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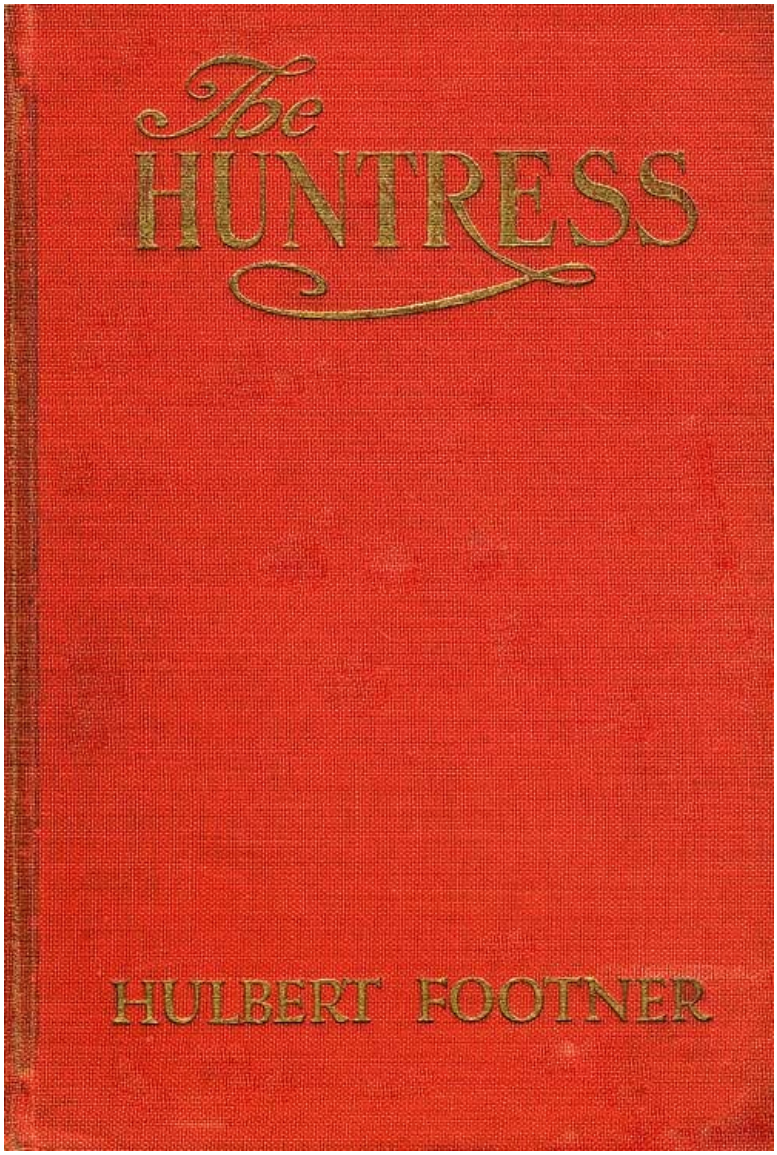

Bela (Colleen Moore) says to Gladding (Lloyd Hughes): "Fine surprise um white man."
(Photoplay Edition—"The Huntress") *(A First National Picture)*

THE HUNTRESS

By HULBERT FOOTNER

Author of
"The Fur Bringers," "The Woman From Outside," "The Owl Taxi," "Thieves' Wit," "The Substitute Millionaire," etc.

A. L. BURT COMPANY
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CONTENTS

THE HUNTRESS [1]

CHAPTER I

THE FISH-EATERS' VILLAGE

From within the teepee of Charley Whitefish issued the sounds of a family brawl. It was of frequent occurrence in this teepee. Men at the doors of other lodges, engaged in cleaning their guns, or in other light occupations suitable to the manly dignity, shrugged with strong scorn for the man who could not keep his women in order. With the shrugs went warning glances toward their own laborious spouses.

Each man's scorn might well have been mitigated with thankfulness that he was not cursed with a daughter like Charley's Bela. Bela was a firebrand in the village, a scandal to the whole tribe. Some said she was possessed of a devil; according to others she was a girl born with the heart of a man.

This phenomenon was unique in their experience, and being a simple folk they resented it. Bela refused to accept the common lot of women. It was not enough for her that such and such a thing had always been so in the tribe.

She would not do a woman's tasks (unless she happened to feel like it); she would not hold her tongue in the presence of men. Indeed, she had been known to talk back to the head man himself, and she had had the last word into the bargain.

Not content with her own misbehaviour, Bela lost no opportunity of gibing at the other women, the hard-working girls, the silent, patient squaws, for submitting to their fathers, brothers, and husbands. This naturally enraged all the men. [2]

Charley Whitefish was violently objurgated on the subject, but he was a poor-spirited creature who dared not take a stick to Bela. It must be said that Bela did not get much sympathy from the women. Most of them hated her with an astonishing bitterness.

As Neenah, Hooliam's wife, explained it to Eelip Moosa, a visitor in camp: "That girl Bela, she is *weh-ti-go*, crazy, I think. She got a bad eye. Her eye dry you up when she look. You can't say nothing at all. Her tongue is like a dog-whip. I hate her. I scare for my children when she come around. I think maybe she steal my baby. Because they say *weh-ti-gos* got drink a baby's blood to melt the ice in their brains. I wish she go way. We have no peace here till she go."

"Down the river they say Bela a very pretty girl," remarked Eelip.

"Yah! What good is pretty if you crazy in the head!" retorted Neenah. "She twenty years old and got no husband. Now she never get no husband, because everybody on the lake know she crazy. Two, three years ago many young men come after her. They like her because she light-coloured, and got red in her cheeks. Me, I think she ugly like the grass that grows under a log. Many young men come, I tell you, but Bela spit on them and call fools. She think she better than anybody.

"Last fall Charley go up to the head of the lake and say all around what a fine girl he got. There was a young man from the Spirit River country, he say he take her. He come so far he not hear she crazy. Give Charley a horse to bind the bargain. So they come back together. It was a strong young man, and the son of a chief. He wear gold embroidered vest, and doeskin moccasins worked with red and blue silk. He is call Beavertail. [3]

"He glad when he see Bela's pale forehead and red cheeks. Men are like that. Nobody here tell him she crazy, because all want him take her away. So he speak very nice to her. She show him her teeth back and speak ugly. She got no shame at all for a woman. She say: 'You think you're a man, eh? I can run faster than you. I can paddle a canoe faster than you. I can shoot straighter than you!' Did you ever hear anything like that?

"By and by Beavertail is mad, and he say he race her with canoes. Everybody go to the lake to

see. They want Beavertail to beat her good. The men make bets. They start up by Big Stone Point and paddle to the river. It was like queen's birthday at the settlement. They come down side by side till almost there. Then Bela push ahead. Wa! she beat him easy. She got no sense.

"After, when he come along, she push him canoe with her paddle and turn him in the water. She laugh and paddle away. The men got go pull Beavertail out. That night he is steal his horse back from Charley and ride home.

"Everybody tell the story round the lake. She not get a husband now I think. We never get rid of her, maybe. She is proud, too. She wash herself and comb her hair all the time. Foolishness. Treat us like dirt. She is crazy. We hate her."

Such was the conventional estimate of Bela. In the whole camp this morning, at the sounds of strife issuing from her father's teepee, the only head that was turned with a look of compassion for her was that of old Musq'oosis the hunchback. [4]

His teepee was beside the river, a little removed from the others. He sat at the door, sunning himself, smoking, meditating, looking for all the world like a little old wrinkled muskrat squatting on his haunches.

If it had not been for Musq'oosis, Bela's lot in the tribe would long ago have become unbearable. Musq'oosis was her friend, and he was a person of consequence. The position of his teepee suggested his social status. He was with them, but not of them. He was so old all his relations were dead. He remained with the Fish-Eaters because he loved the lake, and could not be happy away from it. For their part they were glad to have him stay; he brought credit to the tribe.

As one marked by God and gifted with superior wisdom, the people were inclined to venerate Musq'oosis even to the point of according him supernatural attributes. Musq'oosis laughed at their superstitions, and refused to profit by them. This they were unable to understand; was it not bad for business?

But while they resented his laughter, they did not cease to be secretly in awe of him, and all were ready enough to seek his advice. When they came to him Musq'oosis offered them sound sense without any supernatural admixture.

In earlier days Musq'oosis had sojourned for a while in Prince George, the town of the white man, and there he had picked up much of the white man's strange lore. This he had imparted to Bela—that was why she was crazy, they said.

He had taught Bela to speak English. Bela's first-hand observations of the great white race had been limited to half a score of individuals—priests, policemen, and traders.

The row in Charley's teepee had started early that morning. Charley, bringing in a couple of [5]
skunks from his traps, had ordered Bela to skin them and stretch the pelts. She had refused point blank, giving as her reasons in the first place that she wanted to go fishing; in the second place, that she didn't like the smell.

Both reasons seemed preposterous to Charley. It was for men to fish while women worked on shore. As for a smell, whoever heard of anybody objecting to such a thing. Wasn't the village full of smells?

Nevertheless, Bela had gone fishing. Bela was a duck for water. Since no one would give her a boat, she had travelled twenty miles on her own account to find a suitable cottonwood tree, and had then cut it down unaided, hollowed, shaped, and scraped it, and finally brought it home as good a boat as any in the camp.

Since that time, early and late, the lake had been her favourite haunt. Caribou Lake enjoys an unenviable reputation for weather; Bela thought nothing of crossing the ten miles in any stress.

When she returned from fishing, the skunks were still there, and the quarrel had recommenced. The result was no different. Charley finally issued out of the teepee beaten, and the little carcasses flew out of the door after him, propelled by a vigorous foot. Charley, swaggering abroad as a man does who has just been worsted at home, sought his mates for sympathy.

He took his way to the river bank in the middle of camp, where a number of the young men were making or repairing boats for the summer fishing just now beginning. They had heard all that had passed in the teepee, and, while affecting to pay no attention to Charley, were primed for him—showing that men in a crowd are much the same white or red. [6]

Charley was a skinny, anxious-looking little man, withered and blackened as last year's leaves, ugly as a spider. His self-conscious braggadocio invited derision.

"Huh!" cried one. "Here come woman-Charley. Driven out by the man of the teepee!"

A great laugh greeted this sally. The soul of the little man writhed inside him.

"Did she lay a stick to your back, Charley?"

"She give him no breakfast till he bring wood."

"Hey, Charley, get a petticoat to cover your legs. My woman maybe give you her old one."

He sat down among them, grinning as a man might grin on the rack. He filled his pipe with a

nonchalant air belied by his shaking hand, and sought to brave it out. They had no mercy on him. They out vied each other in outrageous chaffing.

Suddenly he turned on them shrilly. "Coyotes! Grave-robbers! May you be cursed with a woman-devil like I am. Then we'll see!"

This was what they desired. They stopped work and rolled on the ground in their laughter. They were stimulated to the highest flights of wit.

Charley walked away up the river-bank and hid himself in the bush. There he sat brooding and brooding on his wrongs until all the world turned red before his eyes. For years that fiend of a girl had made him a laughing-stock. She was none of his blood. He would stand it no longer.

The upshot of all his brooding was that he cut himself a staff of willow two fingers thick, and carrying it as inconspicuously as possible, crept back to the village.

At the door of his teepee he picked up the two little carcasses and entered. He had avoided the river-bank, but they saw him, and saw the stick, and drew near to witness the fun. [7]

Within the circle of the teepee Charley's wife, Loseis, was mixing dough in a pan. Opposite her Bela, the cause of all the trouble, knelt on the ground carefully filing the points of her fish-hooks. Fish-hooks were hard to come by.

Charley stopped within the entrance, glaring at her. Bela, looking up, instantly divined from his bloodshot eyes and from the hand he kept behind him what was in store. Coolly putting her tackle behind her, she rose.

She was taller than her supposed father, full-bosomed and round-limbed as a sculptor's ideal. In a community of waist less, neckless women she was as slender as a young tree, and held her head like a swan.

She kept her mouth close shut like a hardy boy, and her eyes gleamed with a fire of resolution which no other pair of eyes in the camp could match. It was for the conscious superiority of her glance that she was hated. One from the outside would have remarked quickly how different she was from the others, but these were a thoughtless, mongrel people.

Charley flung the little beasts at her feet. "Skin them," he said thickly. "Now."

She said nothing—words were a waste of time, but watched warily for his first move.

He repeated his command. Bela saw the end of the stick and smiled.

Charley sprang at her with a snarl of rage, brandishing the stick. She nimbly evaded the blow. From the ground the wife and mother watched motionless with wide eyes.

Bela, laughing, ran in and seized the stick as he attempted to raise it again. They struggled for possession of it, staggering all over the teepee, falling against the poles, trampling in and out of [8] the embers. Loseis shielded the pan of dough with her body. Bela finally wrenched the stick from Charley and in her turn raised it.

Charley's courage went out like a blown lamp. He turned to run. Whack! came the stick between his shoulders. With a mournful howl he ducked under the flap, Bela after him. Whack! Whack! A little cloud arose from his coat at each stroke, and a double wale of dust was left upon it.

A whoop of derision greeted them as they emerged into the air. Charley scuttled like a rabbit across the enclosure, and lost himself in the bush. Bela stood glaring around at the guffawing men.

"You pigs!" she cried.

Suddenly she made for the nearest, brandishing her staff. They scattered, laughing.

Bela returned to the teepee, head held high. Her mother, a patient, stolid squaw, still sat as she had left her, hands motionless in the dough. Bela stood for a moment, breathing hard, her face working oddly.

Suddenly she flung herself on the ground in a tempest of weeping. Her startled mother stared at her uncomprehendingly. For an Indian woman to cry is rare enough; to cry in a moment of triumph, unheard of. Bela was strange to her own mother.

"Pigs! Pigs! Pigs!" she cried between sobs. "I hate them! I not know what pigs are till I see them in the sty at the mission. Then I think of these people! Pigs they are! I hate them! They not my people!"

Loseis, with a jerk like an automaton, recommenced kneading the dough.

Bela raised a streaming, accusing face to her mother. [9]

"What for you take a man like that?" she cried passionately. "A weasel, a mouse, a flea of a man! A dog is more of a man than he! He run from me squeaking like a puppy!"

"My mother gave me to him," murmured the squaw apologetically.

"You took him!" cried Bela. "You go with him! Was he the best man you could get? I jump in the

lake before I shame my children with a coyote for a father!"

Loseis looked strangely at her daughter. "Charley not your father," she said abruptly.

Bela pulled up short in the middle of her passionate outburst, stared at her mother with fallen jaw.

"You twenty year old," went on Loseis. "Nineteen year I marry Charley. I have another husband before that."

"Why you never tell me?" murmured Bela, amazed.

"So long ago!" Loseis replied with a shrug. "What's the use?"

Bela's tears were effectually called in. "Tell me, what kind of man my father?" she eagerly demanded.

"He was a white man."

"A white man!" repeated Bela, staring. There was a silence in the teepee while it sunk in. A deep rose mantled the girl's cheeks.

"What he called?" she asked.

"Walter Forest." On the Indian woman's tongue it was "Hoo-alter."

"Real white?" demanded Bela.

"His skin white as a dog's tooth," answered Loseis, "his hair bright like the sun." A gleam in the dull eyes as she said this suggested that the stolid squaw was human, too.

"Was he good to you?" [10]

"He was good to me. Not like Indian husband. He like dress me up fine. All the time laugh and make jokes. He call me 'Tagger-Leelee.'"

"Did he go away?"

Loseis shook her head. "Go through the ice with his team."

"Under the water—my father," murmured Bela.

She turned on her mother accusingly. "You have good white husband, and you take Charley after!"

"My mother make me," Loseis said with sad stolidity.

Bela pondered on these matters, filled with a deep excitement. Her mother kneaded the dough.

"I half a white woman," the girl murmured at last, more to herself than the other. "That is why I strange here."

Again her mother looked at her intently, presaging another disclosure. "Me, my father a white man too," she said in her abrupt way. "It is forgotten now."

Bela stared at her mother, breathing quickly.

"Then—I 'most white!" she whispered, with amazed and brightening eyes. "Now I understand my heart!" she suddenly cried aloud. "Always I love the white people, but I not know. Always I ask Musq'oosis tell me what they do. I love them because they live nice. They not pigs like these people. They are my people! All is clear to me!" She rose.

"What you do?" asked Loseis anxiously.

"I will go to my people!" cried Bela, looking away as if she envisaged the whole white race.

The Indian mother raised her eyes in a swift glance of passionate supplication—but her lips were tight. Bela did not see the look.

"I go talk to Musq'oosis," she said. "He tell me all to do."

CHAPTER II [11]

MUSQ'OOSIS ADVISES

The village of the Fish-Eaters was built in a narrow meadow behind a pine grove and the little river. It was a small village of a dozen teepees set up in a rough semicircle open to the stream.

This stream (Hah-Wah-Sepi they call it) came down from the Jack-Knife Mountains to the north, and after passing the village, rounded a point of the pines, traversed a wide sand-bar and was received into Caribou Lake.

The opposite bank was heavily fringed with willows. Thus the village was snugly hidden between the pines and the willows, and one might have sailed up and down the lake a dozen times without suspecting its existence. In this the Indians followed their ancient instinct. For generations there had been no enemies to hide from.

It was at the end of May; the meadow was like a rug of rich emerald velvet, and the willows were freshly decked in their pale leafage. The whole scene was mantled with the exquisite radiance of the northern summer sun. Children and dogs loafed and rolled in aimless ecstasy, and the whole people sat at the teepee openings blinking comfortably.

The conical teepees themselves, each with a bundle of sticks at the top and its thread of smoke, made no inharmonious note in the scene of nature. Only upon a close look was the loveliness a little marred by evidences of the Fish-Eaters' careless housekeeping. [12]

Musq'oosis's lodge stood by itself outside the semicircle and a little down stream. The owner was still sitting at the door, an odd little bundle in a blanket, as Bela approached.

"I t'ink you come soon," he said. These two always conversed in English.

"You know everyt'ing," stated Bela simply.

He shrugged. "I just sit quiet, and my thoughts speak to me."

She dropped on her knees before him, and rested sitting on her heels, hands in lap. Without any preamble she said simply: "My fat'er a white man."

Musq'oosis betrayed no surprise. "I know that," he replied.

"My mot'er's fat'er, he white man too," she went on.

He nodded.

"Why you never tell me?" she asked, frowning slightly.

He spread out his palms. "What's the use? You want to go. Got no place to go. Too much yo'ng to go. I t'ink you feel bad if I tell."

She shook her head. "Mak me feel good. I know what's the matter wit' me now. I understand all. I was mad for cause I think I got poor mis'able fat'er lak Charley."

"It is well," said Musq'oosis.

"You know my fat'er?" asked Bela eagerly.

He nodded gravely.

"Tell me."

Musq'oosis seemed to look within. "Long tam ago," he began, "though I am not yo'ng then neither. It was in the Louis Riel war I see your fat'er. He a soldier in that war, wear red coat, ver' fine. Ot'er soldier call him Smiler Forest. Red people call him Bird-Mouth for cause he all tam mak' music wit' his wind, so"—here Musq'oosis imitated a man whistling. "He is one good soldier. Brave. The Great Mother across the water send him a medal wit' her face on it for cause he so brave." [13]

"What is medal?" interrupted Bela.

"Little round piece lak money, but not to spend," explained Musq'oosis. "It is pin on the coat here, so everybody know you brave.

"Always I am a friend of the white people," Musq'oosis went on, "so I fight for them in that war. I can't march me, or ride ver' good. I canoe scout on the Saskatchewan River. Your fat'er is friend to me. Moch we talk by the fire. He mak' moch fun to me, but I not mad for cause I see he lak me just the same. Often he say to me, 'Musq'oosis, my boy, I bad lot.'"

"Bad lot?" questioned Bela,

"He mean no good," Musq'oosis explained. "That is his joke. I not believe ev'ryt'ing he tell me, no, not by a damnsight. He say, 'Musq'oosis, I no good for not'ing 't'all but a soldier.' He say, 'When there ain't no war I can't keep out of trouble.' He ask moch question about my country up here. He say, 'When this war over I go there. Maybe I can keep out of trouble up there.'

"Me, I all tam think that just his joke. Bam-by the fighting all over, and Louis Riel sent to jail. Me, I got brot'ers up here then. I want to see my brot'ers after the war. So I go say good-bye to my friend. But he say, 'Hold on, Musq'oosis, I goin' too.' I say, 'W'at you do up there? Ain't no white men but the comp'ny trader.' He say, 'I got fight somesing. I fight nature.'" [14]

"Nature?" repeated Bela, puzzled.

Musq'oosis shrugged. "That just his fonny way of talk. He mean chop tree, dig earth, work. So he come wit' me. He ver' good partner to trip. All tam laugh and sing and mak' music wit' his wind. He is talk to me just the same lak I was white man, too. Me, I never have no friend lak that. I lak Walter Forest more as if he was my son."

The old man's head drooped at this point, and the story seemed to have reached its end.

"What do you do when you come here, you two?" Bela eagerly demanded.

Musq'oosis sighed and went on. "The Fish-Eaters was camp down the lake by Musquasepi then. Your mot'er was there. She ver' pretty girl. Mos' pretties' girl in the tribe, I guess."

"Pretty?" said Bela, amazed.

"She is the first one we see when we come. We are paddling up the river and she is setting muskrat trap on the bank. Your fat'er look at her. Her look at your fat'er. Both are lak wood with looking. Wa! I think me, Bird-Mouth ain't goin' to keep out of trouble up here neither! Well, he is lak crazy man after that. All night he want stay awake and talk me about her. He ask me what her name mean. I tell him Loseis mean little duck. He say, 'Nobody ever got better name.' 'Better wait,' I say, 'plenty ot'er girl to see.' 'Not for me,' he say.

"In a week he marry her. Marry her honest wit' priest and book. He build a house at Nine-Mile Point and a stable. Say he goin' to keep stopping-house for freighters when they bring in the company's outfit in the winter. He cut moch hay by Musquasepi for his stable. He work lak ten [15]
red men. When the ice come, right away he start to freight his hay across. I say 'Wait, it is not safe yet.' He laugh.

"One day come big storm wit' snow. He got lost out on the ice wit' his team and drive in airhole. We find the hay floating after. He never see you. You come in the spring. He was a fine man. That is all."

After a silence Musq'oosis said: "Well, what you think? What you goin' do?"

"I goin' outside," Bela promptly answered. "To my fat'er's country."

Musq'oosis shook his head heavily. "It is far. Many days' journey down the little river and the big river to the landing. From the landing four days' walk to town. I am too old to travel so far."

"I not afraid travel alone," exclaimed Bela.

Musq'oosis continued to shake his head. "What you goin' do in town?" he asked.

"I marry a white man," replied Bela coolly.

Musq'oosis betrayed no astonishment. "That is not easy," he observed with a judicial air. "Not easy when there are white women after them. They know too moch for you. Get ahead of you."

"I am a handsome girl," said Bela calmly. "You have say it. You tell me white men crazy for handsome girls."

"It is the truth," returned Musq'oosis readily. "But not for marry."

"My fat'er marry my mot'er," persisted Bela.

"Ot'er white men not same lak your fat'er."

Bela's face fell. "Well, what must I do?" she asked.

"There is moch to be said. If you clever you mak' your white man marry you."

"How?" she demanded. [16]

Musq'oosis shrugged. "I can't tell you in one word," he replied.

"I can't stay with these people," she said, frowning.

"All right," said Musq'oosis. "But stay in the country. This is your country. You know the way of this country. I tell you somesing else. You got some money here."

"Money?" she echoed, opening her eyes wide.

"When your fat'er die, he have credit wit' the company. Near six hundred dollars. Beaton, the old company trader, he talk wit' me for cause I your fat'er's friend. He say this money too little to go to law wit'. The law is too far from us. He say 'I not give it to Loseis, because her people get it. They only poor, shiftless people, just blow it in on foolishness.' He say, 'I goin' keep it for the child.' I say, 'All right.'

"Well, bam-by Beaton leave the company, go back home outside. He give me an order on the new trader. He say keep it till Bela grow up. I have it now. So I say to you, this money buy you a team, mak' you rich in this country. But outside it is nothing. I say to you, don't go outside. Marry a white man here."

