until she rose and went out as Muriel entered. The girl, to his surprise, was dressed in furs, and he felt his heart beat when she looked at him with a shy smile.

"I have been expecting you," she said, giving him her hand.

"I wonder," he asked gravely, "whether you can guess why I have come?"

"Yes," she answered in a steady voice; "I think I can. But we'll go out, Jack."

He followed her, puzzled, but not questioning her wish, and they walked silently down the beaten trail that stretched away, a streak of grayish blue, across the glittering snow. Brilliant sunshine streamed down on them and the nipping air was wonderfully clear. When they passed a birch bluff that hid them from the house; Prescott stopped.

"Muriel," he said, "I think you know that I love you."

There was a warm color in her face, but for a moment she met his eyes squarely.

"Yes; I knew it some time ago, though perhaps I should have shrunk from confessing that so frankly, if it hadn't been for last night. But why were you afraid of telling me, Jack?"

He read surrender in her face and yielding pose, and with a strange humility that tempered the wild thrill of delight he placed his arm about her. Then, as she crept closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder, every feeling was lost in a delirious sense of triumph. It was brief, for he remembered how he was handicapped, and he held her from him, looking gravely down at her.

"Dear, there is something to be said."

"Yes," she rejoined with tender mockery; "you either took a great deal for granted or there was one important thing you were willing to leave in doubt. Now take my hands and hold them fast. You know I have suffered something—fears and anxieties because of you—I want to feel safe."

He did as she bade him and she looked up.

"Now listen, Jack dear. All that I have to give, my love, my closest trust, is yours, and because you said I saved your life, that belongs to me. I think it's all that matters."

He was silent for a few moments, overwhelmed by a sense of his responsibility.

"Still," he urged, "you must understand what you are risking. I should have told you first."

Muriel released her hands, and her glance was grave.

"Yes; you had better continue, Jack. I suppose we must speak of these things now, and then forget them forever."

"You know what Jernyngham believed of me. I could not marry you with such a stain on my name; but it will be wiped off in a few more days, and this I owe to you. It was you who insisted that I should clear myself."

She started.

"Remember that I know nothing, except that you went away."

Prescott told her briefly what he had learned at Navarino and of Wandle's capture; and her deep satisfaction was obvious.

"I'm so glad!" she exclaimed. "This will make it easier for the others, though it doesn't affect me. If I had had any doubts, I couldn't have loved you. But I'm pleased you told me before you were really cleared. To have waited until everybody knew you were innocent would have looked as if you were afraid to test my faith in you."

"No," he said; "that couldn't be. I was afraid of your having to make too heavy a sacrifice; and, unfortunately, there's some risk of that still."

"Go on, Jack."

"I'm far from a rich man, though I never regretted it much until of late. You know how we live

here; I can guess what you have enjoyed at home. Life's strenuous on the prairie, and though I think it's good, it makes demands on one you can't have felt in England. There's so much that you must give up, many things that you will miss. I am anxious when I think of it."

Muriel looked far across the plain which ran back; glistening in the sunlight, until it faded into cold blues and purples toward the skyline. The gray bluffs, standing one behind the other, and the long straggling line of timber by a ravine marked its vast extent. It filled the girl with a sense of freedom; its wideness uplifted her.

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"Jack," she said, "I wonder whether you can understand why I made you take me out? The prairie has drawn me from the beginning, and I felt it would be easier to make a great change in this wonderful open space; I wanted to adopt the country, to feel it belonged to me. Now that I've made my choice, my home is where you are; I want nothing but to be loved and cared for, as you must care for me."

Prescott drew her toward him, but there was more of respect than passion in his caress.

"My dear," he said gravely, "I feel very humble as well as thankful. It's a great thing I've undertaken, to make you happy; and I think you'll try to forgive me if I sometimes fail."

Muriel laughed and shook herself free.

"I'm not really hard to please, and even if you make mistakes now and then, good intentions count for a good deal. But you are dreadfully solemn, and there's so much that is pleasant to talk about."

They walked on briskly, for it had been possible to stand still only in the shelter of the bluff with bright sunshine streaming down on them; the cold they had forgotten now made itself felt.

"I can't understand Jernyngham," Prescott said after a while. "One can't blame him for persecuting me, but there's something in his conduct that makes one think him off his balance."

Muriel's eyes sparkled with indignation.