Bela considered this. "Which one?" she asked. "There is only Stiffy and Mahooly, the traders. The gov'ment won't let the police to marry."

"Wait," said Musq'oosis impressively. "More white men are coming. Many white men are coming."

"I can't wait," complained Bela rebelliously. "Soon I be old."

"Some are here already," he added.

She looked at him questioningly.

"Las' week," he went on, "the big winds blow all the ice down the lake. It is calm again. The sun is strong. So I put my canoe in the water and paddle out. Me, I can't walk ver' good. Can't moch ride a horse. But my arm's strong. When I yo'ng, no man so strong lak me on a paddle. So I paddle out on the lake. Smell sweet as honey; shine lak she jus' made to-day. Old man feel lak he was yo'ng too. [17]

"Bam-by far across the lake I see little bit smoke. Wa! I think, who is there now? I look, I see the sky is clean as a scraped skin. I think no wind to-day. So I go across to see who it is. I go to Nine-Mile Point where your fat'er built a house long time ago. You know it. Wa! Wa! There is five white men stopping there, with moch horses and wagons, big outfit. Rich men.

"So I spell wit' them a while. They mak' moch fun. Call me ol' black Joe. Feed me ver' good. We talk after. They say gov'ment goin' measure all the land at the head of lake this summer and give away to farmers. So they come to get a piece of land. They are the first of many to come. Four strong men, and anot'er who cooks for them. They got wait over there till ice on the shore melt so they drive around."

"All right. I will marry one of them," announced Bela promptly.

"Wait!" said Musq'oosis again, "there is moch to be said."

"Why you not tell me when you come back?" she demanded.

"I got think first what is best for you."

"Maybe they got girls now," she suggested, frowning.

"No girls around the lake lak you," he stated.

She was mollified. [18]

"Do everything I tell you or you mak' a fool!" he remarked impressively.

"Tell me," she asked amenably.

"Listen. White men is fonny. Don't think moch of somesing come easy. If you want get white man and keep him, you got mak' him work for you. Got mak' him wait a while. I am old. I have seen it. I know."

Bela's eyes flashed imperiously. "But I want him now," she insisted.

"You are a fool!" said Musq'oosis calmly. "If you go after him, he laugh at you. You got mak' out you don' want him at all. You got mak' him run after *you*."

Bela considered this, frowning. An instinct in her own breast told her the old man was right, but it was hard to resign herself to an extended campaign. Spring was in the air, and her need to escape from the Fish-Eaters great.

"All right," she agreed sullenly at last.

"How you goin' pick out best man of the five?" asked Musq'oosis slyly.

"I tak' the strongest man," she answered promptly.

He shook his head in his exasperating way. "How you goin' know the strongest?"

"Who carries the biggest pack," she said, surprised at such a foolish question.

Musq'oosis's head still wagged. "Red man carry bigger pack than white man," he said oracularly. "Red man's arm and his leg and his back strong as white man. But white man is the master. Why is that?"

She had no answer.

"I tell you," he went on. "Who is the best man in this country?" [19]

"Bishop Lajeunesse," she replied unhesitatingly.

"It is the truth," he agreed. "But Bishop Lajeunesse little skinny man. Can't carry big pack at all. Why is he the best man?"

This was too much of a poser for Bela. "I don't want marry him," she muttered.

"I tell you," said Musq'oosis sternly. "Listen well. You are a foolish woman. Bishop Lajeunesse is the bes' man for cause no ot'er man can look him down. White men stronger than red men for cause they got stronger fire in their eyes. So I tell you when you choose a 'osban', tak' a man with a strong eye."

The girl looked at him startled. This was a new thought.

Musq'oosis, having made his point, relaxed his stern port. "To-morrow if the sun shine we cross the lake," he said amiably. "While we paddle I tell you many more things. We pass by Nine-Mile Point lak we goin' somewhere else. Not let on we thinkin' of them at all. They will call us ashore, and we stay jus' little while. You mus' look at them at all. You do everyt'ing I say, I get you good

'osban'."

"Bishop Lajeunesse coming up the river soon," suggested Bela. "Will you get me 'osban' for him marry? I lak marry by Bishop Lajeunesse."

"Foolish woman!" repeated Musq'oosis. "How do I know? A great work takes time!"

Bela pouted.

Musq'oosis rose stiffly to his feet. "I give you somesing," he said.

Shuffling inside the teepee, he presently reappeared with a little bundle wrapped in folds of dressed moose hide. Sitting calm he undid it deliberately. A pearl-handled revolver was revealed to Bela's eager eyes.

"The white man's short gun," he said. "Your fat'er gave it long tam ago. I keep her ver' careful. [20] Still shoot straight. Here are shells, too. Tak' it, and keep her clean. Keep it inside your dress. Good thing for girl to have."

Bela's instinct was to run away to examine her prize in secret. As she rose the old man pointed a portentous finger.

"Remember what I tell you! You got mak' yourself hard to get."

During the rest of the day Bela was unobtrusively busy with her preparations for the journey. Like any girl, red or white, she had her little store of finery to draw on. Charley did not show himself in the tepee.

Her mother, seeing what she was about, watched her with tragic eyes and closed mouth. At evening, without a word, she handed her a little bag of bread and meat. Bela took it in an embarrassed silence. The whole blood of the two women cried for endearments that their red training forbade them.

More than once during the night Bela arose to look at the weather. It was with satisfaction that she heard the pine-trees complaining. In the morning the white horses would be leaping on the lake outside.

She had no intention of taking Musq'oosis with her. She respected the old man's advice, and meant to apply it, but an imperious instinct told her this was her own affair that she could best manage for herself. In such weather the old man would never follow her. For herself, she feared no wind that blew.

At dawn she stole out of the teepee without arousing anybody, and set forth down the river in her dugout alone.

CHAPTER III [21]

AT NINE-MILE POINT

The camp at Nine-Mile Point was suffering from an attack of nerves. A party of strong men, suddenly condemned in the heat of their labours to complete inaction, had become a burden to themselves and to each other.

Being new to the silent North, they had yet to learn the virtue of filling the long days with small, self-imposed tasks. They had no resources, excepting a couple of dog-eared magazines—of which they knew every word by heart, even to the advertisements—and a pack of cards. There was no zest in the cards, because all their cash had been put into a common fund at the start of the expedition, and they had nothing to wager.

It was ten o'clock at night, and they were loafing indoors. Above the high tops of the pines the sky was still bright, but it was night in the cabin. They were lighted by the fire and by a stable lamp on the table. They had gradually fallen into the habit of lying abed late, and consequently they could not sleep before midnight. These evening hours were the hardest of all to put in.

Big Jack Skinner, the oldest and most philosophic of the party—a lean, sandy-haired giant—sat in a rocking chair he had contrived from a barrel and stared into the fire with a sullen composure.

Husky Marr and Black Shand Fraser were playing pinocle at the table, bickering over the game [22] like a pair of ill-conditioned schoolboys.

On the bed sprawled young Joe Hagland, listlessly turning the pages of the exhausted magazine. The only contented figure was that of Sam Gladding, the cook, a boyish figure sleeping peacefully on the floor in the corner. He had to get up early.

It was a typical Northern interior: log walls with caked mud in the interstices, a floor of split poles, and roof of poles thatched with sods. Extensive repairs had been required to make it habitable.

The door was in the south wall, and you had to walk around the house to reach the lake shore. There was a little crooked window beside it, and another in the easterly wall. Opposite the door was a great fire-place made out of the round stones from the lake shore.

Of furniture, besides Jack's chair, there was only what they had found in the shack, a rough, home-made bed and a table. Two shared the bed, and the rest lay on the floor. They had some boxes for seats.

Something more than discontent ailed the four waking men. Deep in each pair of guarded eyes lurked a strange uneasiness. They were prone to start at mournful, unexpected sounds from the pine-tops, and to glance apprehensively toward the darker corners. Each man was carefully hiding these evidences of perturbation from his mates.

The game of pinocle was frequently halted for recriminations.

"You never give me credit for my royal," said Shand.

"I did."

"You didn't."

Husky snatched up the pencil in a passion. "Hell, I'll give it to you again!" he cried.

"That's a poor bluff!" sneered Shand. [23]

Big Jack suddenly bestirred himself. "For God's sake, cut it out!" he snarled. "You hurt my ears! What in Sam Hill's the use of scrapping over a game for fun?"

"That's what I say," said Shand. "A man that'll cheat for nothing ain't worth the powder and shot to blow him to hell!"

"Ah-h! What's the matter with you?" retorted Husky. "I only made a mistake scoring. Anybody's liable to make a mistake. If it was a real game I'd be more careful like."

"You're dead right you would," said Black Shand grimly. "You'd get daylight let through you for less."

"Well, you wouldn't do it!" snarled Husky.

Shand rose. "Go on and play by yourself," he snarled disgustedly. "Solitaire is more your style. Idiot's delight. If you catch yourself cheating yourself, you can shoot yourself for what I care!"

"Well, I can have a peaceful game, anyhow," Husky called after him, smiling complacently at getting the last word.

He forthwith dealt the cards for solitaire. Husky was a burly, red-faced, red-haired ex-brakeman, of a simple and conceited character. He was much given to childish stratagems, and was subject to fits of childish passion. He possessed enormous physical strength without much staying power.

Black Shand carried his box to the fire and sat scowling into the flames. He was of a saturnine nature, in whom anger burned slow and deep. He was a man of few words. Half a head shorter than big Jack, he showed a greater breadth of shoulders. His arms hung down like an ape's.

"How far did you walk up the shore to-day?" big Jack asked. [24]

"Matter of two miles."

"How's the ice melting?"

"Slow. It'll be a week before we can move on." Jack swore under his breath. "And this the 22nd of May!" he cried. "We ought to have been on our land by now and ploughing. We're like to lose the whole season.

"Ill luck has dogged us from the start," Jack went on. "Our calculations were all right. We started the right time. Any ordinary year we could have gone right through on the ice. But from the very day we left the landing we were in trouble. When we wasn't broke down we was looking for lost horses. When we wasn't held up by a blizzard we was half drowned in a thaw!

"To cap all, the ice went out two weeks ahead, and we had to change to wheels, and sink to the hubs in the land trails. Now, by gad, before the ice on the shore is melted, it'll be time for the lake to freeze over again!"

"No use grousing about it," muttered Shand.

Big Jack clamped his teeth on his pipe and fell silent. For a while there was no sound in the shack but Husky muttering over his game, the licking of the wood fire, and faint, mournful intimations down the chimney from the pines. The man on the bed shuddered involuntarily, and glanced at his mates to see if they had noticed it.

This one, Joe Hagland, was considerably younger than the other three. He was a heavy, muscular youth with curling black hair and comely features, albeit somewhat marked by wilfulness and self-indulgence.

Back in the world outside he had made a brief essay in the prize-ring, not without some success. He had been driven out, however, by an epithet spontaneously applied by the fraternity: "Crying

Joe Hagland." [25]

The trouble was, he could not control his emotions.

"For God's sake, say something!" he cried at the end of a long silence. "This is as cheerful as a funeral!"

"Speak a piece yourself if you feel the want of entertainment," retorted Jack, without looking around.

"I wish to God I'd never come up to this forsaken country!" muttered Joe. "I wish I was back this minute in a man's town, with lights shining and glasses banging on the bar!"

This came too close to their own thoughts. They angrily silenced him. Joe buried his face in his arms, and another silence succeeded.

It was broken by a new sound, a soft sound between a whisper and a hum. It might have come from the pine-trees, which had many strange voices, but it seemed to be right there in the room with them. It held a dreadful suggestion of a human voice.

It had an electrical effect on the four men. Each made believe he had heard nothing. Big Jack and Shand stared self-consciously into the fire. Husky's hands holding the cards shook, and his face changed colour. Joe lifted a livid white face, and his eyes rolled wildly. He clutched the blankets and bit his lip to keep from crying out.

They moved their seats and shuffled their feet to break their hideous silence. Joe began to chatter irrelevantly.

"A funeral, that's what it is! You're like a lot of damn mutes. Who's dead, anyhow? The Irish do it better. Whoop things up! For God's sake, Jack, dig up a bottle, and let's have one good hour!"

The other three turned to him, oddly grateful for the interruption. Big Jack made no move to get the suggested bottle, nor had Joe expected him to. The liquor was stored with the rest of the [26] outfit in the stable. None desired to have the door opened at that moment.

Young Joe's shaking voice rattled on: "I could drink a quart myself without taking breath. Lord, this is enough to give a man a thirst! What would you give for an old-fashioned skate, boys? I'd welcome a few pink elephants, myself, after seeing nothing for days. What's the matter with you all? Are you hypnotized? For the love of Mike, start something!"

The pressure of dread was too great. The hurrying voice petered out, and the shack was silent again. Husky made a bluff of continuing his game. Jack and Shand stared into the fire. Joe lay listening, every muscle tense.

It came again, a sibilant sound, as if out of a throat through clenched teeth. It had a mocking ring. It was impossible to say whence it came. It filled the room.

Young Joe's nerves snapped. He leaped up with a shriek, and, springing across the room, fell beside Shand and clung to him.

"Did you hear it?" he cried. "It's out there! It's been following me! It's not human! Don't let it in!"

They were too much shaken themselves to laugh at his panic terror. Both men by the fire jumped up and turned around. Husky knocked over his box, and the cards scattered broadcast. He sidled towards the others, keeping his eyes on the door.

"Stop your yelling!" Shand hoarsely commanded.

"Did you hear it? Did you hear it?" Joe continued to cry.

"Yes, I heard it," growled Shand.

"Me, too," added the others. [27]

Joe's rigid figure relaxed. "Thank God!" he moaned. "I thought it was inside my head."

"Listen!" commanded Jack.

They stood close together, all their late animosities forgotten in a common fear. There was nothing to be heard but the wind in the tree-tops.

"Maybe it was a beast or a bird—some kind of an owl," suggested Husky shakily.

"No; like a voice laughing," stammered Joe.

"Right at the door like—trying to get in," added Shand.

"Open the door!" said big Jack.

No one made a move, nor did he offer to himself.

As they listened they heard another sound, like a stick rattling against the logs outside.

"Oh, my God!" muttered Joe.

The others made no sound, but the colour slowly left their faces. They were strong men and

stout-hearted in the presence of any visible danger. It was the supernatural element that turned their breasts to water.

Big Jack finally crept toward the door.

"Don't open it!" shrieked Joe.

"Shut up!" growled Jack.

They perceived that it was not his intention to open it. He dropped the bar in place. They breathed easier.

"Put out the light!" said Husky.

"Don't you do it!" cried Shand. "It's nothing that can shoot in!"

Their flesh crawled at the unholy suggestion his words conveyed.

They stood elbow to elbow, backs to the fire, waiting for more. For a long time all was quiet except the trees outside. They began to feel easier. Suddenly something dropped down the [28] chimney behind them and smashed on the hearth, scattering the embers.

The four men leaped forward as one, with a common grunt of terror. Facing around, they saw that it was only a round stone such as the chimney was built of. But that it might have fallen naturally did not lessen the fresh shock to their demoralized nerves. Their teeth chattered. They stuck close together, with terrified and sheepish glances at each other.

"By God!" muttered Big Jack. "Ice or no ice, to-morrow we move on from here!"

"I never believed in—in nothing of the kind," growled Shand. "But this beats all!"

"We never should have stopped here," said Husky. "It looked bad—a deserted shack, with the roof in and all. Maybe the last man who lived here was mur—done away with!"

Young Joe was beyond speech. White-faced and trembling violently, the big fellow clung to Shand like a child.

"Oh, hell!" said Big Jack. "Nothing can happen to us if we stick together and keep the fire up!" His tone was less confident than the words.

"All the wood's outside," stammered Husky.

"Burn the furniture," suggested Big Jack.

Suiting the action to the words, he put his barrel-stave rocker on the embers. It blazed up generously, filling every corner of the shack with light, and giving them more confidence. There were no further untoward sounds.

Meanwhile the fifth man had been sleeping quietly in the corner. The one who goes to bed early in camp must needs learn to sleep through anything. The other men disregarded him. [29]

The table and the boxes followed the chair on the fire. The four discussed what had happened in low tones.

"I noticed it first yesterday," said Big Jack.

"Me, too," added Husky. "What did you see?"

"Didn't see nothing." Jack glanced about him uneasily. "Don't know as it does any good to talk about it," he muttered.

"We got to know what to do," said Shand.

"Well, it was in the daytime, at that," Jack resumed. "I set a trap for skunks beside the trail over across the creek, and I went to see if I got anything. I was walkin' along not two hundred yards beyond the stable when something soft hit me on the back of the head. I was mad. I spun around to see who had done it. There wasn't nobody. I searched that piece of woods good. I'm sure there wasn't anybody there. At last I thought it was a trick of the senses like. Thought I was bilious maybe. Until I got the trap."

"What was it hit you?" asked Husky.

"I don't know. A lump of sod it felt like. I was too busy looking for who threw it to see."

"What about the trap?" asked Shand.

"I'm comin' to that. It was sprung, and there was a goose's quill stickin' in it. Now, I leave it to you if a wild goose ain't too smart to go in a trap. And if he did, he couldn't get a feather caught by the butt end, could he?"

They murmured in astonishment.

"Me," began Husky; "yesterday I was cuttin' wood for the fire a little way back in the bush, and I got het up and took off my sweater, the red one, and laid it on a log. I loaded up with an armful of wood and carried it to the pile outside the door here. I wasn't away two minutes, but when I went [30] back to my axe the sweater was gone.

"I thought one of you fellows took it. Remember, I asked you? I looked for it near an hour. Then I came in to my dinner. We was all here together, and I was the first to get up from the table. Well, sir, when I went back to my axe, there was the sweater where I first left it. Can you beat it? It was so damn queer I didn't like to say nothing."

"What about you?" Jack asked of Shand.

Shand nodded. "To-day when I walked up the shore there was something funny. I had a notion I was followed all the way. Couldn't shake it. Half a dozen times I turned short and ran into the bush to look. Couldn't see nothing. Just the same I was sure. No noise, you understand, just pad, pad on the ground that stopped when I stopped."

"What do you know?" Jack asked in turn of Joe.

"W—wait till I tell you," stammered Joe. "It's been with me two days. I couldn't bring myself to speak of it—thought you'd only laugh. I saw it a couple of times, flitting through the bush like. Once it laughed——"

"What did it look like?" demanded Jack.

"Couldn't tell you; just a shadow. This morning I was shaving outside. Had my mirror hanging from a branch around by the shore. I was nervous account of this, and I cut myself. See, there's the mark. I come to the house to get a rag.

"You was all in plain sight—cookee inside, Jack and Husky sittin' at the door waitin' for breakfast, Shand in the stable. I could see him through the open door. He couldn't have got to the tree and [31] back while I was in the house. When I got back my little mirror was hangin' there, but——"

"Well?" demanded big Jack.

"It was cracked clear across."

"Oh, my God, a broken mirror!" murmured Husky.

"I—I left it hanging," added Joe.

Meanwhile the chair, the table, and the boxes were quickly consumed, and the fire threatened to die down, leaving them in partial obscurity—an alarming prospect. The only other movable was the bed.

"What'll we do?" said Joe nervously. "We can't break it up without the axe, and that's outside."

Husky's eye, vainly searching the cabin, was caught by the sleeping figure in the corner.

"Send cookee out for wood," he said. "He hasn't heard nothing."

"Sure," cried Joe, brightening, "and if there's anything out there we'll find out on him."

"He'll see we've burned the stuff up," objected Shand, frowning.

"What of it?" asked Big Jack. "He's got to see when he wakes. 'Tain't none of his business, anyhow."

"Ho, Sam!" cried Husky.

The recumbent figure finally stirred and sat up, blinking. "What do you want?" Sam demanded crossly.

As soon as this young man opened his eyes it became evident that a new element had entered the situation. There was a subtle difference between the cook and his masters, easier to see than to define. There was no love lost on either side.

Clearly he was not one of them, nor had he any wish to be. Sam's eyes, full of sleep though they were, were yet guarded and wary. There was a suggestion of scorn behind the guard. He looked [32] very much alone in the cabin—and unafraid.

He was as young as Joe, but lacked perhaps thirty pounds of the other youth's brawn. Yet Sam was no weakling either, but his slenderness was accentuated in that burly company.

His eyes were his outstanding feature. They were of a deep, bright blue. They were both resolute and prone to twinkle. His mouth, that unerring index, matched the eyes in suggesting a combination of cheerfulness and firmness. It was the kind of mouth able to remain closed at need. He had thick, light-brown hair, just escaping the stigma of red.

There was something about him—fair-haired, slender, and resolute—that excited kindness. There lay the difference between him and the other men.

"We want wood," said Husky arrogantly. "Go out and get it."

An honest indignation made the sleepy eyes strike fire. "Wood!" he cried. "What's the matter with you? It's just outside the door. What do you want to wake me for?"

"Ah!" snarled Husky. "You're the cook, ain't you? What do we hire you for?"

"You'd think you paid me wages to hear you," retorted Sam. "I get my grub, and I earn it."

"You do what you're told with less lip," said Husky threateningly.

At this point Big Jack, more diplomatic, considering that a quarrel might result in awkward disclosures, intervened. "Shut up!" he growled to Husky. To Sam he said conciliatingly: "You're right. Husky hadn't ought to have waked you. It was a bit of thoughtlessness. But now you're awake you might as well get the wood." [33]

"Oh, all right," said Sam indifferently.

He threw off his blanket. As they all did, he slept in most of his clothes. He pulled on his moccasins. The other four watched him with ill-concealed excitement. The contrast between his sleepy indifference and their parted lips and anxious eyes was striking.

Sam was too sleepy and too irritated to observe at once that the table and chair were missing. He went to the door rubbing his eyes. He rattled the latch impatiently and swore under his breath. Perceiving the bar at last, he flung it back.

"Were you afraid of robbers up here?" he muttered scornfully.

"Close the door after you," commanded Jack.

Sam did so, and simultaneously the mask dropped from the faces of the men inside. They listened in strained attitudes with bated breath. They heard Sam go to the wood-pile, and counted each piece of wood as he dropped it with a click in his arm. When he returned they hastily resumed their careless expressions. Sam dropped the wood on the hearth.

"Better get another while you're at it," suggested Jack.

Sam, without comment, went back outdoors.

"Well," said Jack with a foolish look, "nothing doing, I guess."

"I thought there was nothing," boasted Husky.

"You——" began Jack indignantly. He was arrested by a gasp from Joe.

"My God! Listen!"

They heard a sharp, low cry of astonishment from Sam, and the armful of wood came clattering to the ground. They heard Sam run, but away from the cabin, not toward the door. Each caught his breath in suspense. They heard a thud on the ground, and a confused, scrambling sound. [34] Then Sam's voice rose quick and clear.

"Boys, bring a light! Quick! Jack! Shand! Quick!"

The four wavered in horrible indecision. Each looked at the other, waiting for him to make a move. There was no terror in the cries, only a wild excitement.

Finally Big Jack, with an oath, snatched up the lantern and threw open the door. The others followed in the order of their courage. Joe bringing up the rear.

A hundred yards from the door the light revealed Sam struggling with something on the ground. What it was they could not see—something that panted and made sounds of rage.

"Boys! Here! Quick!" cried Sam.

To their amazement his voice was full of laughter. They hung back.

"What have you got?" cried Jack.

The answer was as startling as an explosion: "A girl!"

A swift reaction passed over the four. They sprang to his aid.

"Hold the light up!" Sam cried breathlessly. "Shand, grab her feet. I've got her arms locked. God! Bites like a cat! Carry her in." This ended in a peal of laughter.

Between them Shand and Sam carried her toward the door, staggering and laughing wildly. Their burden wriggled and plunged like a fish. They had all they could do, for she was both slippery and strong. They got her inside at last. The others crowded after, and they closed the door and barred it.

Sam, usually so quiet and wary in this company, was transformed by excitement. "Now, let's see what we've got!" he cried. "Put her feet down. Look out or she'll claw you!" [35]

They set her on her feet and stood back on guard. But as soon as she was set free her resistance came to an end. She did not fly at either, but coolly turned her back and shook herself and smoothed her plumage like a ruffled bird. This unexpected docility surprised them afresh. They watched her warily.

"A woman!" they cried in amazed tones. "Where did she drop from?"

They instantly ascribed all the supernatural manifestations to this human cause. Everything was made clear, and a load of terror lifted from their breasts.

The suddenness of the reaction dizzied them a little. Each man blushed and frowned,

remembering his late unmanly terrors. They were amazed, chagrined and tickled all at once.

Big Jack strode to her and held the lantern up to her face. "She's a beauty!" he cried.

A silence succeeded that word. Four of the five men present measured his mates with sidelong looks. Sam shrugged and, resuming his ordinary circumspect air, turned away.

CHAPTER IV [36]

THE VISITOR

The girl turned an indifferent, walled face toward the fire, refusing to look at any of the men. Her beauty grew upon them momentarily. Their amazement knew no bounds that one like this should have been led to their door out of the night.

"Well," said Big Jack, breaking the silence at last. "It was a rough welcome we give you, miss. We thought you was a spook or something like that. But we're glad to see you."

She gave no sign of having heard him.

"Was it you whistled through the keyhole and tossed a stone down the chimney?" demanded Husky.

No answer was forthcoming.

"I'm sorry if we hurt you," added Jack.

He might as well have been addressing a wooden woman.

"I say, I'm sorry if we hurt you," he repeated louder.

"Maybe she can't understand English," suggested Sam.

"What'll I do then?" asked Jack hopelessly.

"Try her with sign language."

"Sure," said Jack. He looked around for the table. "Oh, hell, it's burnt up! We'll have to eat on the floor. Hey, look, sister!" He went through the motions of spreading a table and eating. The others watched interestedly. "Will you?" he asked.

She gravely nodded her head. A cheer went up from the circle. [37]

"Hey, cookee!" cried Big Jack. "Toss up a bag of biscuits and put your coffee-pot on. You, Joe, chase out to the stable and fetch a box for her to sit on."

For the next few minutes the cabin presented a scene of great activity. Every man, with the tail of an eye on the guest, was anxious to contribute a share to the preparations. Husky went to the lake for water; Shand cut bacon and ground coffee for the cook; Big Jack produced a clean, or fairly clean, white blanket to serve for a tablecloth, and set the table.

A glitter in each man's eyes suggested that his hospitality was not entirely disinterested. They were inclined to bristle at each other. Clearly a dangerous amount of electricity was being stored within the little shack. Only Sam was as self-contained in his way as the girl in hers.

Big Jack continued his efforts to communicate with her. He was deluded by the idea that if he talked a kind of pidgin-English and shouted loud enough she must understand.

"Me, Big Jack," he explained; "him, Black Shand; him, Husky; him, Young Joe. You?" He pointed to her questioningly.

"Bela," she said.

It was the first word she had uttered. Her voice was like a strain of woods music. At the sound of it Sam looked up from his flour. He quickly dropped his eyes again.

When Joe brought her the box to sit on, he lingered beside her. Good-looking Young Joe was a boasted conqueror of the sex. The least able of them all to control his emotions, he was now doing the outrageously masculine. He strutted, posed, and smirked in a way highly offensive to the other men.

When, Bela sat down Joe put a hand on her shoulder. Instantly Big Jack's pale face flamed like an aurora. [38]

"Keep your distance!" he barked. "Do you think the rest of us will stand for that?"

Joe retreated to the bed, crestfallen and snarling, and things smoothed down for the moment.

"Where do you live?" Jack asked the girl, illustrating with elaborate pantomime.

She merely shook her head. They might decide as they choose whether she did not understand or

did not mean to tell.

Husky came in with a pail of water. The sanguine Husky was almost as visibly ardent as Joe. He rummaged in his bag at the far end of the cabin, and reappeared in the firelight bearing an orange silk handkerchief. His intention was unmistakable.

"You put that up, Husky!" came an angry voice from the bed. "If I've got to stay away from her, you've got to, too!"

Husky turned, snarling. "I guess this is mine, ain't it? I can give it away if I want."

"Not if I know!" cried Joe, springing toward him. They faced each other in the middle of the room with bared teeth.

Big Jack rose again. "Put it away, Husky," he commanded. "This is a free field and no favour. If you want to push yourself forward at our expense you got to settle with us first, see?"

The others loudly approved of this. Husky, disgruntled, thrust the handkerchief in his pocket.

After the two overweening spirits had been rebuked, matters in the shack went quietly for a while. The four men watched the girl, full of wonder; meanwhile each kept an eye on his mates.

It was their first experience at close range with a girl of the country, and they could not make her out at all. Her sole interest seemed to be upon the fire. This air of indifference at once provoked and baffled them. They could not reconcile it with the impish tricks she had played. [39]

They could not understand a girl alone in a crowd of men betraying no self-consciousness. "Touch me at your peril," she seemed to say; but if that was the way she felt, what had she come for?

Sam brought his basin of flour to the hearth and, kneeling in the firelight, proceeded to mix the dough. After the manner of amateur cooks, he liberally plastered his hands and arms with the sticky mess.

The girl watched him with a scornful lip. Suddenly she dropped to her knees beside him, and without so much as "By your leave," took the basin out of his hands. She showed him how it ought to be done, flouring her hands so the batter would not stick, and tossing up the mess with the light, deft touch of long experience. At the sight of Sam's discomfiture a roar of laughter went up from the others.

"Guess you're out of a job now, cookee," said Shand.

"Now we'll have something to eat besides lead sinkers," added Joe.

Sam laughed with the others, and, retiring a little, watched how she did it. The girl affected him differently from the rest. Diffidence overcame him. He scarcely ever raised his eyes to her face.

All watched her delightedly, each man showing it according to his nature. In every move she was as graceful as a kitten or a filly, or anything young, natural, and unconscious of itself.

In a remarkably short space of time the three frying-pans were upended before the fire, each with its loaf. No need to ask if it was going to be good bread. It appeared that this wonderful girl had other recommendations beside her beauty. [40]

She rose, dusting her hands, and backed away from the fire, as if to cool off. Before they realized what she was doing, she turned and quietly walked out of the door, closing it after her.

They cried out in dismay, and of one accord sprang up and made for the door. Sam involuntarily ran with the others, filled, like they were, with disappointment. It was now pitch dark under the trees, and straight from the fire as they were, they could not see a yard ahead.

They scattered, beating the woods, loudly calling her name and making naive promises to the night, if she would only come back. They collided with each other and, tripping over roots, measured their lengths on the ground.

Curses began to be mixed with their dulcet invitations to the vanished one to return. From the sounds, one would have been justified in thinking a part of bedlam had been let loose in the pine-woods.

Sam was the first to take sober second thought. He began to retrace his steps toward the cabin. Common sense told him she would never be caught by that noisy crew unless she wished to be. In any case, the bread might as well be saved.

In his heart he approved of her retreat. Trouble in the shack could not long have been averted if she had stayed. Perhaps she had been better aware of what was going on than she seemed. What a strange visitation it had been altogether! How beautiful she was, and how mysterious! Much too good for that lot. It pleased him to think that she was honest. He had not known what to think before.

Thus ruminating he came to the cabin door, and was pulled up short on the threshold by a fresh shock of astonishment. There she was, kneeling on the hearth as before! [41]

She glanced indifferently at him over her shoulder and went on with her work. Such hardihood in face of all the noise outside did not seem human. Sam stared at her open-mouthed. She had some

birds that she was skinning and cutting up. The pungent, appetizing smell of wild fowl greeted his nostrils.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he exclaimed involuntarily. "What does this mean?"

She disdained any answer.

"You were foolish not to beat it while you had the chance," he said, forgetting she was supposed not to understand. "This is no place for a woman!"

She glanced at him with a subtle smile; Sam flushed up. "Oh, very well!" he said hotly. Turning, he called outside: "Boys, come back! She's here!"

One by one they straggled in, grinning delightedly, if somewhat sheepishly. They shook their heads at each other. "We sure have a queer customer," was the general feeling. It was useless to bombard her with questions. The language of signs is a feeble means of communication when one side is intractable.

Apparently she had merely gone to some cache of her own to obtain a contribution toward the feast. She had brought half a dozen grouse. The biscuit-loaves were now done sufficiently to stand alone, and the pans were giving off delicious emanations of frying grouse and bacon.

The four men who, for the past week, had been sunk in utter boredom, naturally reacted to the other extreme of hilarity. Loud laughter filled the cabin. The potentialities for trouble were not, however, lessened. On the contrary, a look or a word was enough at any moment to bring a [42] snarling pair face to face. Presently the inevitable suggestion was brought forth.

"This is goin' to be a regular party," cried Joe. "Jack, be a sport; get out a bottle, and let's do it in style!"

To save himself, Sam could not keep back the protest that sprang to his lips. "For God's sake!" he cried.

"What the hell is it to you, cook?" cried Joe furiously.

There was old bad blood between these two. Perhaps because they were of the same age.

Big Jack was bursar and commissary of the expedition. He smiled and gave his mouth a preliminary wipe. "Well, I think we might stand one bottle," he said.

Sam shrugged and held his tongue.

Jack returned with one of the precious bottles they had contrived to smuggle past the police at the Landing. He opened it with loving care, and the four partners had an appetizer.

When the food was ready, the always unexpected girl refused to sit with them around the blanket. No amount of urging could move her. She retired with her own plate to a place beside the fire.

Though she was the guest, she assumed the duty of hostess, watching their plates and keeping them filled. This was the first amenity she had shown them. They were perplexed to reconcile it with her scornful air.

Only once did she relax. Big Jack, jumping up to put a stick on the fire, did not mark where he set his plate. On his return he stepped in it. The others saw what was coming, and their laughter was ready.

Above the masculine guffaws rang a girlish peal like shaken bells. They looked at her, surprised [43] and delighted. More than anything, the laughter humanized her. She hastily drew the mask over her face again, but they did not soon forget the sound of her laughter.

Big Jack kept control of the bottle, and doled it out with strict impartiality. Under the spur of the fiery spirit, their ardour and their joviality mounted together.

Sam was not offered the bottle. Sam was likewise tacitly excluded from the contest for the girl's favour. It did not occur to any of the four to be jealous of little Sam. He accepted the situation with equanimity. He had no desire to rival them. His feeling was that if that was the kind she wanted, there was nothing in it for him.

Like all primitive meals, it was over in a few minutes. Sam gathered up the dishes, while the other men filled their pipes and befogged the atmosphere with a fragrant cloud of smoke. Like all adventurers, they insisted on good tobacco.

The rapidly diminishing bottle was circulated from hand to hand, the hilarity sensibly increasing with each passage. Their enforced abstention of late made them more than usually susceptible. Their faces were flushed, and their eyes began to be a little bloodshot. They continually forgot that the girl could not speak English, and their facetious remarks to each other were in reality for her benefit. A rough respect for her still kept them within bounds.

Bela, as a matter of course, set to work on the hearth to help Sam clean up. This displeased Joe.

"Ah, let him do his work!" he cried. "You come here, and I'll sing to you." [44]

His partners howled in derision. "Sing!" cried Husky. "You ain't got no more voice than a bull-

bat!"

Joe turned on him furiously. "Well, at that, I ain't no fat, red-headed lobster!" he cried.

A violent wrangle resulted, into which Shand was presently drawn, making it a three-cornered affair. Big Jack, commanding them to be silent, made more noise than any. Pandemonium filled the shack. The instinctive knowledge that the first man to strike a blow would have to fight all three kept them apart. No man may keep any dignity in a tongue-lashing bout. Their flushed faces and rolling eyes were hideous in anger.

Through it all the amazing girl quietly went on washing dishes with Sam. He stole a glance of compassion at her.

Big Jack, having the loudest roar, battered the ears of the disputants until they were silenced. "You fools!" he cried. "Are you going to waste the night chewing the rag like a parcel of women?"

They looked at him sullenly. "Well, what *are* we going to do? That's what I'd like to know," said Shand.

A significant silence filled the cabin. The men scowled and looked on the floor. The same thought was in every mind. An impossible situation confronted them. How could any one hope to prevail against the other three.

"Look here, you men," said Jack at last. "I've got a scheme. I'm a good sport. Have you got the nerve to match me?"

"What are you getting at?" demanded Husky.

Jack put his hand in his pocket. "I'm gettin' at a weddin'. Why not? Here's as pretty a piece of goods, as I, for one, ever see or ever ask to. Handy, too, and the finest sort of prime A1 cook. [45] Bride O.K. Four lovin', noble bachelors to choose the bridegroom out of. Bishop Lajeunesse'll be along to-morrow or the next day, or mighty soon. He's due to pass any minute. Priest all ready. Husband ready—leastwise I am for one. Bride all ready——"

"Damned if she is," contradicted Sam.

"Give her a chance and see," snarled Jack truculently. "She don't look no manner of a fool. It'll be a mighty fine thing for a girl of this blasted country to get a downright white husband, and I'll bet my bottom dollar this here girl's cute enough to see it—or—what the hell did she come to our shack for? And, if no such notion ever crossed her prutty head, I'll explain it to her clear enough —give me five minutes' chin with her——You all been complainin' it was so gol darn dull. Well, here's some excitement: a weddin' on the spry." He pulled his hand from his pocket and showed the dice in its palm. "This shack ain't big enough to hold the four of us men, not just at present," he said meaningly. "Three has got to get out for a bit, and leave one to do his courtin'—and do it quick. I've got a pair of dice here. Three rounds, see? The low man to drop out on each round. The winner to keep the shack, and to pop the question—while the other three camp on the shore. What do you say to it?"

CHAPTER V [46]

THE DICE DECIDE

The three stared at Big Jack in a dead silence while the underlying significance of his words sunk in. They began to breathe quickly. Sam, hearing the proposal, flushed with indignation. His heart swelled in his throat with apprehension for the girl. How could he make her understand what was going on? How could he help her? Would she thank him for helping her?

Shand was the first to speak. "Say, you fellows, it's some idea—what? And it'll be cheerfuller than a funeral. Yes," he muttered. "I'm on!"

"How about the cook?" demanded Husky thickly.

"Hell, he ain't in this game!" said Jack indifferently. "He goes outside with the losers."

"I'm damned if I'll stand for it!" cried Joe excitedly. "It's only a chance! It doesn't settle anything. The best man's got to win!"

"You fools!" growled Shand. "How will you settle it—with guns? Is it worth a triple killing?"

"With my bare fists!" said Joe boastfully.

"Are you man enough to take on the three of us, one after the other?" demanded Shand. "You've got to play fair in this. You take an equal chance with the rest of us, or we'll all jump on you."

Jack and Husky supported him in no uncertain terms. Joe subsided.

"It's agreed, then," said Jack. [47]

Shand and Husky nodded.

"Let him come in, then, if he wants his chance," said Jack indifferently. "The losers will take care of him."

Joe made haste to join them. They squatted in a circle around the blanket. Under the strong excitement of the game, each nature revealed itself. Black Shand became as pale as paper, while Husky's face turned purple.

Young Joe's face was drawn by the strain, and his hand and tongue showed a disposition to tremble. Only Big Jack exhibited the perfect control of the born gambler. His steely blue eyes sparkled with a strange pleasure.

"Let me see them?" demanded Husky, reaching for the dice.

Jack laughed scornfully. "What's the matter with you? 'Tain't the first time you've played with them. There's only the one pair. We've all got to use them alike."

"Let me see them!" persisted Husky, showing his teeth. "It's my right!"

Jack shrugged, and the bone cubes were solemnly passed from hand to hand.

"You can't shoot on a mat," said Joe. Jerking the blanket from the floor, he tossed it behind him.

"Get something to shake them in," said Shand. "No palming wanted."

Husky reached behind him and took a cup from Sam.

A long wrangle followed as to who should throw first. They finally left it to the dice, and the choice fell on Joe. Shand was at his left hand; Husky faced him; Jack was at his right. They held their breath while the bones rattled in the cup. When they rolled out, their eyes burned holes in the floor. [48]

"Ten!" cried Joe joyfully. "I'm all right! Beat that if you can!"

Sam, obliged to await the result without participating, was suffocating with suspense. When the cup passed to Shand he touched the girl. She looked at him inquiringly. None of the other four were paying the least attention to them then. Sam asked her with a sign if she understood the game. He had heard that the natives were inveterate gamblers.

She nodded. He then, by an unmistakable gesture, let her know that the stake they played for was—herself. Again she nodded coolly. Sam stared at her dumbfounded.

In her turn, she asked him with a glance of scorn why he was not in the game. Young Sam blushed and looked away. He was both abashed and angry. It was impossible for him to convey his feeling by signs.

Meanwhile Shand threw seven, and Joe rejoiced again. But when Husky, opposite him, got a beggarly three, the young man's triumph was outrageous. The evening had left an unsettled score between these two.

"You're done for, lobster!" he cried with intolerable laughter. "Take your blankets and go outside!"

A vein on Husky's forehead swelled. "You keep a civil tongue in your head, or I'll smash your face, anyhow," he muttered.

"You're not man enough, Braky!" taunted Joe.

"Well, I'll help him," said Shand suddenly.

"Me, too," added Jack. "Play the game like a man and keep your mouth shut!"

When the cup went to Jack, Sam caught the girl's eye again. He could not help trying once more. He looked significantly toward the door. While the four heads were bent over the floor she could easily have gained it. She slightly shook her head. [49]

Sam ground his teeth and doggedly attended to the dishes. A surprising angry pain transfixed his breast. What did he care? he asked himself. Let her go! But the pain would not be assuaged by the anger. She was so beautiful!

While rage gnawed at Husky's vitals, and he tried not to show it, Big Jack shook the cup with cool confidence and tossed the dice on the floor. Strange if he could not beat three! The little cubes rolled, staggered, and came to a stop. For a second the four stared incredulously. A pair of ones!

An extraordinary change took place in Husky. He grunted and blinked. Suddenly he threw back his head and roared with laughter. Big Jack steeled himself, shrugged, and rose. Going to the fire-place, he tapped the ashes out of his pipe and prepared to fill it again.

"'Tain't for me to kick," he said coolly; "since I got it up!" Jack deserved better at the hands of fortune.

The cup passed to Joe again. He shook it interminably.

"Ah, shoot!" growled Shand.

Whereupon Joe put down the cup and prepared to engage in another snarling argument. Only a

combined threat from the three to put him out of the game forced him to play. He got five, and suddenly became quiet and anxious.

Shand threw four, whereupon Joe's little soul rebounded in the air again. Husky got eight. Shand rose without a word and crossed the room to the door.

"Wait till the game is over," said Big Jack quietly. "We'll all go out together and save trouble." [50]

Young Joe, once more in possession of the cup, was unable to get up sufficient nerve to make the fateful cast. He shook it as if he meant to wear a hole in the tin. He offered to let Husky shoot first, and when he refused tried to pick a quarrel with him.

Finally Big Jack drew out his watch. "Ten seconds," he said, "or you forfeit. Are you with me, Shand?"

"Sure!" muttered the other.

Joe, with a groan of nervous apprehension, made his cast. He got a ten. Another reaction took place in him.

"Let me see you beat that!" he cried offensively. "I'm all right!" He smirked at the girl.

Husky picked up the dice and with one hasty shake tossed them out. By this time he had had as much suspense as he could stand. His nervous cast sent the cubes flying wide. One turned up a five between them. The other rolled beyond Joe. They had to crawl on hands and knees to see it. Six black spots were revealed.

"Eleven!" roared Husky. "I win!"

Joe's self-control gave way altogether. Tears were in his voice. "Do it over!" he cried. "You got to do it over! It wasn't on the table! You never shook the cup! I won't stand for it!"

Husky, having won, blissfully calmed down. "Ah, you short sport," he contemptuously retorted, "you deserve to lose!"

Joe sprang up with a tearful oath. "I won't stand for it!" he cried. "I said I wouldn't stand by a throw of the dice. You've got to fight me!"

Big Jack, expecting something of the kind, intervened from one side, Shand from the other. Joe's [51] arms were promptly pinned behind him. He struggled impotently, tears of rage coursing down his cheeks.

"You fool!" said Jack. "We told you we'd see fair play done. What can you do against the three of us? If he had lost we would have done the same for you. Go outside, or we'll drag you."

Joe finally submitted. They released him. Still muttering, he went out without looking back.

"Come on!" said Big Jack brusquely to Sam. "You are the contract."

Another and an unexpected mutiny awaited them here. Sam very promptly arose from among his tins and turned on Big Jack. He had become as pale as Shand, but his eyes were hot enough. His lips were compressed to a thin line.

"Yes, I heard it!" he cried. "And a rotten, cowardly frame-up I call it! We never lacked for hospitality from her people. And this is the way you repay it. With your mouth full of talk about fair play, too. You make me sick!"

For an instant they stared at him flabbergasted. For the masters to be bearded by a humble grub-rider was incredible. Husky, the one most concerned, was the first to recover himself. Flushing darkly, he took a step toward Sam with clenched fists.

"Shut up, you cook!" he harshly cried. "It's none of your put! You stick to dish-washing and let your betters alone, if you know what's good for you!"

Sam's pale cheeks flamed and paled again. Instead of falling back, he took another step toward Husky.

"You can't shout me down, you bully," he said quietly in his face. "You know I'm right. And you all know it." [52]

Husky towered over the slight figure.

"Get out," he roared, "before I smash you!"

"Go ahead!" said Sam, without budging. "I'm not afraid of you!"

For the first time, the girl seemed really interested. Her nostrils were slightly distended. Her glance flew from face to face. There was a pregnant pause. Husky's great fist was raised. But not having struck on the instant, he could not strike at all. Under the blaze of the smaller man's eyes, his own glance finally bolted. He turned away with an assumption of facetiousness.

"Take him away," he said to his mates, "before I kill him."

An audible breath escaped the girl. She turned back to the fire.

Jack and Shand looked disconcerted by Sam's accusation; nevertheless, obsessed by their fetish of fair play, they had to see the thing through. Jack in particular, having proposed the game and having lost, was bound by his code to assist Husky.

They seized Sam between them and started to drag him toward the door. Sam struggled desperately and vainly in their grasp. Joe, attracted by the raised voices, had run in again. He, for his own ends, showed a disposition to help Sam. Jack overawed him with a look.

"Come along," he commanded.

The girl showed no further concern in the matter. Sam, observing her, suddenly ceased to struggle.

Outside the door they released him. When the four of them were joined together, they paused for a moment to decide which direction they should take.

"That sand-bank at the mouth of the creek," suggested Jack. [53]

The sound of a shot rang muffled in the cabin behind them.

For an instant they were stupefied. A strange joy lightened Sam's breast. Dropping their bundles, they ran back, and, flinging the door open, stood back warily, half expecting to be received with a fusillade.

The smell of gunpowder assailed their nostrils. The light of the fire revealed Husky's burly figure sprawling on his back, with his feet among the tin dishes on the hearth. The girl was not to be seen.

They cautiously ventured in. She was not behind the door. She could not have gone out by the door without their knowing it, for they had been within ten paces. Both windows were intact. The only possible place of concealment within the shack was the bed. A swift investigation proved that there was nothing in it or under it.

The old feeling of awe of the supernatural returned. They avoided each other's eyes. The figure on the floor stirred a little and groaned. A dark, wet stain was spreading on his shirt. Jack dropped to his knees beside him.

"Through the shoulder," he said to the others. "No vital organ."

"Can you hear me?" he asked of the wounded man.

"A she-devil!" muttered Husky. "A devil!"

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. Everything turned black. A devil—had a gun in her dress! Speaks English, too. Understood every word!"

None of Husky's mates had any skill in surgery. Like men in the flush of their strength, they refused to harbour the thought of injury or disease, and had come to the wilderness ill provided.

Jack, lacking antiseptics or healing medicaments, bound up the shoulder roughly. They laid [54]
Husky on the bed and endeavoured to forget him. Jack, Shand, and Joe elected to sleep in the stable to escape the injured man's stertorous breathing and his groans. They took care to bar themselves in against the terrors of the night.