"I suppose he ought to be pitied, but I can't forgive him, and I'll tell you what I think. He has led a well-regulated life, but his virtues are narrow and petty. Indeed, I think they're partly habits. He is not a clever or a really strong man; but because of his money and position, which he never ventured out of, he found people to obey him and grew into a domineering autocrat. I believe he was fond of Cyril and felt what he thought of as his loss; but that was not all. The shock brought him a kind of horrified anger that anything of a startling nature should happen to him—he felt it wasn't what he deserved. Then his desire for justice degenerated into cruelty and when he came out here, where nobody gave way to him, he somehow went to pieces. His nature wasn't big enough to stand the strain."

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It was a harsh analysis, but Muriel was not inclined to be charitable. Jernyngham had made things very hard for her lover.

"I dare say you're right," responded Prescott. "But the morning after he reached my place in the blizzard I had a talk with him and found him reasonable. I think he half believed in my innocence, but soon afterward he was more savage than before."

"Isn't it possible that you took too much for granted? He couldn't be rude to you when you had saved him from freezing."

"I don't think I did. He was pretty candid at first and I wasn't cordial, but he listened to me, and I feel convinced that before he left he was beginning to see that he might have been mistaken. What I don't understand is why he changed again, when nothing fresh turned up to account for it."

A light dawned on Muriel. She saw Gertrude's work in this and her face flushed with anger, but it was not a subject she meant to discuss with the man she loved.

"Well," she said, "it's scarcely likely that you will learn the truth. After all, much of Jernyngham's conduct can't be explained." She smiled at Prescott. "If he'd had any reason in him, he would never have doubted you."

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They turned back to the homestead presently and on reaching it Prescott found that Colston had arrived. The latter gave him an interview in the barn, which was the only place where they could be alone, and listened with a thoughtful air to what he had to say. This included an account of his meeting with Laxton and the pursuit of Wandle.

"I'm in an unfortunate position," Colston remarked when Prescott had finished. "You see, every prudential consideration urges me to oppose you—looked at from that point of view the match is most undesirable—but I must admit my sympathy with you, and I don't suppose my opposition would have much effect."

"It certainly wouldn't," Prescott replied.

"After all," Colston resumed, "I have no real authority; Muriel's of age and she has no property. Still, I'm fond of the girl and am anxious about her future. I think you ought to satisfy me that you're able to take care of her."

"I'll try."

Prescott gave him a concise account of his means, his farming operations, and his plans for the future; and Colston listened with satisfaction. The man was more prosperous than he had supposed and had carefully considered what could be done to secure the comfort of his wife; his

schemes included the rebuilding of his house. It was obvious that Muriel need not suffer greatly from the change. Moreover, Colston had liked Prescott from the beginning and had found it hard to distrust him, even when appearances were blackest against him.

"All this," he said frankly, "is a relief to me. But there's another and more important point." He paused a moment before he continued: "To my mind your name is cleared, but you must agree that the mystery isn't unraveled yet. Although I have no power to interfere, Muriel is my wife's sister and I think she owes my views some deference. Neither of us can countenance an engagement or your meeting Muriel often while a doubt remains. The matter must stand over."

"I must yield to that; you have been more liberal than I could have expected." Then Prescott smiled. "There's only one thing which could really clear me—the reappearance of my victim; and I don't despair of it. The police are trying to trace him on the Pacific Slope, but it would be quite in accordance with his character if he suddenly turned up here."

They went out together, shivering a little, for the barn was very cold, but they were on friendly terms and were mutually satisfied.

CHAPTER XXX

PRESCOTT'S VINDICATION

On the day after Prescott's avowal, Muriel found Gertrude alone and sat down opposite her.

"Don't you think you ought to insist on your father's going home?" she asked. "The strain is wearing him out; he may lose his reason if he stays."

Gertrude looked up sharply. There was no sympathy in the girl's tone and her eyes were hard. Muriel might have forgiven a wrong done to herself, but she was merciless about an injury to one she loved.

"Ah!" exclaimed Gertrude. "You wish to get rid of us?"

"No; my suggestion was really generous, because I would much rather you both remained and saw Mr. Prescott proved innocent."

Not knowing what had prompted her rival, Gertrude gave her jealous anger rein.

"I'm afraid we couldn't wait. Even my father's patience would hardly hold out."

"It wouldn't be long tried; but in a way you're right. It's dangerous for him to stay here, and you're responsible for his condition."

"I'm responsible?" cried Gertrude with a start.