Sam was glad to see them go. Their endless and futile discussion of what had happened tried his temper.

In the morning Husky was feverish. His mates shrugged and left him to Sam. Their attitude toward the injured one was as naive as that of children or animals.

Sam had no love for the gross figure on the bed, who, he felt, had earned what he got. Nevertheless, he did what offices humanity suggested; washing the wound and redressing it; bringing ice from the lake shore to mitigate his fever. He had to smile at Husky's changed tone in his lucid moments.

"Do you think this will croak me?" he continually asked. "Lord, I ain't ready to die! I leave it to you, cook; shouldn't a man have some warning of his end? Lord, if I get over this I'll lead a different life! I swear I will! Lord, think of dying in a God-forsaken place like this without a parson to clear the track for you! It ain't fair to catch you like this. Not even a Bible in the outfit!"

"I have a Bible," said Sam grimly.

"Get it for me; there's a good fellow," begged Husky.

Sam did so. "Do you want me to read it to you?" he asked.

"No use," said Husky. "Couldn't never get the hang of it. But let me have it here in bed with me. That's something." [55]

As the day wore on the patient grew worse, and the other men became more and more chary of approaching him. However, toward the end of the afternoon, a cold squall of rain drove them indoors in spite of themselves.

They squatted on the floor at the farthest possible distance from the bed and half-heartedly dealt the cards for euchre. Meanwhile Sam busied himself baking bread, trying to remember what he could of the girl's deft technique. He could think of her now with a pleasant warmth about the heart. She had redeemed her sex in his eyes.

Careless of whether he heard them, the men joked outrageously about Husky's condition. It was their way of hiding their helpless terror.

"Well, old Husk is bound for the heavenly shore, I guess," said Jack.

"We'll give him a bang-up funeral," suggested Joe. "Spill a little booze and carve a board to put at his head. It's the least we can do for a pal."

"When Husk gets to the golden gates," Jack went on, "if Peter tries to hold him up, he'll say, 'What is it worth to you, old man?'"

This well-known saying of their partner produced a subdued laugh all around.

Black Shand remarked in his curt way: "Husky wouldn't get along in heaven. Ain't got no ear for music."

"He'd be in trouble down below, too," said Jack. "He'd undertake to show the Old Boy himself how to build a fire."

Outside the pine branches thrashed wildly, and gusts of rain were flung against the panes of the little window above the players' heads. Water found its way through more than one place in the sod roof and dripped sullenly on the floor. From time to time the game shifted, seeking a dry spot. [56]

On such a day the pioneers were keenly conscious of their isolation. The emptiness of the land seemed to press upon their breasts, hindering free breathing. Moreover, their nerves were still jangling as a result of the night's events.

Such was their situation when, without warning, the latch of the door clicked.

They froze in their card-playing attitudes, turning horrified eyes in the direction of the sound. The door opened inward, and a ghastly moment passed before they could see what was behind it. Then each man's breath escaped with a little sound of amazement and awe.

It was Bela.

CHAPTER VI [57]

A FRESH SURPRISE

Raindrops sparkled like diamonds in Bela's dark hair and upon her glowing cheeks. She was, as ever, composed and inscrutable. In one swift glance around she took in the whole scene—the cardplayers under the window, Sam arrested at his pan of dough, and the injured man breathing hard upon the bed.

She went toward the latter with a noiseless, gliding motion.

"Mak' water hot," she said coolly over her shoulder to Sam. "Get clean rags for bandage."

Jack and his mates, hearing the English speech, glanced at each other meaningly. Nevertheless, speech humanized her, and they relaxed.

There was no leaping up of the unholy fires of the night before. They regarded her with great, new respect. They remained sitting motionless, absorbed in her every move, like the spectators of a play.

At the sound of her voice the injured man opened his eyes with a grunt. Seeing her, he rolled away as far as he could get on the bed, crying out in mingled pain and terror:

"Keep her away! Keep her away! Don't let her get me!"

Bela fell back with a scornful smile.

"Tell him I not hurt him," she said to Sam, who had gone to her. "Tell him I come to mak' him well." [58]

Sam sought in vain to reassure Husky.

"I won't let her touch me!" the injured man cried. "She's a witch!"

"Let be," she said to Sam, shrugging. "I tell you w'at to do."

Under her direction Sam cut away his own rude bandage from Husky's shoulder and washed the wound. The bullet had gone cleanly through. Meanwhile Bela was macerating some leaves she had brought. She showed Sam how to apply the mass to the wound before rebandaging it. Husky

strained away.

"Poison! Poison!" he cried. "Keep her away from me!"

"You crazy!" said Bela impatiently. "Look at me!"

She chewed some of the poultice and swallowed it before Husky's eyes.

"Are you afraid, too?" she asked Sam.

He shook his head, smiling, and ate one of the leaves.

But Husky, notwithstanding the evidence of his eyes, continued to cry out and to resist their ministrations.

"All right," said Bela at last. "I can't do not'ing. He got die, I guess." She started for the door.

A swift reaction passed over Husky. All in the same breath with his protests he began to beg her not to desert him. She came back, and he made no further objections to having her dress and bind his wound.

When it was all done, she made for the door again as coolly as she had come. Sam experienced a sudden sinking of the heart.

"Are you going?" he cried involuntarily.

Big Jack jumped up at the same moment. "Don't go yet," he begged. [59]

Jack and the others had recovered sufficiently from the shock of their surprise to discuss in whispers what they should say to her.

"I come back to-morrow," said Bela. "I go home now to get medicine."

"Where do you live?" asked Jack.

"I not tell you," she answered coolly.

The sound of a snicker behind him brought a scowl to Jack's face. "I could easily find out," he muttered.

"If you follow me, I not come back," she announced.

"No offence," said Jack hastily. "But—it's darned funny. I leave it to you. Your coming and going like this. How did you get out last night?"

"I not tell you," she said again.

"'Tain't no wonder Husky's a bit leary of you. We all think——"

"What you think?" she asked mockingly.

"Well, we think it's funny," Jack repeated lamely.

"I don't care what you think," she retorted.

"Tell me one thing," said Jack. "What did you come here for first off?"

"Yes, I tell you what I come for," the girl said with a direct look. "I want see what white men lak. My fat'er him white man. I never see him. Him good man, good to women. So I think all white men good to women. I think no harm. I come here. I play trick for to mak' fun and be friends. Now I know ot'er white men not lak my fat'er. Now I look out for myself."

Big Jack had the grace to scowl shamefacedly and look away.

"Say, that's right," he muttered. "You're dead right, sister. We got in wrong. I'm sorry. These other fellows, they're sorry, too. We made it up together to tell you we was sorry. Give us a [60] chance to show you we ain't plumb rotten."

The girl dimpled like a white woman. No walled look then.

"All right," she said. "I come to-morrow early. I be your friend."

When the next squall swooped down from the southerly hills, Bela set off in her dugout from the mouth of the creek. The wind helped carry her in the direction she wanted to go, and the sheets of rain hid her from the view of anyone who might be looking out from the shack.

Her Indian upbringing had taught her to disregard bodily comfort. Streaming like a mermaid, she crouched in her canoe, paddling with the regularity of a machine.

In two hours she had reached the other shore. By this time it had cleared, and the late sun was sending long, golden rays down the lake.

She found a scene of industry in the village, for the fishing had started in earnest. The women were splitting and cleaning the day's catch, and hanging the fish on racks to cure in the smoke of

the fires. No surprise was elicited by her arrival. Bela had always gone and come as she chose.

Outside Charley's teepee she found her mother. Loseis's eyes lighted up at the sight of her, but she said nothing. She followed her into the teepee and unexpectedly seized and kissed her. They were mutually embarrassed. Bela had not learned to kiss among the tribe. Charley came in scowling.

"The fish are running," he said. "Everybody is working now. If you not work you get no fish."

"Keep your fish," said Bela. [61]

In that teepee she was mum as to her adventures. Having changed her clothes in her own little bower in the pines, she sought out Musq'oosis and told him her story.

Musq'oosis was a little sore. He listened, smoking impassively and tending his share of the fish hanging in the smoke. Meanwhile the sun went down in troubled crimson splendour over the pines, presaging more squalls.

When she came to the end he said sententiously: "You foolish go alone. You want a man."

Bela was mum.

"What you want of me now?" he asked.

"Grease for the wound," said Bela. "A little food for myself."

"All right. I give you. You goin' back?"

"To-night."

"I go with you," suggested Musq'oosis.

Bela shook her head a little sullenly.

She had good reasons, but it was difficult to explain them.

"I got go alone," she said.

"All right," replied Musq'oosis huffily. "Why you want talk to me?"

Bela glanced at him appealingly. "You speak me good words," she said. "You moch my friend. But I go alone. I can't tell it good. When I alone I keep myself moch secret lak you tell me. They not see me come and go; think I got magic. They scare of me."

"All right," repeated Musq'oosis. "I lak sleep in my teepee. What you goin' do when you go back?"

"When the bishop come I goin' marry the cook," said Bela calmly.

"Um," grunted Musq'oosis. "Is he the bigges'?" [62]

"No," answered Bela. "He littles'. I watch him. He got stronges' eye."

"So?"

"He is a pretty man," she said, suddenly lowering her head. "He mak' me want him bad. His eyes lak the sky at tam wild roses come. Hair bright lak mink-skin. He has kindness for women lak my fat'er got."

"H-m!" growled Musq'oosis; "you talk lak white woman."

"Tell me how to get him," said Bela simply.

Musq'oosis affected scorn. "Wa! All tam ask me what to do. Then go do what you lak, anyhow."

"You have good words," she put in meekly.

"I tell you before," grumbled Musq'oosis. "Don't let him see you want him or he never want you."

"I think he not want me moch," said Bela dejectedly. "Not lak ot'er men."

"Wait a while," encouraged Musq'oosis. "Hard wood slow to catch, but burn longer. I tell you again—keep your mouth shut. Don't let anythin' on. If ot'er men think you want the cook, they kill him maybe. White men sometam crazy lak that. You mus' all same mak' friends wit' all. Ask moch question. Watch them well. When you know their ways, you know what to do. Bam-by maybe you get your man to leave the ot'ers. Then it is easy."

"I do all you tell me," promised Bela.

"Come home to-morrow night," he said.

She rebelled at this. "No. I lak stay there. I can't be paddling over every day. Too far."

"Are you a fool?" asked Musq'oosis, exasperated. "Where you goin' stay at night?"

"I got little cache by the creek," she replied. "They no good in the bush. Can't see not'ing. I fool them all I lak. They never find me." [63]

"Watch yourself," advised Musq'oosis. "It's a dangerous game."

"I got my little gun," she returned, tapping her breast. "They plenty scare of me now."

As soon as it cleared up Young Joe casually remarked that he guessed he'd wash his shirt and let it dry before the fire while he slept. Big Jack and Shand both allowed that it was a good idea, and presently the three of them were squatting together by the creek, sousing their garments in the icy water.

Later Jack and Joe made a dicker to cut each other's hair. Shand, hearing of this, was obliged to part with a necktie to get Jack to cut his also. A general shave ended the ablutions. This was remarkable, for Joe had shaved only the day before.

"A fellow hadn't ought to let himself get careless up in the bush," he opined.

There was a great beating and shaking of clothes, and a combined cleaning of the shack. Sam made a broom out of willow branches; Jack cut some poles, out of which he designed to make a chair after supper.

"She's got to have something to sit in when she's watching beside Husky's bed like," he said.

It did not occur to him that Bela had probably never in her life before sat in a chair.

"You're damned lucky to get her to nurse you after you brought it on yourself," Joe said to Husky.

Husky was now looking forward to her return no less than the others. He had taken a turn for the better, and no longer thought of dying.

After supper a high degree of amity prevailed in the shack. Joe and Shand helped with the chair, and then they all planned to make a table next day. [64]

"Shand, lend a hand with this piece while I drive a nail, will you?" requested Jack politely.

"Sure thing! Say this is going to be out o' sight! You certainly have a good knack of making things, Jack."

"Oh, so-so. I ought to have a flat piece to put on the seat."

"I'll go out to the stable and see if I can find a box-cover."

"You stay here. I'll go," said Joe.

Sam, washing the dishes, harkened to this, and smiled a little grimly to himself, wondering how long it would last.

They retired early. The bed was given up to Husky, and the other four rolled up in their blankets across the room like a row of mummies. Calm brooded over the shack throughout the night.

Sam had not had so much time as the others to make himself presentable the night before, so he got up extra early for that purpose. Issuing out of the shack with soap, towel, razor, and glass, the first thing he beheld on rounding the shack was Bela. She was kneeling on a piece of wood to protect her knees from the wet ground, tearing and rolling some pieces of cotton for bandages.

She was dressed differently to-day—all in buckskin.

The newly risen sun was behind her, shooting misty beams across a lake of mother-of-pearl. The artist, latent in every man, arrested Sam, forcing him to wonder and admire.

Bela looked up calmly. "I waitin' till the men get up," she remarked.

"I'll call them," he offered, making a move to turn.

"Let them sleep," commanded Bela. "It is early."

Sam became uncomfortably conscious of his unkempt condition. "You caught me unawares," he said. "I haven't washed up yet." [65]

She glanced at him sidewise. Had he known it, he did not appear altogether at a disadvantage with his fair hair tousled and his shirt open at the throat.

"I don't care," she said, with a child's air of unconcern.

Presently she caught sight of the razor. "You got hair grow on your chin, too? That is fonny thing. Ot'er day I watch the curly-head one scrape his face. He not see me. What for you want scrape your face?"

Sam blushed. "Oh, it looks like a hobo if you don't," he stammered.

She repeated the word with a comical face. "What is hobo?"

"Oh, a tramp, a loafer, a bum."

"I on'erstan'," she said. "We got hoboes, too. My mot'er's 'osban' is a hobo."

She looked at his chin again. "Bishop Lajeunesse not scrape his chin," she stated. "Got long hair,

so. He is fine man."

Sam, not knowing exactly what to say, remained silent. He found it difficult to accommodate himself to a conversational Bela. She was much changed in the morning light from the inscrutable figure of the fire-side. Ten times more human and charming, it is true, but on that account the more disconcerting to a young man, without experience of the sex. Moreover, her beauty took his breath away. Bela watched his blushes with interest.

"What mak' your face hot?" she asked. "There is no fire."

He could not but believe she was making fun of him. "Ah! cut it out!" he growled. [66]

"White men fonny," said Bela, rolling her strips of cotton.

"Funny!" repeated Sam. "How about you? Hanged if you're not the strangest thing I ever came across."

Obviously this did not displease her. She merely shrugged.

He forgot some of his self-consciousness in his curiosity. "Where do you come from?" he asked, drawing nearer. "Where do you go to?"—"You wonderful creature!" his eyes added.

"No magic," she said calmly. "I just plain girl."

"Why wouldn't you tell them how you got out night before last?"

"Maybe I want get out again."

"Will you tell me?"

She glanced at him provokingly through her lashes. "Why I tell you? You just go tell your partners."

"They're no partners of mine," said Sam bitterly. "I should think you could see that. I'm just their cook. I work for my grub. They don't let me forget it either."

"Why you come to this country?" asked Bela.

"I want a piece of land the same as they do. But I've got to work to earn an outfit before I can settle."

"When you get your land what you do then?" she asked.

"Build a house, raise crops."

"White man all want land to dig," said Bela wonderingly.

"You've got to have land," explained Sam eagerly. "You've got to have something of your own. Outside, a poor man has no chance nowadays but to slave away his best years working for a rich man." [67]

Bela studied his face, trying to grasp these ideas so new to her.

"How did you get out of the shack?" Sam asked her again.

"I tell you," she said abruptly. "I climb the chimney."

"By George!" he exclaimed admiringly.

"It was easy. But I get all black. I am all day cleaning myself after."

"You're a wonder!" he cried. "Travelling about alone and all. Are all the girls up here like you?"

"No," replied Bela quaintly. "There is nobody lak me. I am Bela."

"Where do you live?"

She looked at him again through her lashes. "Maybe I tell you when I know you better."

"Tell me now," he pleaded.

She shook her head.

Sam frowned. "There's generally no good behind a mystery," he remarked.

"Maybe," said Bela. "But I not goin' tell all I know."

There was something highly exasperating to a young man in her cool, smiling air. He stood looking at her, feeling oddly flat and baffled.

Suddenly she turned her head to listen. "They gettin' up now," she said quickly. "Go and wash."

"Can't I speak to you if I am the cook?" he demanded.

"Go and wash," she repeated. "I don' want no more trouble."

Sam shrugged and walked stiffly away. He had plenty to occupy his mind while he shaved. His sensations were much mixed. In her subtle way the girl allured, mystified, and angered him all at [68]

once. Anger had the last word.

He would like to show her if he was the cook that he wasn't to be trifled with. He felt as if the most important thing in life was to solve the mystery that enshrouded her. However, the invigorating touch of cold water brought about a reaction. Violently scrubbing himself with the towel, he came to a sudden stop and addressed himself after this fashion:

"Steady, old man! You're heading in the wrong direction. You've got to get a toehold yourself before you can look at a girl. She's a sight too good-looking. You can't think about it straight. Forget it! Anyhow, a girl like that, she'd naturally pick a man like Big Jack or Shand. No use storing up trouble for yourself. Put it out of mind. Look the other way. Harden yourself."

Young Joe swung his heavy shoulders around the shack. Seeing Bela alone, he could scarcely credit his good fortune. He approached her, grinning and fawning in his extreme desire to please.

"Hello! You're an early bird," he said.

Bela looked at him in her most inscrutable way.

"How!" she said, offering him her hand according to the etiquette of the country.

Joe fondled it clumsily. "Say, the sight of you is good for sore eyes!" he cried, leering into her face. "Hanged if you ain't better looking than the sun-rise!"

Bela determinedly freed her hand. "Foolish talk!" she said loftily. "Wake the ot'er men and let us eat."

"Aw, don't be in such a rush," pleaded Joe. "I want to talk to you. I won't likely get another chance." [69]

"What you want say?" she asked. "More foolishness, I think."

"Aw, give a fellow a chance," begged Joe. "Be decent to me."

"Well, say it," she commanded.

Joe's feeling was genuine enough. The conqueror of the sex found himself at a loss for words.

"The—the sight of you kind of ties a man's tongue," he stammered. "I can't say it right. You're certainly a wonder! I never thought there was anything like you up here. I could stop here all day just taking you in!"

"I couldn't," said Bela coolly. "I too 'ongry. Wake the ot'er men and go wash."

Joe stared at her, scowling, trying to discover if he was being made game of.

"Ah," he growled, "you might give me a chance to make good."

"I will cook breakfast," said Bela. "I bring some nice whitefish."

"To the deuce with breakfast!" cried Joe. "I spoke you fair. You're only trying to put me off!"

"If you don't wake the men," said Bela coolly, "I will."

Her eyes were as clear as the lake waters. Joe's fell before them. He went sullenly back and shouted in the door of the shack.

CHAPTER VII [70]

THE SUITORS

The day started well, with Big Jack, Shand, and Joe all on their good behaviour. But it was too good to last. Watching Bela's graceful movements before the fire, and eating the delicious food she put before them, the same thoughts passed through each man's mind.

What a treasure to enrich the cabin of a lonely pioneer! What would hard work and discouragements matter if a man had that to welcome him home at the end of the day? How could a man endure to live alone, having known such a woman? How could he hope to succeed without her help?

Each seeing the same thoughts revealed in the faces of his companions, realized that two men stood between him and his desire, and the baleful fires of jealousy were lighted again.

Each afraid one of the others might steal a march on him, watched his mates like a detective. The consequence was that hating each other, they nevertheless stuck together like burs.

They followed Bela round in company like dogs contending for scraps, ready upon no occasion at

all to bare their teeth and snarl at each other.

Bela, perceiving her power, and being only a human woman, naturally abused it a little. Thus to see white men, whom all her life she had revered, cringing for her favour, went to her head a little. [71]

She made them fetch and carry for her like women, she would have said. Thus the situation was reversed from that of her first appearance in the shack.

"Bring me sewing," she said. "I not lak do not'ing."

A variety of damaged garments was pressed upon her.

"I sew one for each man," she said.

Having made Husky comfortable, she took her work out into the sunshine. Jack, Shand, and Joe lounged in front of her smoking, watching her covertly; each privately making up his mind to secure that charming sewing-machine for his own household, whatever the cost.

"Ain't you got not'ing to do?" asked Bela coolly.

"This is a holiday," replied Jack.

"The stable is dirty," she persisted.

"That's Shand's job," said Joe.

"Well, I ain't goin' to leave you two here," growled Shand. "There's plenty of other work, if it comes to that."

"All go clean the stable," commanded Bela. "I lak a clean stable."

"Now go cut plenty wood, so I can cook good," she ordered when they came back. "I want pine or birch. No poplar."

With Sam the case was a little different. When Bela addressed him it was with perhaps a heightened arrogance, but for the most part he managed to keep out of her way.

Not that he was indifferent; far from it. This new aspect of her exasperated him mightily. "She needs a master," he thought. The idea of taming her was delicious, seductive. "I could do it," he told himself, sneering at the obsequiousness of Big Jack *et al.*

Meanwhile he attended strictly to his own duties. [72]

Sam, when he chose, had command of a face as wooden as Bela's. More than once Bela, when she was unobserved, flashed a hurt and angry look at his indifferent back in the distance. For several hours during the afternoon Sam disappeared altogether. During his absence the other men had an uneasy time at Bela's hands.

With all her haughty airs she did not relax any of her care of Husky. The others envied him his wound. Hour by hour he was visibly growing better. The fever had left him. He had got over his fear of Bela.

Now, by a twisted course of reasoning, characteristic of him, he adopted a proprietary air toward her. She was his, he seemed to say, because forsooth, he had been shot by her. This, it need not be said, was highly offensive to the other men.

In the middle of the afternoon, Bela desiring a pail of water, Jack and Shand fell into a wrangle over who should get it. The fact that each felt he was making a fool of himself did not lessen the bitterness of the dispute.

Joe attempted to take advantage of it by sneaking out of the door with another pail. He was intercepted, and the argument took on a three-cornered aspect. Another endless, futile jawing-match resulted. Each was restrained from striking a blow by the knowledge that the other two would instantly combine against him.

Bela finally got the water herself, and ordering the three of them outside, bolted the door after them. The last sound they heard was Husky's triumphant laugh from the bed, whereupon they patched up their differences, and joined in cursing him, and expressing the hope he might yet die of his wound.

They were not allowed inside again until Sam returned and the supper was started. Their tempers had not improved any, and the situation grew steadily worse. Throughout the meal a sullen silence prevailed. [73]

Bela maintained the air of a haughty mistress of an unruly school. They all deferred to her uneasily, except Sam, who kept himself strictly to himself. His face was as blank of expression as a wax-work.

As soon as Bela finished eating she rose.

"I go now," she said coolly. "Come back to-morrow."

Three of the faces fell absurdly. Sam did not look up. A tiny flash in Bela's dark eyes showed that she observed the difference. She moved toward the door. Involuntarily Young Joe started to rise.

"Sit down," snarled Jack and Shand simultaneously.

Bela went.

Left to themselves, none of the men were disposed to talk except Husky. Like sick men generally, his fibres were relaxed, and his tongue loosened.

"I feel fine to-night," he announced at large.

"A hell of a lot we care!" muttered Joe.

"It's great to feel your strength coming back," Husky went on, unabashed. "She's a wonderful fine nurse. Takes care of me like a baby. I'd trust myself to her sooner than the highest-priced doctor in the city."

"You sung a different tune yesterday morning," sneered Joe.

"Lord! you're a fool, Husky!" added Shand.

"Ah! you're only jealous!" returned Husky. "You wish you was me, I bet. She's got rare good sense, too. You fellows with your quarrelling and all, you don't know her. This afternoon when she put you out we had a real good talk. You ought to heard the questions she asked. About the [74] city and everything. Like a child, but better sense like. She thinks things out for herself all right. Me and her's gettin' real good friends."

"Ah! shut your silly head!" snarled Joe. "Be thankful you're laid out on your back or you'd get it busted in for less than that. To hear you talk, one would think you had a mortgage on the girl just because she plugged you! You fool! You got no chance at all. You've already got your turn-down good and proper!"