"Of course! You knew Mr. Prescott went away to look for your brother and you kept it secret; when he saved your father from freezing, he almost convinced him that he had nothing to do with Cyril's disappearance. You must have known how it would have eased his mind to get rid of his dreadful suspicions, but you worked upon him and brought them back."

Gertrude sank down in her chair with a shiver. A denial would serve no purpose and she was conscious of her guilt.

"Could you expect me to be indifferent to the loss of my brother?"

"You knew you had not lost him. You believed what Mr. Prescott told you, until we came." Muriel flushed and hesitated, for this was as far as she would go. Even in her anger, she would not taunt her beaten rival with defeat. "Now," she continued, "you must see what you have done. You have made your father suffer terribly; I think you have weakened his mind, and, if I hadn't turned the pistol, you would have made him kill an innocent man. He seems too dazed and shaken to realize what he meant to do, but the thing was horrible."

Gertrude sat silent for a few moments, her face drawn and colorless. Then she looked up.

"I couldn't see what it would lead to. Do the others know what you have told me? Does Mr. Prescott?"

She looked crushed and defenseless and Muriel's resentment softened.

"No," she said. "Nobody knows, and Mr. Prescott will never suspect; he's not the man to think hard things of a woman. But I'm going to insist on your taking your father away."

"But how can I?" cried Gertrude. "You know how determined he is!"

"You have influenced him already; you must do so again. You will regret it all your life if you let him stay."

"Well," Gertrude promised desperately, "I will try." Then a thought struck her and her expression grew gentler. "Muriel, have you realized that if we leave here soon, the Colstons will accompany us and you will have to go with them?"

"No," Muriel replied with a resolute smile; "I will stay."

Gertrude turned her head and there was silence for a while. Then she said with an effort:

"I can't ask your forgiveness; it would be too much, and I'm not sure that I wish to have it. But I feel that you are generous."

"Take your father home," Muriel responded, and getting up went quietly out.

During the next fortnight, Gertrude exerted all her powers of persuasion, without much success. Jernyngham was apathetic, moody, and morose, and his companions found the days pass heavily. Then one evening Prescott drove over with the excuse of a message for Leslie, and Muriel, putting on her furs, slipped out to speak to him before he left. They stood near the barn, talking softly, until there was a pause and Muriel looked out across the prairie. It was a clear, cold evening; a dull red glow blazed above the great plain's rim, and the bluffs stood out in wavy masses with sharp distinctness. The snow had lost its glitter and was fading into soft blues and grays.

The darker line of the trail caught the girl's eye and, following it, she noticed a horseman riding toward the homestead.

"Nobody has been here for a while," she said. "I wonder who it can be?"

Prescott's team, which had been growing impatient of the cold, began to move, and he was occupied for the next minute in quieting them. Then he looked around, started violently, and stood very still, his eyes fixed on the approaching man.

"Jernyngham, by all that's wonderful!" he gasped, and sent a shout ringing across the snow: "Cyril!"

The man waved his hand, and Prescott, turning at a sound, saw Muriel lean weakly against the side of the sleigh. The color had faded from her face, but her eyes were shining.

"O Jack!" she said breathlessly. "Now everything will be put straight!"

Prescott realized from the greatness of her relief what she had borne on his account; but there was something that must be done and he ran to the stable, where Leslie was at work.

"Get into my sleigh, and drive to Harper's as hard as you can!" he said. "Curtis was there when I passed; bring him here at once!"

Leslie came out with him and understood when he saw the newcomer. Jumping into the vehicle, he drove off, while Prescott ran to meet Cyril, who dismounted and heartily shook hands with him.

"It's good to see you, Jack," he said, and indicated the galloping team. "The sensation I seem to make shows no signs of lessening."

"Haven't you heard!" Prescott exclaimed. "Don't you understand?"

"Not much," Cyril replied with a careless laugh. "When I got off the train at the settlement, everybody stared at me, and there were anxious inquiries as to where I'd been. I promised to tell them about it another time, and at the livery-stable Kevan said something about my being killed. I told him it didn't look like it; and as the boys seemed determined on hearing my adventures; I rode off smartly. When I reached your place, Svendsen looked scared, and all I could get out of him was that you were here."

Prescott made a gesture of comprehension. It was typical of Cyril that he had not taken the trouble to find out the cause of the excitement his appearance had aroused.

"Who is the lady?" Cyril asked.

"Miss Hurst. You had, perhaps, better know that she has promised to marry me."

Cyril looked at him in frank astonishment, and then laughed.

"I suppose my surprise isn't complimentary, but I wasn't prepared for your news. Jack, you're rather wonderful, but you have my best wishes, and you can tell me what brought Miss Hurst back by and by. No doubt she expects me to speak to her."

"Thanks," said Prescott dryly. "Whatever my capabilities of making a sensation are, they're a long way behind yours."

They walked toward the girl and Prescott led up his companion.

"Muriel," he said, "Cyril Jernyngham wishes to be presented to you."

She gave him her hand, and he realized that she was studying him carefully.

"I'm glad we have met," she said. "I have heard a good deal about you."

Cyril bowed with a mischievous smile.

"Nothing very much to my credit, I'm afraid. As an old friend of Jack's, it's my privilege to wish you every happiness and assure you that you have got a much better man than the one you at first took him for."

Muriel colored.

"Jack stands on his own merits."

Then she turned to Prescott.

"Does he know? Have you told him?"

"Not yet. I've news for you, Cyril. Your father and sister are here."

"What brought them?" There was astonishment in Cyril's face, but he looked more disturbed than pleased.

"They thought you dead," Muriel told him.

"Then I'm sorry if they've been anxious, but I can't understand the grounds for it. In fact, everybody I've met seems to have gone crazy, except you and Jack."

"We knew the truth," said Muriel. "There are a number of explanations you will have to make, but you had better go in."

The next moment the door opened and Gertrude appeared, as if in search of Muriel. She saw the group and broke into a startled cry.

"Cyril!"

He ran toward her and Prescott suggested that it might be advisable for him to retire, but Muriel would not agree.

"Give them a few minutes, Jack, and then we'll go in together; you are one of us now and must be acknowledged. Besides, you have a right to hear what Cyril has to say."

They walked briskly up the trail and when they turned to come back Muriel glanced at Prescott with a smile.

"Jack dear, I like him, but he said something that was true. I should never have fallen in love with the real Cyril Jernyngham."

They found the others in the large sitting-room. Cyril was talking gaily, though Prescott concluded from one remark that he had not yet given a full account of his adventures. Jernyngham sat rather limply in an easy-chair, as if the relief of finding his son safe had shaken him, but his eyes were less troubled and his manner calmer. He rose when he saw Prescott.

"Mr. Prescott," he said, "I must own before these others, who have heard me speak hardly of you, that I have done you a grievous wrong. I have no excuse to urge in asking you to forgive it. There is nothing that now seems to mitigate my folly."

"All you thought and did was very natural, sir," Prescott answered quietly. "I tried not to blame you and I feel no resentment."

"What's this?" Cyril glanced up sharply, and as he noticed the guilty faces of the others and Gertrude's strained expression, the truth dawned on him.

"Oh!" he cried, "it's preposterous! You all suspected my best friend!"

"If it's any consolation, we're very much ashamed of it," Colston replied. "And there was one exception; Muriel never shared our views."

Cyril still looked disturbed.

"It's obvious that I've given everybody a good deal of trouble, but I feel that you deserved it for your foolishness. May I ask on what grounds you suspected Jack?"

Seeing that none of them was ready to answer, Prescott interposed.

"Perhaps I had better explain; I think you ought to know."

He related the events that had followed his friend's disappearance, and when he had finished, Cyril turned to the others.

"After all, you were not so much to blame as I thought at first—you don't know Jack as I do, and things undoubtedly looked bad. Now I'll give you an account of my adventures and clear up the mystery."

"Not yet," said Prescott with a smile. "You don't seem to realize that instead of excusing people for suspicions they could hardly avoid, you're expected to make some defense for the carelessness that gave rise to them. Anyway, Curtis is entitled to an explanation, and as I sent him word, he should be here soon."

"You did right," Jernyngham broke in with a trace of asperity. "It's proper that the blundering fellow who misled us all should have his stupidity impressed on him!"

They waited, talking about indifferent matters, until Curtis arrived. At Cyril's request he made a rough diagram of the tracks he had discovered in the neighborhood of the muskeg and stated his theory of what had happened there.