"You're jealous!" retorted Husky. "Wouldn't you give something to know what passed between us when you was locked out? You wait and see."

Husky was in no condition to keep up his end with a well man. His voice trailed off into a whine and ceased.

Sam unconcernedly rolled up and went to sleep. The other three smoked and glowered into the fire. No sleep for them. No telling how near she might be. The heart of each man was outside the shack. Each knew that any attempt to follow it would only result in a fresh wrangle.

Finally Big Jack remarked very casually: "Let's go outside for a bit."

The other two arose with alacrity and they issued out in a body. The sky was still bright. They covertly looked about, hoping to discover a sign of her presence, or some indication of the way she had gone.

Together they loafed down to the creek, and, crossing by the stepping-stones, walked out on the point beyond, whence they could see a long way down the shore. Toward the east the lake was like a sheet of armour-plate. Behind them the sky was paling from amber to clear jade.

Without confessing what was in his mind, each man searched the shore for a tell-tale wisp of [75] smoke. Nothing was to be seen. Each wondered if she were watching him from concealment, laughing in her sleeve.

Returning at last, unsatisfied and irritable, a senseless dispute arose at the door over who should be the last to enter. Shand, suddenly losing his temper, gave Joe a push that sent the youth sprawling inside on his hands and knees. He sprang up livid and insane with rage.

Jack and Shand instinctively drew together. Joe, seeing the odds against him, leaped without a word toward the corner of the shack where the guns were kept. The other two paling, measured the distance back to the door. But Joe was held up in mid career.

"They're gone!" he cried blankly.

Following his eyes, they saw that the corner was empty. Their thoughts took a sharp turn. They glanced at each other suspiciously.

Joe's anger blazed up afresh.

"You did it, you traitor!" he cried, whirling around on Shand.

"You made way with the guns so you could pick us off one by one! You keep quiet, don't you, and work behind our backs! Jack, are you going to stand for it? He'll get you, too!"

Jack moved a little away from Shand, grim and suspicious.

"What grounds have you?" he demanded of Joe.

Joe had no grounds—except his anger. "I see it in his face!" he cried.

"It's a damned lie!" said the dark man thickly. "I play fair."

Joe renewed and enlarged his accusations. Husky, from the bed, merely to be on the stronger side, added his voice. Big Jack's silent anger was more dangerous than either. Once more the [76]

little shack was like a cauldron boiling over with the poisonous broth of hate.

Sam sat up in his bed, blinking—and angry, too. He felt he had been wakened once too often by their imbecile quarrelling.

"For Heaven's sake, what's the matter now?" he demanded.

"Shand stole the guns!" cried Joe.

"He didn't," said Sam. "I hid them."

All four turned on him in astonishment. "What did you do that for?" demanded Joe, open-mouthed.

"I hid them to keep you from blowing the tops of each other's heads off before morning," said Sam coolly. "Turn in and forget it."

Joe took a step toward him. "By George, we don't need no cook to tell us what to do!" he cried. "I'll teach you——"

"You fool!" said Sam scornfully. "It's nothing to me if you want to shoot each other. I'll tell you where they are. Only I'll move on by your leave. I don't want to be mixed up in any wholesale murders. The guns are altogether—they're——"

"Stop!" cried Jack in a great voice. "He's right," he said, turning to the others. "Let the guns be till morning. Let every man turn in. Are you with me, Shand?"

"Sure!" he muttered.

"Me, too," added Husky from the bed, somewhat unnecessarily. "I need sleep."

The storm blew over. Joe went to his corner, muttering. Jack and Shand lay down between him and Sam. Sam fell asleep calmly. By and by Husky began to snore. The others lay feigning sleep, each ready to spring up at the slightest move from one of his fellows. [77]

Shortly after dawn they arose simultaneously from their wretched beds with muttered curses. They looked at each other blackly. In the uncompromising light of morning all were alike weary, sore, and dispirited.

"Hell!" muttered Big Jack, the wisest and the most outspoken of the three. "This can't go on. Inside a week we'll all be loony or under the ground!"

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" snarled Joe.

"It's no good our fighting over her," said Big Jack. "She'll take the one she wants, anyway. You never can tell about women. Soon as she comes to-day I'll offer myself to her straight out and stand by her answer."

"Do you think you'll be let do all the talking?" asked Joe. "Eh, Shand?"

"Every man is at liberty to speak for himself," replied Jack. "Every man here is welcome to hear what I say to her."

"Jack is right," growled Shand. "I agree."

"Well, how about the order?" demanded Joe. "Who'll speak first?"

"Last word is supposed to be best," said Jack. "We'll give that to you," he added scornfully. "If she's got the sense I credit her with I'm not afraid of you."

"Fat chance you have! Twice her age!" snarled Joe.

"I take my chance," returned Big Jack calmly. "Already I feel better since I thought of putting it up to her. Whichever man she chooses can draw his share out of the concern, and go on with her. Husky speaks first, me second, Shand third, and Joe last—or we can match for chances."

"I'm satisfied," said Shand with a sidelong look at Jack. It appeared as if these two felt that the other was the only one to be feared. [78]

Joe, suspicious of both, refused to commit himself.

"He's got to be satisfied," declared Big Jack indifferently.

Bela arrived with the sun and peeped in the window. Seeing them up and dressed, she came around to the door. In the meantime Husky had awakened, and Jack had told him what was planned.

It was almost too much for Husky. His objections and entreaties were unnoticed. Fully dressed but somewhat shaky, he was now sitting on the edge of his bed. Sam still slept in the corner.

From the character of the silence that greeted her, Bela instantly apprehended that something was in the wind.

"What for you get up so early?" she demanded.

"Bela, we got something to say to you," Big Jack began portentously.

"More talk?" asked Bela.

"This is serious."

"Well, say it."

"Let's go outside," said Joe nervously. "It's suffocating in here."

Filing out of the shack, they stood against the wall in a row—Big Jack, Black Shand, Husky, and Young Joe. Bela stood off a little way, watching them warily.

It had a good deal the look of a spelling-bee with a teacher who meant to stand no nonsense. But each of the men was taking it very seriously. Each was pale, tight-lipped, and bright-eyed with excitement, excepting poor Husky, whose eyes were harassed, and whose mouth kept opening and shutting.

"'Tain't fair! 'Tain't fair!" he kept muttering. "Look at me, the state I'm in, and all!" [79]

"Well, what you want say?" demanded Bela.

Big Jack stood up straight and brought his heels together. He had been a soldier in his time. He felt that it was a great moment. An honest bluntness gave him dignity.

"I got to open this matter," he said, "before each man speaks for himself." He glanced at his companions. "If any man here thinks he can explain it better, let him speak out."

"Ah, go ahead, and cut it short!" muttered Shand.

"Yesterday," Jack resumed, "it may have seemed as if we acted like a parcel of unlicked schoolboys. I own I am sorry for my part in it. But I don't see how I could have done different. A man can't let another man get ahead of him when there's a woman in the case. It can't go on with the four of us here, and nobody knowing where he stands. So I proposed that we end it this morning by putting it up to you."

The other men were moving impatiently.

"Ah, cut out the preliminaries!" growled Joe.

Jack was direct enough when he got ready to be. "Are you married?" he asked Bela point-blank.

Bela was a stranger to the tremors and blushes imposed upon civilized women at such a crisis. "No," she said with her inscrutable face.

"Do you want to be?"

She shrugged with fine carelessness. "I suppose I got get 'osban' some tam."

"Well, take your pick of the four of us," said Jack. "I ain't sayin' we're prize specimens, mind you. But you'll hardly do better at that up here. Anyhow, look us over."

She proceeded to do so. Under her glance each man bore himself according to his nature. Her eyes showed no change as they moved along the line. None of them could tell what thoughts lay [80] behind that direct, calm glance. Having inspected each one, her eyes returned to Jack as if inviting him to speak further.

"Husky speaks first, according to arrangement," said Jack, waving his hand.

Husky's speech was moist, incoherent, and plaintive.

"They fixed this up when I was asleep," he stuttered. "Sprung it on me unawares. Me just out of a sick-bed, not shaved nor slicked up nor nothin'. 'Tain't fair! I ain't had no chance to think of anything to say. Made me speak first, too. How do I know what they're goin' to say after me? Tain't fair! I'm as good as any man here when I got my strength. Don't you listen to anything they say. Take it from me, I'm your friend. You know me. I'm a loving man. A woman can do anything with me if she handles me right. I won you from them fair, and now they want to go back on it. That shows you what they are. Don't you listen to them. You and me, we had our scrap, and now it's all right, ain't it? Look at what I suffered for you!"

There was a lot more of this. The other men became impatient. Finally Jack stepped forward.

"Time!" he said. "You're beginning all over. It's my turn now."

Husky subsided.

"Now I speak for myself," said Jack. It was the voice of what men call a good sport—cheerful, determined, weary, not unduly confident. "I am the oldest man here, but not an old man yet by a long shot. I am boss of this outfit. I got it up."

Joe angrily interrupted him. "Hold on there! You ain't proved the best man yet."

"Shut your head!" growled Shand. "Your turn is coming."

"Forty per cent of this outfit belongs to me," Jack went on. "That is, I got twice as much property [81] as any man here. I can make a good home for you. A girl has got to think of that. But that ain't all of it, neither. You got to take me with it, ain't yeh? Well, I'm old enough to realize how lucky I'd

be if I got you. I'd treat you good. Wherever you come from, you're a wonderful woman. You taught us a lesson. I'm man enough to own it. I say I take off my hat to you. Will you have me?"

Bela's face never changed. She turned to Shand.

"What you got say?" she asked.

Shand's dead white face made a striking contrast with his raven hair. His heavy head was thrust forward, his big hands clenched. He spoke in an oddly, curt, dry voice, which, however did not hide the feeling that made his breast tight.

"I am no talker," he said. "I'm at a disadvantage. But I got to do the best I can. I want you as much as him, though I can't tell you so good. I'm five years younger. That's something. I'm the strongest man here. That's something, too, in a land where you get right down to tacks. But that ain't what I want to say. If you come to me, you'll be the biggest thing in my life. I ain't had much. I'll work for you as long as I draw breath. All that a man can do for a woman I will do for you!"

The three others scowled at Shand, astonished and a little dismayed that the dumb one should prove so eloquent.

Young Joe plunged into the silence. A particular confidence animated him. With his curly hair, his smooth face, and his herculean young body, he had a kind of reason for it.

He showed off his charms before her as naively as a cock-grouse. But somehow the fire of his eyes and voice was a lighter, flashier blaze than that of the men who had last spoken. [82]

"Sure, they'd be lucky to get you!" he said. "Any of them. Jack is twenty years older than you. Shand and Husky fifteen, anyhow. I guess you want a young husband, don't you? How about me? I'm twenty-four. We're young together. They've had their day. Girls have their own way of picking out what they want. Jack says look us over. I stand by that. Look us over good, and say which one you want."

She deliberately did as he bid her. The suspense was unbearable to them.

"You've heard us all now?" said Jack. "What do you say?"

Bela was the picture of indifference.

"There's anot'er man here," she said.

Jack stared. "Another? Who? Oh, the cook! He ain't one of us. He ain't got nothing but the shirt on his back!"

Bela shrugged. "You say you want mak' all fair. Let me hear what he got say."

Here was an unexpected turn to the situation. They glowered at her with increasing suspicion and anger. Was it possible there was a dark horse in the race?

"If you want him, I guess you can say so right out, can't you?" growled Jack.

Bela tossed her head. "I not want him," she said quickly. "I jus' want hear what he got say."

It was difficult for them to think of the despised grub-rider in the light of a rival, so they decided it was just a freak of coquettishness in Bela.

"All right," said Jack. "Anything to oblige." Turning, he opened the door and shouted for Sam.

Sam presently appeared, tousled and flushed with sleep, his blue eyes scornfully resentful. [83]

"What do you want now?" he demanded. "You made me lose sleep last night."

"Well," said Jack, "all that is over. We're askin' Bela here to choose between us and settle the thing for good. We've all said our say, but she allowed she wanted to hear what the cook had to offer before she closed. Speak up."

Sam was efficaciously startled into wakefulness. He became very pale, and fixed Bela with a kind of angry glare. It seemed to him like a horrible burlesque of something sacred. He hated her for allowing it. He did not reflect that she might not have been able to prevent it. She did not look at him.

"Do I understand right?" he said stiffly. "You're all proposing to her in a body?"

"That's right," said Jack. "And out of goodness of heart she gives you a chance, too."

Sam's jaw snapped together, and his mouth became a hard line.

"Much obliged," he said. "I resign my chance. I'm not looking for a wife." He went back into the house.

It was not what the other men expected to hear. Suspecting an insult to the object of their own desires, they turned on him angrily. They would never have allowed him to have her, but neither should he turn her down.

"And a good thing for you, too!" cried Joe.

"By George, I've a good mind to thrash him for that!" muttered Jack.

His attention was attracted in the other direction by a laugh from Bela. It had anything but a merry sound, but their ears were not sharp enough to detect the lack. Bela's nostrils were dilated, and her lip oddly turned back. But she laughed.

"He is fonny cook!" she said. "I got laugh!" [84]

"Oh, never mind him!" said Big Jack. "He doesn't count! What is your answer?"

Bela stopped laughing. "Well, I got think about it," she said. "I tell you to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII [85]

THE LITTLE MEADOW

The situation at Nine-Mile Point was not improved by the wholesale proposal for Bela's hand. The twenty-four hours she required for her answer promised to be hard to get through.

The interim of waiting for a lady to make up her mind is sufficiently trying on a man's nerves under the most favourable circumstances; but to be obliged to endure the company of all his rivals meanwhile was almost too much.

Breakfast was eaten in a dangerous electrical silence. No man dared to speak of what was in every man's mind, and to make trivial conversation was impossible under that atmospheric pressure.

Afterward, when Bela announced her intention of going away for a while, every man, much as he desired her company, felt relieved, and no word was spoken to stay her departure.

They let her go without so much as looking out to see which way she went. As a matter of fact, nobody was willing to let anybody else look; therefore, he could not look himself.

Thereafter they breathed more freely. At least, they were all in the same boat. They were not under the intolerable strain of watching every look of her eyes and interpreting every word she spoke for a sign.

The worst they had to look forward to was one more day of unutterable boredom. Each man was buoyed up by the hope that it might be the last of such days for him. [86]

Sam went about his work with a wooden face and a sore and angry heart. He was not much of a self-analyst. He called Bela all manner of hard names to himself, without stopping to ask why, if she were such a worthless creature, he should feel so concerned about her.

A woman who took her pleasure in provoking four men to the point of murder was not worth bothering about, he told himself a hundred times; but he continued to be very much bothered.

"I'll never let her get me on her hook!" he cried inwardly—meanwhile the hook was in his gills!

After he had given the men their dinner he, too, went away from camp, bent upon his own devices. No one paid any attention to him.

A couple of hundred yards east of the shack a good-sized creek emptied into the lake. The stones of the shore offered a barrier to its path, over which it tumbled musically. Farther inland it pursued a slower, deeper course.

Ascending its bank, in about a quarter of a mile one found it issuing out of a lovely little meadow, through which it meandered crookedly, its course marked out by willow bushes.

The meadow was Sam's objective. He had often been there before. It was about a quarter of a mile long, and no more than a good stone's throw across from pines to pines. Though the level of the ground was several feet above the creek, the ground, like the creek bottoms generally, was spongy and damp, with dry islands here and there.

The grass was amazingly luxuriant. Drenched in the strong sunlight, and hemmed all around by the secretive pines, the place was the very picture of a cheerful retreat. Silent, strong-winged water-fowl frequented it, and more than once Sam had caught a glimpse of a noble figure of a moose stepping out from among the trees. [87]

Sam, ever anxious to learn the lore of the country, was experimenting in trapping muskrats. Finding a couple of the little beasts snared and drowned at the doors of their own dwellings, he set to work to skin them. His inexperienced fingers made a mess of the job.

He was sitting thus occupied on the edge of a little cut-bank, with his feet hanging over. A clump of willows flanked him on either side. The clear waters of the brook eddied sluggishly a few inches under his feet.

In the middle of his bloody task, something caused him to look over his shoulder, and there, not twenty feet from him, peering through the willows, he saw Bela.

From a variety of causes, he blushed to the roots of his hair. For one thing, he was thinking

bitterly of her at that very moment; for another, he saw, or imagined he saw, scorn in her eyes for his clumsy handiwork upon the muskrat.

He hastily tossed the little carcass into the water, and then regretted having done so.

"What are you spying on me for?" he demanded hotly.

The word was strange to Bela, but the tone conveyed its sense. She promptly took fire from his heat.

Showing herself proudly, she said: "I not know spyin'." [88]

"Following me around," said Sam. "Watching what I do without my knowing."

"I follow you for cause I want talk," said Bela indignantly. "I think maybe you got sense. If you not want talk to me, all right; I go away again. You ain't got sense, I think. Get mad for not'ing."

Sam was a little ashamed.

"Well—I'm sorry," he muttered. "What did you want to talk about?"

She did not immediately answer. Coming closer, she dropped to her knees on the little hummock of dry earth.

"I show you how to skin him, if you want," she suggested, pointing to the other muskrat.

Sam swallowed his pride. "All right, go head," he replied.

Cutting off the paws of the little animal and making an incision over his broadest end, she deftly rolled back the skin, and drew it off inside out over his head like a glove.

Then cutting a willow stem beside her, she transformed it with two half cuts into a little spring-frame, over which she drew the late muskrat's over-coat. The whole operation did not consume five minutes.

"Easy enough when you know how," admitted Sam sheepishly.

"Hang it up to dry," she said, handing it over.

They stretched in the grass side by side, and, hanging over the edge, washed their hands in the creek. A silence fell upon them. Each was waiting for the other to speak. Sam was trying to resist a great tenderness that threatened to undermine all his fortifications.

Finally he asked again: "What was it you wanted to talk about?"

Bela (Colleen Moore) announces to Gladding (Lloyd Hughes): "Me want you husband."
(*Photoplay Edition—"The Huntress"*) (*A First National Picture*)

Bela was not yet ready to answer. She threw up little cascades of water with her hands. Sam, watching, was suddenly struck by the fact that they were not at all like ordinary hands. [89]

This was the first pair of hands he had ever distinguished in his life. They were most beautiful objects, the backs ivory coloured, the palms and finger-tips a lovely dusky pink. They were useful hands, too—thin, strong, nervous. Watching them play in the water, he forgot the argument going on inside him.

"You not mad wit' me now?" murmured Bela softly.

This reminded him that he had every reason to be angry with her—though he had temporarily forgotten the reasons. He turned his face away, frowning, blushing again, the picture of anger. It was partly directed against himself, that he should have so little self-command.

"No!" he replied stiffly.

"Then why you mak' wrinkles in your face to me?" asked Bela.

"Ah, cut it out!" he said, exasperated. "Never mind my face! What did you want to say?"

"I can't say it when I think you mad," murmured Bela.

"I'm not," said Sam. "I want to be your friend," he added. "You can't always regulate your face."

There was another silence. Bela studied his averted face with a curious wistfulness. He was very difficult to handle.

"You want to see my cache?" she asked abruptly, at last. "Where I stay?"

Sam's heart leaped up. Old Prudence shook his staff in vain. "Yes, if you like," he said breathlessly, scowling harder than ever. [90]

She scrambled to her feet. "Stay here," she said. "I come back soon."

She disappeared around the willows without vouchsafing any further explanation. Sam lay as she left him, scowling at the water, very much confused as to his internal sensations.

As it happened before, no sooner was the intoxication of her presence removed than he began to berate himself for his weakness.

"Weak as water!" he mentally scolded himself. "Just because she's pretty, you forget every blame thing! There's a whole lot of funny business about her that needs explaining. But you swallow it whole. What business have you got fooling with any girl, anyhow? You've got other problems to solve. For God's sake, take a brace!"

As he was communing with himself in this fashion, the graceful prow of a dugout poked itself around a bend of the little grass-fringed canal below. Presently followed, kneeling in the stern, Bela with her quiet face and glowing eyes, wielding a paddle with inimitable grace.

She floated toward him noiselessly, bringing the boat's nose this way and that with deft turns of the wrist. She was as harmonious against the background of brown water and green grass as a wild duck.

It was such an intimate, cosy little stream; the grassy banks seemed to embrace the canoe as they let it pass. So charming was the sight that Sam forgot his prudence and broke into a beaming smile.

She brought her little craft to a stop before him.

"Get in," she said, pointing to the bow. "Tak' care!"

It was Sam's first experience with a native craft. It looked cranky. He let himself carefully over the bank on his stomach. Finding the floor of the dugout with his feet, he gingerly stood up. It [91] staggered alarmingly under him, and he hastily embraced the bank again, unhappily conscious of a lack of dignity.

A great piece of the sod came away in his hands. He lost his balance and was catapulted overboard. He landed in the water in a sitting position, wearing an absurd expression of surprise. Bela, seeing what was coming, saved herself from a like fate by throwing herself forward in the canoe.

Sam's streaming head emerged from the creek with the same look of surprise on his face. The water reached to his waist. Bela looked at him, and went off into a rippling peal of laughter.

Sam blinked and scowled and dashed the water out of his eyes. His face offered a study in varying expressions. At first he tried to laugh with her, but her laughter was intolerable. Suddenly he exploded:

"Ah, cut it out! Sounds like a chicken!"

The angrier he got the harder Bela was obliged to laugh. It had an apologetic ring, but the tears rolled down her cheeks.

Sam began to think she had done it on purpose, and said so.

"No! No!" gasped Bela. She pointed across the creek. "Shallow there. You can step in easy."

Sam, full of dignity, waded out and started home.

Bela was suddenly sobered. "Wait!" she cried. "Ain't you comin' wit' me?"

He affected not to hear her.

"I sorry I laugh," she said, genuinely distressed. "But—but you look so fonny!" The unruly laughter threatened to escape her again. "Please come back, Sam."

"I can't come like this, can I?" he said scornfully. [92]

"Sure!" she said. "I mak' good fire. You soon dry off."

He gradually allowed himself to be persuaded. Finally, with dignity somewhat marred by his bedraggled appearance, he took his place very gingerly in the bow. Bela bit her lips to keep the laughter in.

"I not want to laugh," she said naively. "Somesing inside mak' me. Your face look so fonny when you sit down in the water! Laka bear when him hear a noise—oh!"

Sam glowered in silence.

She exerted herself to charm away the black looks. "See papa mus'rat," she said, pointing. "Sit so stiff under the leaves, think we see not'ing. Sit up wit' hands on his stomach lak little ol' man and look mad. Look lak Musq'oosis."

Meanwhile she was nosing the dugout cleverly around the grassy bends of the tiny stream and under the willows. It was like a toy boat on a fairy river. Sometimes the willows interlaced overhead, making a romantic green tunnel to be explored.

Finally, as they drew near the woods at the head of the meadow, she turned her boat into a narrow backwater starred with little lilies, and drove it forward till it grounded as snugly as a ship in its berth.

Leading the way up the grassy bank, she pushed under the willows and introduced Sam into a veritable *Titania's* bower, completely encircled by the springing bushes. This was her cache.

Her blankets lay neatly rolled within a tarpaulin. There was her grub-box with stones upon the cover to keep out four-footed prowlers. Her spare moccasins were hanging from the branches to dry.

She made Sam sit down, in a patch of goodly sunshine, and in a jiffy had a crackling fire of dry willow blazing before him. He took off his coat and hung it to dry. [93]

"Tak' off your shirt, too," she said. "Dry quicker."

Sam shook his head, blushing.

"Go on," she said coolly. "I guess you got ot'er shirt on, too."

The blue flannel shirt joined the coat beside the fire.

She handed him a towel to dry his hair with. Afterward she produced a comb.

"I comb your hair nice," she said.

Sam started away in a panic and held out his hand for the comb. Bela let him have it with a regretful look at the thick, bright hair. She started to brew tea.

"Don't be mad wit' me for 'cause I laugh," she said cajolingly. "Some tam, maybe, I fall in water. I let you laugh all you want."