"A clever piece of reasoning," Cyril remarked. "There's scarcely a flaw in it, as you'll see by my account of the affair. After saying good-by to Prescott on the night I left the settlement, I went on until I was near the muskeg and had dismounted to camp when a stranger rode up. We sat talking for a while and I foolishly told him I meant to buy some horses and apply for a railroad haulage contract, from which he no doubt concluded I was carrying some money. Soon afterward, he went off to hobble his horse, and I suppose he must have crept up behind me and knocked me out with the handle of his quirt, for I fell over with a stupefying pain in my head. This was the last thing I was clearly conscious of until the next morning, when I found myself lying close to the water, but at some distance from where I met the man. My hat had gone and my head was cut; my horse had disappeared, and I afterward discovered I had been robbed."

Cyril paused and glanced at Curtis.

"There's a point to be accounted for—how I reached the spot where I was lying, and this is my suggestion: The fellow thought he had killed me and in alarm determined to throw me into the muskeg. As I had a hazy recollection of being roughly lifted, I imagine he laid me across his saddle and after a while I must have moved or groaned. Then, having no doubt only meant to stun me, he left me on the ground. All this fits in with your theory."

"What was the man like?" Curtis asked.

Cyril described him, explaining that there was a good moon; and the corporal nodded, as if satisfied.

"Then I'm glad to say that, as I half expected, we have got the fellow; corralled him for horse-stealing a while ago, and he'll be charged with robbing you in due time. But go on."

"I felt horribly thirsty, and crawling to the edge of the sloo, tumbled in. There was more slime than water, but I could see a cleaner pool some way out, and being up to my knees already, I tried to reach it. It was hardly fit to drink, but I felt better and clearer-headed after swallowing some; and then I noticed thick grass in front of me. This implied that the swamp was shallower there and I made for the other bank, instead of going back. The grass and reeds that I disturbed would soon straighten, which accounts for your losing my tracks. You wouldn't have expected me to wade across the muskeg?"

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"No," admitted Curtis; "I didn't."

"Why did you not return to Sebastian after being robbed of your horse and money?" Jernyngham asked.

"Ah!" said Cyril with some constraint in his manner, "that's more difficult to explain. To some extent it was a matter of temperament. I had left the settlement after a painful and rather humiliating discovery; you can understand that I was anxious to avoid my neighbors. Then I'd been knocked out and robbed by the first rascal I fell in with. I hadn't the courage to crawl back in my battered state and face the boys' amusement; and there was something that appealed to me in the thought of cutting loose and going on without a dollar, to see what I could do." He smiled at his father and sister. "You know I had always rather eccentric ideas."

Then he recounted his adventures along the railroad under the name of Kermode, until Prescott interrupted him.

"I followed you to the abandoned claim in the mountains, where I had to give it up. How did you make out after you struck south with the prospector crank?"

"That was the most interesting part of the trip, but I could hardly describe it. We crawled up icy rocks, found a river we could travel on here and there, scrambled through brush that ripped our clothes and over stones that cut our boots to bits, and finally came down by Quesnelle to the Canadian Pacific main track."

"Loaded with worthless mineral specimens?"

Cyril laughed.

"They were pretty heavy, Jack. Once or twice I thought of dumping my share of them, but it's fortunate that Hollin, who seemed to suspect my intentions, kept his eye on me when I got played out. You see, an assayer we took them to found that they were rich in lead and silver."

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Prescott's astonishment was obvious and Cyril frankly enjoyed it.

"Well," he said, "the end of it was that I called on some of the mining people in Vancouver—it seems they knew Hollin and had had enough of him—but I left one office with a check for a thousand dollars, besides retaining an interest in the claim. Hollin has gone back to see about its development."

His father and sister looked as surprised as Prescott. One could imagine that they found it difficult to conceive of Cyril's financial success, but they offered him their congratulations, and soon afterward Curtis took his leave. Prescott stayed another hour, and when he went Muriel walked to the door with him.

"Jack," she murmured, with her head on his shoulder, "I'm inexpressibly glad it has all come right; but you must remember that I knew it would."

Prescott gently turned her face toward him.

"I'm so thankful that it makes me grave. It's a pretty big task to repay your confidence, but I'll try."

"You'll succeed," she said smiling. "You're rather a determined man and I'm not dreadfully exacting; I couldn't be to you."

Prescott drove off, grateful for Mrs. Colston's permission to come back the next day.

When he drove up on the following afternoon, he found Muriel dressed in furs.

"It's beautifully fine and you may take me for a drive," she said, and added with a smile: "That is, unless you would rather talk to Harry."

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"I think Colston and I are going to be good friends, but I didn't come over to see him," Prescott retorted lightly. "I have something to say to Cyril, but it will do when we get back."