He looked at her startled. He dared not glance forward at any future with her. Nevertheless, in spite of himself, he was relenting. He would have relented quicker had she not continually put him out of conceit with himself by making him blush. Naturally, he blamed her for that.

Meanwhile there was delicious bodily comfort in sitting under shelter of the willows, warmed on the outside by the generous sunshine and the crackling fire, and made all mellow within by hot tea. The corners of his mouth began to turn up.

His curiosity concerning her was still active. Remembering something she had said before, he asked: "Who is Musgooses?"

She smiled at his pronunciation.

"Musq'oosis," she corrected. "That name mean little bear. He is my friend. He friend to my fat'er, too. He is little. Got crooked back. Know everything." [94]

"Where do you live, Bela?" he asked.

"Over the lake by Hah-wah-sepi," she answered readily. On second thought, she corrected the statement. "No; before I am live there. My mot'er live there. Now I live where I am. Got no home. Got no people."

"But if your mother lives there, that's your home, isn't it?" said Sam the respectable.

Bela shrugged. "She got stay wit' her 'osban'," she replied. "He no good. He w'at you call 'obo!"

"What did you leave for?" asked Sam.

She frowned at the difficulty of explaining this in English. "Those people are poor an' foolish, an' dirty people," she said. "They not lak me ver' moch. I not lak them ver' moch. Only my mot'er. But I am live there before for 'cause I not know not'ing. Well, one day I hit my fat'er wit' a stick—no, hit my mot'er's 'osban' wit' a stick. So my mot'er tell me my fat'er a white man. Her fat'er white man, too. So I mos' white. So I go 'way from those people."

"But you've got to have some home—somebody to live with!" said Sam anxiously.

She glanced at him through her lashes. She shrugged. "Musq'oosis tell me what to do," she said simply. "He is my friend."

Sam in his concern for her situation forgot himself.

"I—I'd like to be your friend, too," he stammered.

Bela smiled at him dazzlingly. "I lak hear you say that," she returned simply.

They fell silent, mutually embarrassed, but not unhappy. There was something both delightful and dangerous in their proximity within that secret circle. The eyes of both confessed it.

"Will you eat?" asked Bela, "I have bread and fish." [95]

He shook his head. "I have to go soon," he replied with a glance at the sun.

Her face fell. "I lak feed anybody come to my place," she said wistfully.

"Oh, well, go ahead," assented Sam, smiling.

She hastened to prepare a simple meal. Self-consciousness did not trouble her if she might be busy. Sam loved to follow her graceful movements by the fire. What harm? he asked the watch-dog within. This dog had grown drowsy, anyhow.

Bela's curiosity in turn began to have way.

"Where you live before you come here, Sam?" she asked.

"In a city. New York. It isn't real living."

"I know a city!" she exclaimed. "Musq'oosis tell me. They got houses high as jack-pines. Windows wide as a river. At night a thousand thousand moons hang down to give the people light."

"Right!" said Sam. "What would you say to a sky-scraper I wonder?"

"What is sky-scraper?"

"Like fifty houses piled up one on top of the other, and reaching to the sky."

Bela pouted. "You mak' fun I think because I know not'ing."

"Honest to goodness!" he swore.

"What good to be so high?" she asked. "High roof no good."

"There are different floors inside. Fifty of them."

"How do people get to the top?"

"In an elevator. Kind of box you get into. Whiz, up she goes like that!"

Bela's face showed strong incredulity. She let the subject drop. [96]

"You got fat'er, mot'er out there, Sam?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Both dead."

"You got no people 'tall?" she asked, quick with sympathy.

"Brothers," he said grimly. "Three of them. They don't think much of me."

One question followed another, and the time flew by. They were making famous progress now. They ate. Afterward Sam stretched out in the grass with his hands under his head, and told his story freely.

"Gad, what a relief to talk!" he said. "I haven't really opened up since we left Prince George. Those fellows, they're all right in their way, but pretty coarse. We don't hit it off much. I keep mum to avoid trouble."

"I lak hear you talk," murmured Bela softly.

"My brothers are all a lot older than I," Sam went on. "I was the baby of the family. It's considerable of a handicap to a kid. They baby you along until after you're grown up, then all of a sudden they expect you to stand alone.

"I was always a kind of misfit somehow. I never knew why then. I lack an instinct all other fellows seem to have to hang together and boost each other along. School seemed like such a silly affair to me; I wouldn't learn. In business afterward it was worse.

"My brothers took me up one after another. They're all well-to-do. One is president of an electric-light plant, one is a corporation lawyer, the other runs a big store. Keen on business, all of them. I tried to make good with each one, honest I did. But I sickened in offices. My brain seemed to turn to mush. Impossible for me to get up any interest in business.

"So I got passed along from one to another. Naturally, they thought I was no good. I thought so, too. A dog's life! Their wives, that was worse. All regular rich men's wives, crazy about society and all that, and having things better than the neighbours. Do you understand what I mean?" [97]

"No," Bela confessed. "Some day I will. Don' stop. I lak hear it all."

"Well, me with my untidy clothes, I was a thorn in the side of those ladies. Visibly turned up their noses when I came around. One day after a big row with my eldest brother I just walked off. I've been regularly up against it ever since. Just a year ago. Seems more like ten. I've lived a thousand lives.

"You take a big baby like I was and throw him on the world—well, he won't have to go to hell to find out what it's like! I've learned in one year what most fellows take twenty to soak in. Now I'm beginning to see light, to get solid ground under my feet. Of course, I haven't got anything yet"—Sam smiled here—"but I know what I want."

"What you want?" asked Bela quickly.

"To live a natural life. I've found out that is what I was made for. Anything all laid out and regular like school or business simply floors me. I want a little piece of land of my own, all my own. I'll build my own house on it and raise my own grub. I want to do what I want without anybody else's say-so. That way I feel I can make good. The idea is to build up something that you can see grow."

"All alone?" asked Bela with a casual air.

Sam's heart missed a beat, then overtook it.

"I like to be alone," he said quickly. "That's what I came up here for. I have made up my mind to it. I don't get along well with people."

Bela was silent.

CHAPTER IX

[98]

BELA'S ANSWER

From time to time Bela glanced narrowly at Sam through her lashes. He presented a terrific problem to one of her inexperience. She found this friendly interchange delightful, but was it all?

She had no feeling of being a woman to him. She began to feel a great dissatisfaction. An imperious instinct urged her to sting him out of his comfortable disregard of her sex. Her opportunity came when Sam said:

"You have never told me what it was you wanted to talk to me about."

"All those men want marry me," she said off-hand.

It was instantly effective. Sam sat up abruptly and stared at her in astonishment. Was she, after all, the evil woman he had first thought? Had he been deceitfully lulled into security? She repeated her statement. His face hardened.

"So I gathered," he replied sarcastically.

Bela was secretly pleased by the effect. "What you think 'bout it?" she asked.

"I don't think anything about it," he answered with an angry flash.

"I not know what to tell them," said Bela. It had a faint theatrical ring, which might have suggested to a discriminating ear that she was not being altogether candid.

Sam obstinately closed his mouth. [99]

"Which you lak best?" she asked presently, "the big one, the black one, the red one, yo'ng one?"

A great discomposure seized upon Sam. Anger pounded at his temples, and insane words pressed to his tongue. He put on the clamps. "What I think is neither here nor there," he said stiffly. "It's up to you to make your own choice. Why drag me into it?"

"You say you want be friend," explained Bela. "So I think you help me."

"Nobody can help you in a matter of this kind," said Sam. "Lord, you talk like a wooden man!" Something whispered to him while he said it.

"Why?" she asked with one of her sidelong looks.

Again his eyes flashed on her in angry pain. God! Was the woman trying to madden him?

"A girl must make her own choice," his tongue said primly.

"But you could tell me about them, which is the best man. How do I know?"

This on the face of it seemed like a reasonable request, but his breast still passionately rebelled.

"Well, I won't!" he snapped. "If that's all you want to talk about I'd better go."

"Is Big Jack a good man?" she persisted.

Sam got up.

"No, don't go!" she cried quickly. "I'll be good. I don't know why you always mad at me."

Neither did Sam himself know. He looked at her dumbly with eyes full of pain and confusion. He sat down again.

For a while she made light conversation about muskrats and beavers, but when she thought he was safely settled down, womanlike, she was obliged to return to the forbidden subject.

There was a pain in her breast as well as his. What was the matter with him that he treated her so despite-fully? How else could she find out what was in his heart but by making him lose his temper? [100]

"Maybe I tak' Big Jack," she remarked casually.

"All right," returned Sam bitterly.

"He's the richest."

"A regular woman's reason," said Sam. "I wish you joy."

Would nothing move him? Bela felt as if she were beating with her hands on a rock. "What do you care?" she asked insolently. Both voices rang with bitterness now.

"I don't care."

She sneered.

"What you get mad for?"

Sam's endurance gave way. He sprang up.

"It's rotten!" he cried. "The whole business! That's what makes me mad! Have you no shame, setting a whole camp of men against each other like that? And coolly talking over which one you'll take! I tell you it'll likely end in murder. Maybe you'd like that. Give you quite a send-off, eh? Well, you can't drag me into it. I like a different kind of woman."

Bela was no tame spirit. Anger answered anger. She faced him pale and blazing-eyed.

"No woman want you, anyhow!" she cried. "You cook! You only half a man! You too scared to fight for a woman! You only talk! Go away from me! I tak' a *man* for my 'osban'!"

Sam, beside himself with rage, stepped forward and raised his clenched fist over her head. Bela laughed in his face. Suddenly he seemed to see himself from the outside, and was filled with blank horror.

Turning, he snatched up his coat and shirt, and crashed blindly away through the willows. [101]

"Go and do your cookin'!" Bela cried after him.

Bela's cache was on the opposite side of the creek from the men's cabin. The only place where Sam could cross without getting another wetting was by the stepping-stones near the lake. He headed for the pines where the going was better and encircled the edge of the meadow.

A great turmoil was going on within him. He was aghast at the gust of passion that had drowned all his senses for a moment. He had not known he contained such possibilities. To come so near to striking a woman! Horrible!

Naturally, he did not fail to blame her. A devil—to provoke men to such a pitch of madness! Well, he was done with her. Anyhow, he had seen her now in her true colours. She was no good! There could be no further argument about that. If he ever had anything to do with her let him be called a soft-headed fool!

Forcing his way blindly through the underbrush, stumbling over roots, and plunging into holes, he completed his detour around the meadow. As he came out beside the ford he heard his name called urgently.

"Sam! Sam!"

Notwithstanding his anger, and in the very act of the brave vows he was taking, the voice found his heart like a bullet. He stopped dead with hanging arms and looked strickenly in the direction whence it came.

Presently the dugout came flying around a bend in the creek above. She landed at the head of the little rapids, and ran toward him. He waited with sombre eyes.

She stopped at three paces distance, afraid to come closer. The savage had disappeared. Her face was all softened with emotion. [102]

"Sam, I sorry I call names," she said very low. "That was my madness speaking out of my mouth. I not think those things in my heart. Please forget it."

His eyes bored her through and through.

"Another trick to get you going?" the voice inside him asked.

"Don' look at me lak that," she faltered.

"How do I know what to believe?" Sam said harshly. "You say so many things."

"I jus' foolin' 'bout those ot'er men," she said. "I not marry one of them. I sooner jump in the lak'."

A secret spring of gladness spurted up in Sam's breast. "Do you mean that?" he demanded.

"I mean it," she replied.

He gazed at her, strongly desiring to believe, but suspicious still. His slower nature could not credit such a rapid change of front.

"Don' look at me lak that," she said again. "W'at you want me do?"

"Go away," he said.

She looked at him, startled.

"If you're in earnest about not wanting to make trouble," he said harshly, "you've got to go without seeing any of them again."

Her eyes were full of trouble. "You tell me go away?" she whispered.

Sam winced. "I haven't got anything to do with it," he said. "It's up to you."

He was more than ever inexplicable to her.

"What you goin' do?" she asked.

"I?" he replied, nettled. "I'm going up to the head of the lake with the bunch, of course." [103]

There was a painful silence, while Bela sought vainly in her mind for the explanation of his strange attitude. An instinct told her he loved her, but she could not make him say it.

"You think I bad girl, Sam," she murmured.

"How do I know what you are?" he asked harshly. "Here's your chance to prove to me that you're on the square."

"I got go 'way to mak' you think I all right?"

"Yes," he answered eagerly.

"You fonny man, I think," she murmured sadly.

"Can't you see it?" he cried.

"No," she said. "But I goin' do what you tell me. I go to-night."

"Ah, that's right!" he said with a curious look of gratitude in his pain-haunted eyes.

Bela waited for him to say more—but waited in vain. For herself she would quickly have told him she loved him, had not her tongue been tied by Musq'oosis's positive instructions. And so the unhappy silence continued between them.

"Maybe somebody come this way," said Bela at last. "Mak' trouble. Come up by my boat."

Sam shook his head. "I've got to go back to camp now."

"You not see me again. You got not'ing say to me?" asked Bela despairingly. Her hand sought his.

Sam's instincts sprang up in alarm. "What could I say?" he cried. "What good would it do? Good-bye!" Snatching his hand out of hers, he retreated over the stones, refusing to look back.

When Sam entered the shack Joe faced him, scowling. "Where you been?" he demanded. [104]

Sam, in no humour to be meek, made the time-honoured rejoinder.

"I'll soon make it my business," retorted Joe. "With that, see?" showing a clenched fist. "Have you been with Bela?"

Sam, because of the threat, disdained to lie. "Yes," he said coolly.

Joe whirled about to the others. "Didn't I tell you?" he cried excitedly. "I heard her calling him. There's underhand work here. He's hid the guns on us."

"Do you know where she's hid?" demanded Big Jack.

Sam did not feel any necessity of returning a truthful answer to this. "No," he said. "She came on me when I was visiting my muskrat traps."

"You're lying!" cried Joe. "I'll smash you, anyhow, on the chance of it."

Big Jack stepped between them.

"I'm running this show," he said grimly. To Sam he said: "I strike no man without warning. I warn you now. This is a man's affair. We won't stand no interference from cooks. You keep out. If you don't, God help you, that's all!"

"And if he leaves you," added Joe, "I'll croak you myself with as little thought as I'd pinch a flea!"

"Get the supper," said Jack.

Sam clenched his teeth, and did not speak again.

In the middle of the night Sam awoke in the shack with a weight on his breast, and, sitting up in his blankets, looked about him. The dying embers of the fire cast a faint light on the figures of his three companions lying on the floor beside him. Husky still had the sole use of the bed. [105]

The cabin roof rang with a grotesque chorus of snores. Sam's gorge rose. The air was tainted. He looked at the recumbent figures with a curling lip. Was it hate that had awakened him? He had put up in silence with so much at their hands!

An oblique ray of moonlight struck through the window over his head, luring him like a song. He softly got up, and, gathering up his bed, went outside.

The pines were like a regiment of gigantic soldiers standing at ease under the sky and whispering together while they awaited the word of command. Their fragrance was like a benediction on the air. The moon, low down in the south-east, peeped between the trunks.

At the mouth of the creek where the little rapids poured into a quiet pool there was a bank of sand. This was the general washing-place of the camp.

Sam, thinking of the sand as a promising bed, made his way in that direction by the path they had worn. As he passed around the house a shadow moved from behind a great pine and followed him, flitting noiselessly from tree to tree.

Sam sat down in the sand, nursing his knees. The mouth of the creek was the only spot along shore as yet wholly free of ice. He looked out over the lake through the opening. Under the light of the low moon the water was the colour of freshly cast iron.

Somewhere out upon it Bela was paddling, he thought, if she had not already reached home. His breast relaxed its guard against her a little. He believed she was a pretty fine sort, after all. Had he done the right thing to send her away? She was beautiful enough to make a man's arm ache for her now she had gone.

But on the whole he was glad she was gone. He did not realize it, but his hour had not quite struck. It was a wholesome instinct that made him fight against the overmastering emotions that attacked his heart. [106]

He told himself he couldn't afford to look in that direction. He had work to do first. He had to get a toehold in this land. Some day maybe——

Drowsiness overcame him again. With a sigh he stretched out on the sand and rolled himself in his blankets. His breathing became deep and slow. By and by the coquettish moon peeped between the tree-trunks across the creek and touched his face and his fair hair with a silvery wand. Whereupon it was no longer a mere man; it was young Hermes sleeping beside the water. The shadow stole from among the trees above the sand-bank and crept down to his side. It knelt there with clasped hands. It showed a white face in the moonlight, on which glistened two diamonds.

By and by it rose with energetic action, and still moving noiselessly as a ghost, turned toward the lake, and clambering around the barrier of ice, dropped to the edge of the water on the other side.

Here a dugout was drawn up on the stones, well hidden from the view of any one on shore. She got in and, paddling around the ice, entered the mouth of the creek. Grounding her craft with infinite care on the sand, she groped for a moment in her baggage, then arose and stepped ashore, carrying several long, thin strips of moose-hide.

CHAPTER X [107]

ON THE LAKE

The three men sleeping on the floor of the shack suddenly started up in their blankets.

"What was that?" they asked each other.

"A shout for help," said Jack.

Joe sprang up and opened the door. Some confused sounds from the direction of the creek reached his ears, but he had not enough woodcraft to distinguish them from the legitimate sounds of the night.

The fire was black now. Big Jack struck a match.

"Sam's gone!" he cried suddenly.

Shand felt around the floor with his hands. "His blankets, too!" he added.

"Treachery!" cried Joe with an oath. "You wouldn't believe me before. That's why he hid the guns. Come on, I heard something from the creek."

They pulled on their moccasins and, snatching coats, ran out. Husky remained on the bed, cursing. At the creek-mouth the sand-bank was empty. The last pallid rays of the moon revealed nothing.

They were accustomed to come there many times a day to wash or to draw water, and the welter of foot-prints in the sand gave no clue. Finally Joe, with a cry, pounced on a dark object at the water's edge and held it up. It was Sam's neck handkerchief.

"Here's the mark of a boat, too, in the sand," he cried. "I knew it! Gone together in her boat!" [108]

"It was a man's voice I heard," objected Jack. "What for would he want to cry out?"

"Wanted to give us the laugh when he saw his get-a-way clear," said Joe bitterly. "Oh, damn him!"

"As soon as it's light——" muttered Shand, grinding his teeth.

"What'll you do then?" demanded Joe.

"I'll get him!" said the quiet man.

"We have no boat."

"Boat or no boat."

"Oh, you're going to do great things. He belongs to me."

Shand sneered. "Take it out on him with your tongue."

Joe replied with a torrent of abuse.

Big Jack laughed a harsh note.

"You fools!" he said. "Both of you. What do you think you're going to do so big? She's given us an answer sooner than we expected, that's all. If she prefers a cook to a man, that's her affair. All we got to do is shut up. I'm going back to the shack."

They would not confess the reasonableness of Jack's words. "Go where you like," muttered Shand. "I'll stick by myself."

Jack strode back along the path. Joe followed him, merely because he was one of those natures who will choose an enemy's company sooner than face the prospect of being left with his own.

They left Shand to his own devices. Husky greeted them with eager questions. Joe cursed him, and Jack clenched his teeth upon the stem of his pipe in grim silence.

They revived the fire and sat in front of it. Each man was jealous of his own rage and pain and refused to share it. Joe and Husky bickered in a futile way. Big Jack, in spite of his philosophic [109] protestations, kept the tail of an eye on the whitening window-pane. In the end he rose abruptly. Joe followed suit as a matter of course.

Jack turned on him, snarling. "Have I got to be followed by you like a dog everywhere I go?"

"What's the matter with you?" retorted Joe. "Do you own the whole out of doors?"

Jack halted outside the door. "You take one way; I'll go the other," he said grimly.

Jack returned to the creek, and crossing on the stepping-stones walked out on the point beyond and sat down on a boulder. From here he could see a long way down the lake shore.

At this season in the latitude of Caribou night is brief. The sun sinks but a little way below the horizon, and a faint glow hovers over his head all night, travelling around the northern horizon to the east, where it heralds his reappearance.

It was light in the east now and the lake was stepping into view. Big Jack searched its misty expanse with his keen little eyes.

By and by as the light strengthened, looking down-shore he saw a tiny, dark object steal beyond the next point and become silhouetted against the grey. There could be no doubt of what it was. The lust of pursuit flamed up in the man's heart. He forgot his prudent advice to his mates.

"Making for the foot of the lake," he thought. "And the wind's against them. It's rising. I could

easy ride around the shore and cut them off."

He got up and made his way with energetic action back to the stable. [110]

He had no sooner picked up a saddle than Joe came in. They looked each other over without speaking. Joe made for another saddle.

"You're free to go where you want," said Jack grimly. "I've only got to say I choose to ride alone."

"I don't care how you ride," retorted Joe. "Keep out of my business, that's all."

They saddled their horses in silence.

Joe said at last with a sneer: "Thought you told us to sit down and shut up."

Jack's face flamed suddenly.

"I promised him a beating if he interfered and, by God, I mean to give it to him before her eyes. That's what she's got to take if she picks a cook!"

He fixed Joe with blazing eyes. "And if any man comes between me and my promise, I'll take him first! As for the girl, she can go her way. I wouldn't take her for a gift!"

Joe laughed unpleasantly.

As Jack started to lead his horse out of the stable, he saw what he had not before noticed—several guns leaning in a corner of the stable. His eyes lighted up.

"Where did they come from?" he demanded, choosing his own.

"Shand found them under the sods of the stable roof," said Joe.

"Where is Shand?"

"He has already taken a horse and gone."

Sam was awakened by being violently rolled over on the sand. He felt human hands upon him, but he could not see his enemy. He struggled with a will, but his limbs were confined by the blanket. A heavy body knelt upon his back, and fetters were pulled around him, binding his arms and his legs inside the blanket. [111]

It was then that he shouted lustily. It was cut short by a cotton gag in his mouth. He was ignominiously rolled down the sand to the water's edge. What with the darkness and the confusion of his faculties still, he could not see who had attacked him.

Inert as a log, he was lifted up, dragged away, and finally dropped in a boat. His captor stood away from him, panting. Sam rolled over on his back and saw—Bela.

For a moment he was paralyzed by astonishment—a woman to dare so! Without looking at him she quickly took her place in the stern and pushed off. Suffocating rage quickly succeeded his first blankness. Unable to move or to utter a sound, his heart nearly broke with it.

The black traitress! After all her professions of friendliness! After making her eyes so soft and her voice so sweet! She was worse than his ugliest suspicions had painted! He did not stop to guess why he had been attacked. She was his enemy. That was enough.

Sounds reached them from the direction of the shack, and Bela, lowering her head, paddled swiftly and silently for the point. Her face showed only a dim oval in the failing light. But there was grim resolution in its lines.

Only once did she open her lips. Sam was frantically twisting in his bonds, though owing to his position on the keel of the dugout he did not much threaten her stability.

Bela whispered: "If you turn us over you drown quick."

Angry as he was, the suggestion of being plunged into the lake bound hand and foot reached him with no little force. Thereafter he lay still, glaring at her. [112]

They had no more than rounded the point when they heard the men come running down to the creek. Bela continued to hug the shore. They were soon swallowed in the murk. The moon went down.

By and by the first rays of light began to spread up the sky from the eastern horizon, and the earth seemed to wake very softly and look in that direction.

With the light came a breath from the east, cool as a hand on the brow of fever. Twittering of sleepy chickadees were heard among the pines, and out in the lake a loon laughed.

Day came with a swoop up the lake. The zephyr became a breeze, the breeze half a gale. The leaden sheet of water was torn into white tatters, and the waves began to crash on the ice-rimmed shore, sending sheets of spray into the trees, and making it impossible for Bela to land had she wished to.

This was a hard stroke of luck against her. She would have been out of sight of the point by the time it was fully light, had it not been for the head wind.

The dugout leaped and rolled like an insane thing. Having a well-turned hull, she kept on top, and only spray came over the bow. To Sam, who could see only the sky, the mad motion was inexplicable.

His anger gave place to an honest terror. If anything happened, what chance did he stand? Bela's set, sullen face told him nothing. Her eyes were undeviatingly fixed on a point a few feet ahead and to the right of the bow. Twisting her paddle this way and that, she snaked the dugout over the crests.

Though she seemed to pay no attention to him, she must have guessed what was passing in Sam's mind. Without taking her eyes from that point ahead where the waves came from, she felt in a bundle before her and drew out a knife. Watching her chance, she swiftly leaned forward and cut [113] the bonds around his legs. When another lull came she cut his arms free.

"Move careful," she said, without looking at him.

Sam did not need the warning. The icy quality of the spray in his face filled him with a wholesome respect for the lake. He cautiously worked his arms free of the blanket, and, raising himself on his elbows, looked over the gunwale. He saw the waves come tumbling clumsily toward them and gasped.

It seemed like a miracle the little craft had survived so long. One glance at the shore showed him why they could not land. He fell back, and his hands flew to the knot behind his head. He tore off the gag and threw it overboard. Bela looked at him for the fraction of a second.

"Well, what's your game?" he bitterly demanded. "It's pretty near ended for both of us. I hope you're satisfied. You savage!"

Bela's eyes did not swerve again from that point ahead. In one respect she was a savage; that was the extraordinary stolidity she could assume. For all the attention she gave him he might have been the wind whistling.

At first it fanned his anger outrageously. He searched his mind for cruel taunts to move her. It was all wasted. She paddled ahead like a piece of the boat itself, now pausing a second, now driving hard, as those fixed, wary eyes telegraphed automatically to her arms.

One cannot continue to rail at a wooden woman. Her impassivity finally wore him out. He fell silent, and covered his face with an arm that he might not have to look at her. Besides, he felt seasick.

East of Nine-Mile Point the lake shore makes in sharply, forming the wide, deep bay which stretches all the way to the foot of the lake where Musquasepi, the little river, takes its rise. The [114] stony, ice-clad shores, backed by pines, continued for a mile or so, then gave place to wide, bare mud-flats reaching far inland.

On the flats the ice did not pile up, but lay in great cakes where the receding waters stranded it. This ice was practically all melted now, and the view across the flats was unimpeded. It was nine miles from the point to the intake of the river by water and fifteen miles by land. The trail skirted inside the flats.

Bela kept to the shore until the increasing light made further concealment useless. She then headed boldly across for the river. It was at this time that the wind began to blow its hardest.

She could not tell, of course, if she had yet been discovered from the point. Not knowing the ways of white men, she could not guess if they were likely to pursue.

Under ordinary circumstances with a little start, she could easily have beaten a horse to the river, but the head wind reversed the chances. She might have landed on the flats, but there was not a particle of cover there, and they would have offered a fair mark to any one following by the trail. Moreover, Sam would have run away.

It was too rough for her to hope to escape across the lake in the trough of the sea. So there was nothing for her but to continue to struggle toward the river. A bank of heavy clouds was rising in the east. It was to be a grey day.

After a while Sam looked over the edge again. The dugout seemed scarcely to have moved. They were still but half-way across the wide bay. On the lake side they were passing a wooded island [115] out in the middle. The wind was still increasing. It came roaring up the lake in successive gusts. It was like a giant playing with them in cruel glee before administering the *coup de grâce*. Bela could no longer keep the crests of the waves out. Sam was drenched and chilled.

He stole another look in her face. The imminence of the danger threatening both forced his anger into the background for the moment. She never changed her attitude except occasionally to swing the paddle to the other side of the boat.

At the impact of each gust she lowered her head a little and set her teeth. Her face had become a little haggard and grey under the long continued strain. Sam chafed under his enforced inaction.

"You have another paddle," he said. "Let me help."

"Lie down," she muttered without looking at him. "You don' know how. You turn us over."

He lay in water impotently grinding his teeth. He could not but admire her indomitable courage, and he hated her for being forced to admire her. To be obliged to lie still and let a woman command was a bitter draft to his pride.

A wave leaped over the bow, falling in the dugout like a barrowful of stones. Sam sprang to a sitting position. He thought the end had come. The dugout staggered drunkenly under the additional load. But Bela's face was still unmoved.

"Lean over," she commanded, nodding toward the little pile of baggage between them. "Under the blankets, in the top of the grub-box, my tea-pail."

He found it, and set to work with a will to bail. As fast as he emptied the water, more came in over the bow. The foot of the lake and safety seemed to recede before them. Surely it was not [116] possible a woman could hold out long enough to reach it, he thought, glancing at her.

"Why don't you turn about and run before the wind?" he asked.

"Can't turn now," she muttered. "Wave hit her side, turn over quick."

Sam looked ashore again. For upwards of a furlong off the edge of the flats the breakers were ruling their parallel lines of white. Above all the other noises of the storm the continuous roaring of these waters reached their ears.

"You could land there," he suggested. "What if we did get turned out? It's shallow."

She was not going to tell him the real reason she could not land. "I lose my boat," she muttered.

"Better lose the boat than lose yourself," he muttered sullenly.

Bela did not answer this. She paddled doggedly, and Sam bailed. He saw her glance from time to time toward a certain point inland. Seeing her face change, he followed the direction of her eyes, and presently distinguished, far across the flats, three tiny horses with riders appearing from among the trees.

They were proceeding in single file around the bay. Even at the distance one could guess they were galloping. So that was why she would not land!

Sam did not need to be told who the three riders were. His sensations on perceiving them were mixed. It was not difficult for him to figure what had happened when his absence had been discovered, and he was not at all sure that he wished to escape from his mysterious captor only to fall into those hands.

This line of thought suddenly suggested a possible reason why he had been carried off—but it was too humiliating to credit. He looked at her with a kind of shamed horror. Her face gave [117] nothing away.

By and by Sam realized with a blessed lightening of the heart that the storm had reached its maximum. The gusts were no longer increasing in strength; less water was coming over the bow. Not until he felt the relief was he aware of how frightened he had been.

Bela's face lightened, too. Progress under the cruel handicap was still painfully slow. The wind was like a hand thrusting them back; but every gain brought them a little more under the lee of the land. If Bela's arms held out! He looked at her wonderingly. There was no sign of any slackening yet.

"We not sink now," she said coolly.

"Good!" cried Sam.

In their mutual relief they could almost be friendly.

Bela was heading for the intake of the river. Along the tortuous course of that stream she knew a hundred hiding-places. The land trail followed the general direction of the river, but touched it only at one or two places.

The question was, could she reach the river before the horsemen? Sam watched them, trying to gauge their rate of progress. The horses had at least four miles to cover, while the dugout was now within a mile—but the horses were running.

Sam knew that the trail crossed the river by a ford near the intake from the lake, because he had come that way. If the horsemen cut off Bela at the ford what would she do? he wondered. The outlook was bad for him in either event. He must escape from both parties.

The horsemen passing around the bay became mere specks in the distance. Reaching the foot of the lake they had to cover a straight stretch of a mile and a half to the river. The trail lay behind [118] willows here, and they disappeared from view. It was anybody's race.

Bela, the extraordinary girl, still had a reserve of strength to draw on. As they gradually came under the influence of the windward shore the water calmed down and the dugout leaped ahead.

Sam watched her with a cold admiration, speculating endlessly on what might be going on behind her mask-like face. With all her pluck, what could she hope to gain? Obviously it would be easier

to escape from her than from three men, and he began to hope she would win.

They caught no further glimpses of the horsemen, and as they drew closer and closer to the river the tension became acute. Suppose they arrived simultaneously, thought Sam, would the men shoot?

Not Big Jack nor Shand, perhaps, but Joe was not to be trusted. But surely they would see he was a prisoner. Something of the kind must have been passing through Bela's mind. Putting down her paddle for a moment, she threw back the blankets and drew out her gun. It had been carefully protected from the water. She laid it on top convenient to her hand and resumed.

"She's a good plucky one," thought Sam grimly. "As for me, I play a pretty poor part in this affair, whichever way you look at it. A kind of dummy figure, it seems."

So low were its shores that the intake of the river was hidden from them until they were almost in it. Finally it opened up before them, with its wide reaches of sand stretching away on either hand, willows backing the sand, and a pine ridge rising behind the willows. [119]

Here the wind whistled harmlessly over their heads, and the surface of the water was quiet except for the catspaws darting hither and thither. Before entering the river, Bela paused again, and bent her head to listen.

"Too late!" she said. "We can't pass!"

At the same moment the horses burst from behind the willows a quarter of a mile across the sand. They had the ford!

"We can't pass," Bela repeated, and then with a gasp, in which was more of anger than fear, she added: "An' they got guns, too!"

CHAPTER XI [120]

THE ISLAND

Seeing the dugout, the men raised a shout and bore down upon them across the sand. Bela was not yet in the river. She swiftly brought the dugout around and paddled down the lake shore across the river from the men.

They, suspecting her of a design to land on this side, pulled up their horses, and returning to the ford, plunged across. Whereupon Bela coolly paddled out into the lake. By this manœuvre she was enabled to get out of range of their guns before they got to the water's edge.

Holding her paddle, she turned to watch them. The sounds of their curses came down the wind. They were directed against Sam, not Bela.

Sam smiled bitterly. "I catch it both ways," he muttered.

"You want them catch you?" asked Bela, with an odd look.

Sam scowled at her helplessly.

She rested on her paddle, looking up and down the shore and out on the lake, manifestly debating with herself what to do. To Sam their situation seemed hopeless. Finally Bela took up the paddle with an air of resolution.

"Well, what the devil are you goin' to do?" demanded Sam. [121]

"We go to the island," she answered coolly.

An island! Sam's heart sank. He saw his escape indefinitely postponed. To be kept prisoner on an island by a girl! Intolerably humiliating prospect! How would he ever be able to hold up his head among men afterward?

"What the devil are you up to, anyhow?" he broke out angrily again. "Do you think this will do you any good? What do you expect to gain by it?"

"What you want me do?" asked Bela sullenly, without looking at him.

"Land, and tell them the truth about what happened!"

"They too mad," said Bela. "Shoot you before they listen. Not believe, anyway."

Sam could not deny the reasonableness of this.

"Oh, damn!" he cried impotently. "You've got me into a nice mess! Are you crazy, or just bad? Is it your whole idea to make trouble between men? I've heard of women like that. One would think you wanted —— Say! I'll be likely to thank you for this, won't I? The sight of you is hateful to me!"

Bela made her face like a wall, and looked steadily over his head at her course. There is no satisfaction in flinging words against a wall. Sam's angry voice dwindled to a mutter, then fell

silent.

The island lay about a mile offshore. In a chaos of lowering grey sky and torn white water, it seemed to hang like a serene and lovely little world of itself.

The distant shores of the lake were spectral in the whirl of the elements, and the island was the one fixed spot. It was as brilliant as an emerald in a setting of lead. A beach of yellow sand encircled it, with a border of willows, and taller trees sticking up in the middle.

Borne on the shoulders of the great wind, they reached it in a few minutes. Bela paddled under [122]
the lee side and landed in quiet water. Sam rose on his chilled and stiffened limbs, and stepping ashore, stood off, scowling at her blackly.

There he was! He knew he couldn't escape alone in that cranky craft; certainly not while the wind blew. Nor could he hope to swim a mile through icy water. He wondered bitterly if ever a man before him had been placed in such a galling position.

Ignoring his black looks, Bela hastened to collect dry sticks.

"I mak' fire and dry everything," she said.

Sam cursed her and strode off around the beach.

"Tak' dry matches if you want fire," Bela called after him.

He would not give any sign that he heard.

He sat down on the other side of the island, as far away as he could get from her. Here he was full in the path of the driving, unwearied wind, which further irritated his exacerbated nerves.

He swore at Bela; he swore at the cold, at the wind, at the matches which went out one after another. He felt that all things animate and inanimate were leagued against him.

Finally, in the lee of some willows, he did get a fire going, and crouched in the smoke, choking and sneezing, as angry and unhappy a specimen of young manhood as might have been found in the world that morning.

Finally he began to dry out, and a measure of warmth returned to his limbs. He got his pipe going, and felt a little less like a nihilist.

Suddenly a new, ugly thought made him spring up. Suppose she took advantage of his absence to steal away and leave him marooned on the island? Anything might be expected of such a woman. [123]
He hastened back around the beach.

She had not gone. From a distance he saw her busy by a great fire, with the blankets, and all the goods hanging around to dry.

He squatted behind a clump of willows where he could watch her, himself unseen. Her attitude suggested that she was cooking something, and at the sight hunger struck through him like a knife. Not for worlds would he have asked her for anything to eat.

By and by she arose with the frying-pan in her hand, and looked up and down the beach.

"Oh, Sam!" she called. "Come and eat!"

He laid low, sneering miserably; bent on cutting off his nose to spite his face. He wondered if there were any berries on the island. No, it was too early in the season for berries. Edible roots, maybe. But he wouldn't have known an edible root from any other kind.

After calling awhile, Bela sat down in the sand and proceeded to satisfy her own appetite. Fresh pangs attacked Sam.

"Selfish creature!" he muttered. "That woman is bad through and through!"

She arose and, filling another plate, started toward him, carrying it. Her eyes were following his tracks in the sand. Sam instinctively sprang up and took to his heels.

His cheeks burned at the realization that she would presently discover that he had been sitting there watching her. He had not thought of the tell-tale sand. Wherever he might seek to hide, it would betray him.

He made a complete circuit of the little island, Bela presumably following him. The circumference of the beach was about half a mile. He ran as hard as he could, and presently discovered her [124]
ahead of him. He had almost overtaken her.

Thereafter he followed more slowly, keeping her in sight from the cover of the bushes. The secret consciousness that he was acting like a wilful child did not make him any happier.

When he came around to Bela's fire again, seeing the dugout drawn up on the sand, his heart leaped at the chance of escape. If he could push off in it without capsizing, surely, even with his lack of skill, he could drive before the wind. Or even if he could keep it floating under the lee of the island, he could dictate terms.

He waited, hidden, until she passed out of sight ahead, then ran to it. But even as he put his hands on the bow, she reappeared, running back. He fled in the other direction.

The chase went on reversed. He no longer heard her coming behind him. Now he could not tell whether she were in front or behind. He passed the dugout and the camp fire again. No sign of her there. Rounding the point beyond, he came to the place where he had made his own fire.

Trying to keep eyes in every side of his head at once, he walked around a bush and almost collided with her. There she stood with dimpled face, like a child, behind the door.

She burst out laughing. Sam turned beet colour and, scowling like a pirate, tried to carry it off with dignity.

"Don't be mad at me," she begged, struggling with her laughter. "You so fonny, run away. Here's your breakfast. It's cold now. You can bring it to the fire."

There was bread and smoked fish on the plate she was offering. Sam, though his stomach cried [125]
out, turned his back on her.

"You got eat," said Bela. "Tak' it."

"Not from you," he returned bitterly.

There was a silence. He could not see how she took it. Presently he heard her put the plate down on the sand and walk off. Her steps died away around the point.

Sam eyed the food ravenously and began to argue with himself. In the end, of course, he ate it, but it went down hard.

The day wore on. It continued to blow great guns. Sam wandered up and down his side of the island, meditating fine but impractical schemes of escape and revenge.

He might get away on a raft, he thought, if the wind changed and blew in a direction favourable to carry him ashore. The trouble was the nights were so short. He might build his raft one night, and escape on it the next. How to keep her from finding it in the meantime offered a problem.

He began to look about in the interior of the island for suitable pieces of dry timber. He could use a blanket for a sail, he thought. This reminded him that his blankets were at least his own, and he determined to go and get them.

Rounding the point, he saw her sitting in the sand, making something with her hands. Though she must have heard him coming, she did not look up until he addressed her. Sam, in his desire to assert his manhood, swaggered a bit as he came up.

She raised a face as bland as a baby's. Sam was disconcerted. Desiring to pick a quarrel, he roughly demanded his blankets. Bela nodded toward where they hung and went on with her [126]
work. She was making a trolling spoon.

So much for their second encounter. Sam retired from it, feeling that he had come off no better than from the first.

Later, back on his own side, bored and irritated beyond endurance, he rolled up in his blankets and sought sleep as an escape from his own company.

He slept and dreamed. The roaring of the wind and the beating of the waves wove themselves into his fancies. He dreamed he was engulfed in a murky tempest, He was tossing wildly in a shell of a boat, without oars or sail. Sometimes green and smiling fields appeared close at hand, only to be swallowed up in the murk again.

The noise was deafening. When he endeavoured to shout for aid, his tongue was clamped to his jaw. Behind him was a terror worse than the storm, and he dared not look around. It seemed to him that he struggled for an infinity of time, a hopeless, heart-breaking struggle against increasing odds.

Suddenly the sun broke through, cheering his heart. It was a sun that came down close to him, warming him through and through. It was not a sun. It was a face—a woman's face. At first it was a face he did not know, but beautiful. Then it was Bela's face, and he was glad.

Closer and closer to his own face it drew, and he did not draw away. Finally she touched his lips with hers, and a wonderful sweetness pervaded his whole frame. He awoke.

For a moment he lay blinking, still wrapped in the dream. At any rate, the storm was real. The bushes still thrashed, and the waves beat. Before him stretched the same wide waste of grey [127]
water slashed with white.

The sight of the water brought full recollection back. He had been looking at it all day, and he hated it. It was the water that made his prison. He sat up swearing at his dream. It was a fine thing a man should have no better control over his emotions while he slept.

Beside him on the sand lay another tin plate, with bread and fish. Fresh fish this time, half a pink salmon trout lately pulled from the water. Touching the plate he found it warm. Was it possible
——

Looking in the sand beside where he had lain he saw the rounded depressions made by two knees, on the other side of him was a hand-print. Sam scowled and violently scrubbed his lips with the back of his hand. Even so, he would not admit to himself that the hateful thing had happened.

Nevertheless he ate the fish.

"I've got to keep my strength up if I'm going to help myself," he excused it.

The sun was hidden, but he knew by that instinct which serves us when we give up mechanical contrivances, that it was no more than noon. Half of this hideous day remained to be got over.

He sat dwelling on his grievances until the top of his head seemed about to fly off. Then he set to work to search for and collect dry logs and stow them under the willows, and in so doing managed to tire himself out.

It was dusk, which is to say nearly ten o'clock, when he awoke from another nap. A silence, astonishing after the day-long uproar, greeted his ears. The wind had gone down with the sun, and the world was enfolded in a delicious peace. [128]

The lake was like a polished floor. Above the tree-tops behind him the sky was still bright, while over across the water sat Night in robes, awaiting her cue. On the island there was not a cheep nor a flutter to break the spell.

Sam wondered idly what had aroused him. He saw with a frown that there was food beside him as before. But it had been there some time. It was cold, and sand had drifted into the plate.

At last he heard the sound which had awakened him. It was a strain of music which came stealing as gently on the air as the first breath of dawn. Sam's breast was like wax to music.

Without thinking what he was doing, he kicked himself free of the blankets, and arose to go closer. It was like a lovely incantation, drawing him irrespective of his will.

He did not instantly recognize the source of the music. It might have been the song of a twilight bird, a thrush, a mocking-bird. He forgot for the moment that there are no song-birds so far north.

Presently he knew it for the voice of a woman singing softly, and a good way off—Bela! Still he did not stop.

"I guess I can listen to her sing without giving anything away," he told himself. But his breast was dangerously seduced by the sweetness of the sound.

As he drew closer the detached notes associated themselves into a regular air. It had nothing in common with the rude, strident chants of the Indians that he had heard on the rivers. It was both familiar and elusive. It was like an air he knew, but with a wild, irregular quality different from our airs. It was mournful, sweet, and artless, and it made the heart swell in his breast. [129]

As he progressed around the beach he saw her fire. It was dark enough now for the blaze to shine. Drawing still closer he saw her beside it, and frowned, remembering his injuries—but the song drew him still.

He began to listen for the words. Suddenly he recognized it—one of the loveliest of old English songs. Evidently it had been transmitted from ear to ear until it had acquired the character of a new race of singers.

He progressed from bush to bush. He wasn't going to have anything to do with her, he would have said, but she could sing. He came to a final stop only a few yards away, and watched her through the leaves with burning eyes. She was in her favourite attitude, sitting on her heels, her strong young back curving in to her swaying waist.

Her hair, all unbound, fell around her in shifting masses like smoke. While she sang she combed it with long strokes, holding her head now on this side, now on that, and ever revealing a lovelier pose of her round arms. The half light lent her an unearthly beauty.

The sight was no less affecting than the sound. A great pain filled Sam's breast, and the old inward struggle dragged him back and forth. She was at once so desirable and so hateful in his eyes. It was the cry of bewildered youth: "What right has anything so bad to be beautiful!"

No doubt of her badness occurred to him. Had she not ruined his chances in that country? The old antagonism was there, the readiness to believe ill of the other sex that is born of mutual fear. She had become the immemorial siren in Sam's eyes, and he was fighting to save his soul. But she was beautiful enough to make a man wish to be damned. [130]

She came to the end of her song, and presently started another, a more rollicking air, but still charged with wistfulness. Who had taught her those hushed, thrilling tones? Sam recognized this air, too, and thought of the mother who had sung it to him years ago.

It was "Twickenham Ferry." Why that of all songs? he wondered rebelliously. It was not fair that

she should be armed thus to seek out the weakest joints in his armour.

The desire to stop the song with his own mouth became more than he could bear. The struggle was almost over when she paused and bent her head to listen, and looked up and down the beach.

It broke the spell.

"She's just trying to bring you to her!" Sam told himself, aghast. "That's why her hair is down and all. And you're falling for it, you fool!"

He turned and fled back around the beach.

Whether or not she heard him run away, the song presently ceased, and troubled him no more that night. He returned to his blankets, but not to sleep again.

He built a fire and lay beside it smoking. He drove away the recollection of the disturbing loveliness he had seen by counting over his injuries at her hands, nourishing them and magnifying them in his mind until they filled it to the exclusion of everything else.

It became as dark as it would get. Midnight at that season is no more than an intensified twilight. By and by the moon arose far across the water, looking like an old-fashioned gas-globe, and set sail on her brief voyage low down in the sky from south-east to south-west.

Sam received the friend of lovers with a scowl. He had omitted her from his calculations. "The [131]
nights are short enough without that!" he thought.

Thinking of escape, a new idea caused him to sit up suddenly.

"Why bother with a raft?" he thought. "She's got to sleep sometime. If I could sneak around the beach and push the dugout in! No matter how quick she woke once I was afloat. Oh! it would do my heart good to float just out of her reach and tell her a few things. On a night like this I could paddle anywhere. She's got some food and a blanket. Serve her right, anyhow. I could send some one back after her."

To think of it was to desire to put it into instant action. The moon, however, forbade. Sam cursed her again, and sat down to wait with what patience he could muster until it should slowly sink out of sight.

When the bright scimitar edge sunk behind Nine-Mile Point he arose with a beating heart. Making his blankets into a bundle, he took his way once more around the strip of beach, his moccasined feet falling noiselessly on the sand.

It was about two o'clock, and the afterglow had moved around to the north-east. In an hour it would be light again. The island objects loomed twice their size in this dusk of dusk. Sam kept close under the willows to avoid making a silhouette against the sky. As he drew close to Bela's camp he saw that her fire was out, from which he argued that she had been asleep for some time.

Coming nearer still, he made out the form of the dugout against the pale sand. Bela had drawn it up higher, and had turned it over. Still hugging the willows, he paused, looking for her resting-place. He could not see her. He supposed she had made her bed under the willows behind her [132]
fire. He dared not approach to make sure. Likely she was a light sleeper.

Following man's first instinct, he bent double, and crept across the open sand to the dugout. It lay on its side, the bottom turned toward him.

His heart was beating like a steam hammer. If with one quick movement he could turn it over and rush it into the water, let her wake as quick as she chose. If she attempted to stop him she must take the consequences. When a man's liberty was at stake he could not be too nice with the sex. He took a long breath and turned the canoe over.

Bela was lying beneath it.

"Sam!" she said softly.

The keyed-up Sam grunted at the suddenness of the shock and ran back for ten paces, gasping. Then he got command of himself, and came back ashamed and raging.

Bela stood up. "What you want?" she asked mildly.