"You can't see him now," said Muriel, moving toward the sleigh. "He's engaged with Gertrude

and his father, and I think they have something important to talk about. Cyril looked very serious, and one would imagine that's not often the case with him."

Prescott laughed as he helped her in.

"I dare say he has his thoughtful moments; it would be surprising if he hadn't, considering his capacity for getting into scrapes."

They drove away, but Muriel's supposition was well founded, for Cyril was feeling unusually grave as he sat opposite to his father and sister in a room of the homestead. A brief silence had fallen upon the group, emphasized by the crackle of poplar billets in the stove. Jernyngham, in whose appearance there had been a marked improvement since his son's return, wore an eager expression; Gertrude was watching her brother with troubled eyes.

"You have heard my suggestions about your return to England," Jernyngham said at length. "I think they are fair."

"They are generous," Cyril answered, and added slowly: "But I cannot go."

Jernyngham leaned back in his chair as if he were weary, with keen disappointment in his face.

"I have no other son, Cyril. We will wipe out the past—there is something to regret on both sides—and try to make everything pleasant for you. I feel that you ought to come."

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"No," Cyril persisted with signs of strain. "I'm strongly tempted, but it would not be wise."

Jernyngham looked hard at him and then made a sign of resignation.

"You will, at least, give us your reasons."

"I'll try, though I'm not sure you will understand them; it's unfortunate we're so different that we cannot find a common viewpoint from which to look at things. I believe I've overcome what bitterness I once felt, but in all that's essential I haven't changed. After the first few weeks, I should jar on you, or I should have to be continually on my guard, until the repression got too much for me and the inevitable outbreak came."

"Why should there be an outbreak?" his father asked with some asperity.

Cyril glanced at Gertrude, noticing her rather weary smile, and fancied that she could sympathize with him, which was more than he had expected. She had somehow gained comprehension in Canada.

"I suppose I must explain. I'm not thinking of my worst faults, but, you see, I'm a careless trifler, impatient of restraint. To have to do things in stereotyped order distresses me; I must go where my fancy leads. When I'm cooped up and confined, I feel I must break loose, even if it leads to havoc." He laughed. "Of course, such a frame of mind is beyond your imagining."

"I must confess that it is," Jernyngham replied dryly.

Gertrude cast a half-applauding glance at her brother. With all his failings, which she recognized and deplored, Cyril was to her something of a romantic hero. He took risks, and did daring and perhaps somewhat discreditable things, but, narrow as her decorous life had been, she envied his reckless gallantry. Once she had ventured to break through the safe rules of conduct and grasp at romance, but it had eluded her and left her humiliation and regret. She must go back to the dreary routine wherein lay security, but she admired him for standing out.

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"Well," said Cyril, "I'm talking at large; but we must thrash out the matter once for all. I may do something useful here—make wheat grow; perhaps help in developing the mine—which I couldn't do at home." He paused and concluded whimsically: "It's even possible that I may turn into a successful rancher."

"But that means working like an English field laborer!"

"For a higher pay. When the crop escapes drought and frost, and there's no hail or rust, western farming's fairly profitable."

"In short," said Jernyngham, "you have made up your mind not to come home with us."

"I'm sorry it is so," Cyril responded gravely. "Try to understand. If I stay here, we will be good friends and you will think well of me. If I go home there will be trouble and regret for you. I want to save you that."

"Father," Gertrude broke in softly, "though it's hard to say, I know that Cyril's right."

Jernyngham got up wearily.

"There is nothing more that I can urge. You must do as you think best, my son, but while I shall never quite grasp your point of view, you will always be in our thoughts."

They were glad to separate, for the interview had been trying to them all.

Some time had passed when Cyril, hearing a beat of hoofs, went out and found Prescott pulling up his team.

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"We have been talking over matters while you were out," he told him. "As I've decided to stay here, my people are going home soon—in a week or two, I think; and I expect Colston will leave with them. I thought you might like to know."

He saw the color creep into Muriel's face; and when he turned back to the house Prescott lifted the girl down from the sleigh.

“Dear, I can’t let them take you away,” he said.

Muriel glanced across the snowy plain to the blaze of fading color upon its western rim. It was growing shadowy, the woods were blurred and vague, but its wideness fired her imagination and she felt the exhilaration that was in the nipping air.

“Jack,” she smiled up at him, “my home is here! I’m learning to love the prairie, and it has brought me happiness. I’m glad to stay with you!”

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PRESCOTT OF SASKATCHEWAN ***

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