"I want to get away from here!" cried Sam, "and, by George, I'm going to! If you try to stop me your petticoats won't protect you. Get back!"

Rather to his surprise she fell back without a word. He glanced at her uncertainly. Putting his hands on the canoe he started to shove it toward the water.

"How you goin' mak' it go?" asked Bela softly.

Sam came to a stop, swearing savagely. In his excitement he had neglected to think of paddles. They were not lying anywhere about.

"Where are the paddles?" he demanded.

"I hide 'em," she answered coolly.

"Where are they?" he cried.

She was silent.

"Tell me where they are or take the consequences!" he cried, approaching her threateningly. [133]

"I not tell you if you kill me," she replied, standing fast.

This was an out and out challenge to him to strike her. When it came to the point he could not do it, of course. He turned away, wild with impotent rage. Must she always get the best of him? If there had only been a man of her people there that he could take it out on! He broke into passionate denunciations of her. It was a weird enough scene, there on the shore in the dim dusk.

"What are you keeping me here for, anyway?" was the burden of his cry. "What do you expect to gain by it?"

"You safe here," Bela muttered. "If we go to the shore those men kill you, I think."

This did not help soothe him.

"I'll take my chance of that!" he cried. "I know how to deal with men. I don't need a woman to look after me! Do you think you're going to keep me here all summer?"

"No," she returned. "The bishop and the police comin' pretty soon. Then you safe."

"It's all your fault anyhow!" cried Sam. "Why couldn't you let me alone in the first place? What's your game anyhow?"

Bela was silent.

"Give me a plain answer!" he cried. "What was your idea in carrying me off?" He blushed as he said it. "O Lord!" he added helplessly.

"I hear those men talk," Bela said sullenly. "Say they goin' kill you in the morning. I think if I tell you, you jus' laugh. So I tak' you away quiet."

It had not the ring of truth. "Rot!" exclaimed Sam. "Why should they want to kill me?"

Having no answer ready, she remained silent. [134]

"You're lying now!" cried Sam. "The truth is, you were sore because I wasn't after you like the rest. I know women!"

Bela made an angry movement.

"What's the matter wit' you?" she said defiantly. "You t'ink you so big and clever! W'at you know about me? If you stop cursing me all the tam maybe you see w'at I am! If you act good to me I good to you!"

"Do you expect me to take off my hat and thank you for the privilege of being tied up and carried off?" demanded Sam.

She hung her head. "I sorry for that," she muttered sullenly.

"Huh! Sorry won't mend anything," said Sam.

"I want be friends," she murmured.

"If you're honest you'll get the paddles and put me ashore."

She shook her head. "Not let you go till you friends wit' me."

Sam laughed harshly. "That's good! You'll wait a long time. Hope you've got grub enough. Friendship! Rubbish! You let me go and we'll talk."

She stood in sullen silence. Sam abruptly picked up his blankets and turned to go.

At his move a different sound escaped her. Her hands went to her breast. "Sam—please——"

He paused. "What do you want?"

"Sam—I say I sorry. I say I a fool."

He stood in uncomfortable silence.

"I say I fool," she repeated. "That not easy to say."

Still he had no answer.

"Why you so hard to me?" she demanded rebelliously. "Can't you see in my heart? There is nothing but good in there for you. I want you be good to me. I want you come wit' me so bad. So I act foolish." [135]

Her simplicity surprised and suddenly softened him. Alone with her, and in the all-concealing dusk, his queasy pride was not obliged to take up arms. In return he was as simple and direct as she.

"Oh! I'm sorry, too," he said in an uncertain voice—and regretfully. "If you're like that—if you're on the square. Something might have come of it. But you've spoiled it. You've put me on my guard against you for ever. A man has his pride. A man has to choose. He can't submit to a woman. You wouldn't want a tame man. I'm sorry!"

They stood looking at each other with an odd wistfulness.

"Go back to your own fire," Bela said in a muffled voice.

CHAPTER XII [136]

THE NEXT DAY

Sam was awakened by the rising sun. He arose sore in spirit and unrefreshed. It promised to be a brilliant day, with a gentle breeze from the west. Such a wind would blow him to the foot of the lake, the nearest shore, and, observing it, he immediately started to drag the logs he had collected down to the water's edge, careless now if Bela discovered what he was about. Let her try to stop him if she dared!

Building a raft promised to be no easy task. He was without hammer and nails, and he had not been long enough in the country to learn how it might be done without. His only tool was a pocket knife.

After several fruitless experiments, he hit upon the scheme of lashing the logs together with withes of willow. It promised to be an all-day job, and a clumsy one at the best. Still, if the wind held fair and light, it might serve. Raising a mast presented another problem. He deferred consideration of that until he got the raft built.

After a while Bela appeared around the shore, bringing his breakfast. Sam essayed taking a leaf out of her book by making believe to be oblivious of her. She put the plate down and watched him for a while. Sam, under her gaze, became horribly conscious of the crudeness of his handiwork, but he worked ahead, whistling. [137]

Finally she said scornfully: "You can't get to shore on that."

No answer from Sam.

"When you sit down, her bend in the middle. Water come over you. Raft got be hard lak a floor."

Another silence.

"W'en wind blow she all bus' up."

No answer being forthcoming, Bela shrugged and sat down in the sand as if she meant to spend the morning there. She gazed across the lake. Sam scowled and fidgeted. Something told him that when it came to holding one's tongue, Bela could beat him hollow. He worked doggedly on, careful never to look in her direction.

After a while the astonishing girl rose and said calmly: "I tak you to shore in my canoe now."

Sam dropped his willow strips and stared. "Eh?"

"I say I ready tak you to shore now," she repeated.

"What does this mean?" Sam demanded.

She shrugged slightly. "Ask no question. Come, if you want."

"To what shore?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Anywhere. Better go to little river, I guess. Wind blow us there to-day. Maybe blow hard after."

"What are you up to now?" he muttered.

She had already turned up the beach. "I go get ready," she said over her shoulder. "Better come quick."

She disappeared around the shore, leaving him much perturbed in mind. In a minute or two he stole after to see if she were indeed getting ready. It was true. Watching from behind the willows, he saw her tie a poplar pole in the bow of the dugout and stay it with a rope.

Upon this rude mast she bound a yard, from which hung one of her blankets with a rope tied to each of the lower corners. Afterward she stowed her baggage in the boat. She worked with a determined swiftness that suggested some particular urgency. [138]

Finally she started back along the beach, whereupon Sam turned and, hastening ahead of her, resumed operations on the raft as if he had never dropped them.

"Now I guess you know why we goin' to the shore," she stated abruptly.

"I'm hanged if I do!" returned Sam.

"You got strong eyes and not see not'ing?" she asked scornfully. "Look!"

Following the direction of her pointing finger across the lake, he made out a black spot on the water, between them and the head of the river.

"Those men comin' here," she said. "I am think before maybe come to-day. Yesterday I guess they ride down the river and get Johnny Gagnon's boat."

When she pointed it out, the object was clear enough. The rise and fall of oars was suggested. Sam watched it doubtfully. He was ready to welcome relief in any form from his hateful situation, but was this relief?

"How do you expect to sail to the river when they're coming from there?" he asked.

"I wait till come close," she replied eagerly. "Then go round ot'er side of island. They never catch me wit' my sail. Johnny Gagnon's boat got no sail."

Her eagerness made him suspicious. What had she up her sleeve now? he wondered. While he could scarcely regard Jack, Shand, and Joe in the light of deliverers, his galled pride forbade him to put himself in her hands again. He suddenly made up his mind.

"Go ahead!" he said harshly. "Go anywhere you like! I stay here!" [139]

Bela changed colour, and a real fear showed in her eyes. She moved toward him involuntarily.

"They kill you if they find you here," she said.

"Not if they don't find you here, too."

"They kill you!" she insisted. "Two days they are after us. All tam talk together what they goin' do when they catch us, and get more mad. If they find me gone away, they get more mad again. W'en they catch you, they got kill you for 'cause they say so many times. You are on this little island. Nobody know. Nobody see. They are safe to kill you. You don' go wit' me, you never leave here."

Sam, knowing the men, could not but be shaken by her words. He paled a little, but, having announced his decision to her, pride would not allow him to take it back.

"Go on," he said. "I stay."

The old walled look came back over Bela's face. She sat down in the sand, clasping her knees.

"I not go wit'out you," she announced.

Sam affected to shrug.

"Just as you like. You won't help my chances any by staying here."

"They kill you, anyhow," she said in a level voice. "After they kill you they get me. They not kill me."

Sam started and looked at her aghast. A surprising pain stabbed him. He remembered the looks of the men upon Bela's first appearance in the cabin. Now, after two days' pursuit they would scarcely be more humane than then. The thought of that beautiful creature being delivered over to them was more than he could bear.

"Bela—for God's sake—don't be a fool!" he faltered.

A subtle smile appeared on her lips. She was silent.

His pride made another effort. "Ah, you're only bluffing!" he said harshly. "You can't get me going that way." [140]

She looked at him with a strange, fiery intensity. "I not bluffin'," she replied quietly. "I do w'at I say. If I want say I put my hand in the fire, I hold it there till it burn off. You know that."

In his heart he did know it, however he might rage at being forced to do what she wanted him to do.

"I don't care!" he cried. "You can't lead me by the nose! I'm my own master. I didn't get you into this. You'll have to take your chance as I take mine."

Bela said nothing.

Out of sheer bravado Sam set to work again to bind his logs together. His hand shook. There was little likelihood now that he would need a raft.

The approaching boat had already covered half the distance to the island. They could now make out three figures in it, one steering, each of the other two wielding an oar. The lake was glorious in the strong sunshine. All the little ripples to the east were tipped with gold.

Five minutes passed, while obstinacy contended silently with obstinacy. Bela sat looking at nothing with all the stoicism of her red ancestors; Sam maintained his futile pretence of business. Occasionally he glanced at her full of uncertainty and unwilling admiration. Bela never looked at

him.

At the end of that time the boat was less than a quarter of a mile offshore. They saw the steersman point, and the two oarsmen stop and look over their shoulders. Evidently they had discovered the two figures on the beach, and wondered at their supineness. They came on with increased energy.

Bela held the best cards. Sam finally threw down his work with an oath. [141]

"I can't stand it!" he cried shakily. "I don't care about myself, but I can't see a woman sacrificed—even if it's your own mulishness! I don't care about you, either—but you're a woman. You needn't think you're getting the best of me. I'll hate you for this—but I can't stand it!"

Bela sprang up swiftly and resolutely.

"Come!" she exclaimed. "I don' care what mak' you come, if you come!"

She pointed to the longest way round the shore. "This way," she directed. "I want them follow this way so I sail back ot'er side."

As they ran around the beach, a faint shout reached them from the water. As soon as they had passed out of sight of the boat, Bela pulled Sam into the bushes, and they worked back under cover to a point whence they could watch their pursuers in comparative safety.

"Maybe they goin' land this side," she suggested. "If they land, run lak hell and jomp in my boat."

Sam never thought of smiling.

Five minutes of breathless suspense succeeded. Suppose the men landed and, dividing, went both ways around the beach, what would they do? However, it appeared that they intended to row around the island and, as they thought, cut off Bela's escape by water. But the watchers could not be sure of this until the boat was almost upon them. Finally Bela looked at Sam, and they dashed together for the dugout.

All was ready for the start, the boat pointing, bow first, into the lake. In the excitement of the last few minutes they had forgotten Sam's blankets. It was too late to think of them now.

Sam got in first and, obeying Bela's instructions, braced his feet against the bottom of the mast. She pushed off and paddled like a wild woman until she could weather the island under her [142] square sail. They succeeded in making the point before the rowboat appeared from around the other side of the island. Finally the white blanket, with its wide black bars, caught the wind, and Bela ceased paddling.

To Sam it seemed as if they stopped moving upon the stilling of that vigorous arm. He looked anxiously over his shoulder. She was watching their progress through the water with an experienced eye.

"Never catch us if the wind hold," she said calmly. "Johnny Gagnon's boat ver' heavy boat."

They had a start of upward of a quarter of a mile when their perplexed pursuers, having almost completed a circuit of the island, finally caught sight of them sailing blithely down the lake. A great roar of anger came down the wind to them.

"Let them curse," said Bela. "Cursin' won't catch us. Already they rowin' half an hour. Get tire' soon."

"They've got a spare man to change to," Sam reminded her. He was now as keen to give them the slip as Bela. The mainland ahead promised freedom; not only freedom from his late masters, but freedom from her, too.

Looking over their shoulders, they saw the steersman change to one of the oars. Thereafter the rowboat came on with renewed speed, but the dugout seemed to draw steadily ahead.

Sam's heart rose. Bela, however, searching the wide sky and the water for weather signs, began to look anxious.

"What is it?" asked Sam.

"Wind goin' down," she replied grimly. [143]

Sure enough, presently the heavy sail began to sag, and they could feel the dugout lose way under them. They groaned involuntarily. At the same moment their pursuers perceived the slackening of the wind and shouted in a different key.

The wind freshened again, and once more died away. Now the dugout forged ahead; now the rowboat began to overhaul them. It was nip and tuck down the lake between sail and oars.

The shore they were making for began to loom nearer, but the puffs of wind were coming at longer and longer intervals, and finally they ran into a glassy calm, though they could see slants of wind all about them, a situation to drive pursued sailors frantic.

Bela paddled manfully, but her single blade was no match for two long oars. The sail was a handicap now. Bela had staked everything on it, and they could not take it down without capsizing the dugout. The oarsmen came rapidly, with derisive shouts in anticipation of a speedy

triumph.

"You've got your gun," muttered Sam. "You're a better shot than any of them. Use it while you have the advantage."

She shook her head. "No shoot. Too moch trouble mak' already."

"Plug their boat, then," said Sam.

She still refused. "They die in cold water if boat sink."

"We might as well jump overboard, then," he said bitterly.

"Look!" she cried suddenly. "Wind comin', too!"

Behind the rowboat a dark-blue streak was creeping over the surface of the lake.

"Ah, wind, come quick! Come quick!" Bela murmured involuntarily. "A candle for the altar! My [144]
rabbit-skin robe to Père Lacombe!"

At the same time she did not cease paddling.

The rowers saw the breeze coming, too, and, bending their backs, sent the water flying from their oars. They managed to keep ahead of it. Both boats were now within a furlong of the river-head. The race seemed over. The rowboat drew even with the dugout, and they looked into their pursuers' faces, red with exertion and distorted in cruel triumph.

The steersman was Joe. "Don't stop," he yelled to the heaving oarsmen, "or she'll give us the slip yet! Get ahead and cut her off! You damned dish-washer, we've got you now!" he added for Sam's benefit.

With a sharp crack, Big Jack's oar broke off short. He capsized backward into Shand, knocking him off his seat as well. At the same instant the whispering breeze came up and the blanket bellied out.

Shand and Jack were for the moment inextricably entangled in the bottom of the boat. Emotional Joe cursed and stamped and tore at his hair like a lunatic. Loud laughter broke from Sam and Bela as they sailed away.

Joe beside himself, snatched up his gun and opened fire. A bullet went through the blanket. Bela and Sam instinctively ducked. Perhaps they prayed; more likely they did not realize their danger until it was over. Other shots followed, but Joe was shooting wild. He could not aim directly at Sam, because Bela was between. He emptied his magazine without doing any damage.

In the reaction that followed Bela and Sam laughed. In that moment they were one.

"Feels funny to have a fellow slinging lead at you, eh?" said Sam. [145]

"Musq'oosis say after a man hear bullet whistle he is grown," answered Bela.

A few minutes later the river received them. There was a straight reach of a third of a mile, followed by innumerable, bewildering corkscrew bends all the way to the head of the rapids, thirty miles or more. Out in the lake behind them their pursuers were struggling forward, sculling with the remaining oar.

Bela watched anxiously to see what they would do when they got in the river. If they knew enough to go ashore and take to the land trail, it was possible that even on foot they might cut her off at a point below where the trail touched the river.

Apparently, however, they meant to follow by water. At the last sight she had of them before rounding the first bend they were still sculling.

The river pursued its incredibly circuitous course between cut banks fringed with willows. All the country above, invisible to them in the dugout, was a vast meadow. A steady, smooth current carried them on.

On the outside of each bend the bank was steep to the point of overhanging; on the inside there was invariably a mud flat made gay with water flowers. So crooked was the river that Jack-Knife Mountain, the only object they could see above the willows, was now on their right hand, now on their left.

On the turns they sometimes got a current of wind in their faces and came to a dead stop. Now that they no longer required it, the wind was momentarily strengthening.

"Wouldn't it be better to take the sail down?" Sam suggested.

"Can't tak' it down wi'out land on shore," Bela answered sullenly. [146]

Sam comprehending what was the matter, chuckled inwardly. On the next bend, seeing her struggles with the baffling air-currents, he asked teasingly:

"Well, why don't you go ashore and take it down?"

"If I land, you promise not run away?" she said.

Sam laughed from a light heart. "Not on your life!" he said. "I'm my own master now."

Bela had no more to say.

"Where are you bound for?" Sam presently asked.

"Down river," she answered.

"I'll have to be leaving you," said Sam mockingly. "I'm going the other way. To the head of the lake."

"If you go back they catch you."

"I'll lie low till they're thrown off the scent. I'll walk around the north shore."

"If you stay with me little while, pretty soon we meet police comin' up," she suggested. "Then they can't touch you."

"Much obliged," replied Sam. "I've no fancy to be jumped on at night again and tied up like a roasting fowl."

"I promise I not do that again," said Bela.

"Sure!" retorted Sam. "No doubt you've got plenty other tricks just as good."

"If you look at me you see I speak truth," she murmured. "I your friend, Sam."

The threatened break in her voice brought all his old disquiet surging up again. As he put it, he suspected her of "trying to put one over on him again." "I don't want to look at you!" he returned with a harsh laugh.

An adverse puff of wind blew them into an overhanging willow-bush, which became entangled with the sail and the stay-rope. Sam saw his chance. Seizing the branches, he pulled himself to his feet and managed to swing ashore at the cost only of wet ankles. [147]

A sharp cry was wrung from Bela. "Sam, don't go!"

Gaining a sure footing on the bank, he faced her, laughing. "Well, how about it now?"

There was nothing inscrutable about her face then. It worked with emotion like any woman's.

"Don't go by yourself!" she pleaded. "You not know this country. You got not'ing. No grub! No gun! No blanket!"

"I can walk it in two days or three," he said. "I'll build a fire to sleep by. You can give me a little grub if you want. I'll trade my pocket-knife for it. It's all I've got. You got me into this, anyhow."

"No sell grub," she answered sullenly. "Give all you want if you come with me."

"Very well, keep it then," he snapped, turning away.

Her face broke up again. "No, no! I not mad at you!" she cried hurriedly. "I give you food. But wait; we got talk." She drove the canoe on a mud-bank beyond the willows and scrambled out.

Sam, scowling and hardening at her approach, was careful to keep his distance. He suspected her of a design to detain him by force.

"There's been too much talk," he growled. "You'd better hustle on down. They'll be here soon."

"Sam, don' go!" she begged. "W'at you do at head of lake? Not get no job but cook. Stay wit' me. We got boat and gun and blankets. We need no more. I show you all w'at to do. I show you fishin' and huntin'. When winter come I show you how to trap good fur. You will be rich with me. I not bot'er you no more. I do everything you want."

In her distress Sam's angry eyes chose to see only chagrin at the prospect of his escaping her. At the same time her beseeching face filled him with a wild commotion that he would not recognize. His only recourse lay in instant flight. [148]

"Cut it out! What good does it do?" he cried harshly. "I tell you I'm going to the head of the lake."

"All right, I tak' you there," she said eagerly. "More quick as you can walk, too. Half a mile down the river there is a little backwater to hide. We let those men go by and then come back. I do w'at you want, Sam."

"Will you give me a little grub, or won't you?" he insisted. "I'd rather starve than go with you!"

She burst into tears. "All right, I give you food," she said. She turned back to the dugout, and, throwing back the cover of the grub-box, put what bread and smoked fish she had left into a cotton bag.

Sam awaited her, raging with that intolerable bitterness that a tender and obstinate man feels at the sight of a woman's tears.

She offered him the little package of food, and a blanket as well. "Tak' my ot'er blanket," she said humbly. "I can get more."

He impatiently shook his head, refusing to meet the lovely, imploring eyes. "Here," he said, offering the pocket-knife. "For the food."

With a fresh burst of weeping she knocked it out of his hand, and covered her face with her arm. Sam strode away, blinded and deafened by the confusion of his feelings. His face was as stubborn as stone.

CHAPTER XIII [149]

ON THE RIVER

When Sam had passed out of sight around the willows, Bela, still shaken by sobs, went down on her hands and knees to search for the penknife she had spurned. Finding it, she kissed it and thrust it inside her dress.

Going to the dugout, she stretched out in it, and gave herself up to grief. Not for very long, however. Gradually the sobs stilled, and finally she sat up with the look of one who has something to do. For a long time thereafter she sat, chin in hand, thinking hard with tight lips and inward-looking eyes.

Sounds from around the bend above aroused her. She heard the working of an oar in its socket and the cautious voices of men. An alert look came into her face.

She glanced over the gunwale at her face in the water and disarranged her hair a little. Flinging herself down, she commenced to weep again, but with an altered note; this was self-conscious grief addressed to the ears of others.

The three men, finding her thus, gaped in boundless astonishment. It was anything but what they expected to find. They peered into the bushes for a sign of Sam.

"What the devil is the matter?" demanded Big Jack. [150]

"Where is Sam?" cried Joe.

Bela answered both questions at once. "He leave me," she sobbed with heart-breaking effect.

"Left you?" they echoed stupidly.

"Gone away," wailed Bela. "Say he done with me for good!"

Black Shand and Jack were genuinely discomposed at the sight of her tears. Joe with more hardihood laughed.

"Serve you well right!" said he.

Big Jack had the oar. He drove the boat on the bank alongside the dugout, and they climbed out. Jack and Shand went up the bank.

"He can't have got far," said the former.

A wide sea of grass was revealed to them, stretching to pine ridges on the horizon. In all the expanse there was no sign of any figure, but the dense willows marking the tortuous course of the river provided plenty of cover both up and down stream.

"Which way did he go?" Jack called down.

"I don't know," said Bela. "Down river, I think."

Below, Joe, full of bitter jealousy, was still upbraiding Bela. Jack returned, scowling.

"Cut it out!" he said peremptorily. "I will get to the bottom of this." To Bela he said harshly: "What do you expect us to do for you, girl? You promised us a fair answer yesterday morning, and in the night you skipped with the cook."

Bela raised an innocent-seeming face.

"What you mean, skip?" she asked.

"Lit out, eloped, ran away," said Jack grimly.

"I never did!" she cried indignantly. "He carry me off."

They stared at her open-mouthed again.

"What I want wit' a cook?" she went on quickly. "I want marry a man wit' something. He is a bad man. He tak' me away. Now he say he done wit' me!" Tears threatened again. [151]

They were only half convinced.

"How did it happen?" Jack demanded.

"In the afternoon he find my cache where I stay by the little creek," she said. "Talk to me lak a friend. I think all right. But in the night he come back when I sleepin' and tie my hands and my feet and my mouth, and throw me in my boat and tak' away! I hate him!"

"Then it was you we heard cry out?" exclaimed Joe.

"Sure!" she assented readily. "The handkerchief come loose. But soon he stop me."

"He did it just to spite us!" cried Joe furiously. "He didn't want her himself! I always said he had too proud a stomach for a cook. Worked against us at night like a rat! I warned you often enough!"

"Hold on!" said Big Jack, scowling. "There's more to this." He turned to Bela accusingly. "You were paddling the dugout when you came to the river yesterday. I saw you plain."

"Soon as the wind begin to blow he cut me loose," she said. "He can't mak' the boat go. He tak' my gun and point to me and mak' me paddle."

"The damned blackguard!" muttered Shand.

Jack was still unconvinced. "But to-day," he said, "when my oar busted you laughed. I was lookin' at you."

Bela hung her head. "He tak' me away," she murmured. "I t'ink he marry me then. I good girl. I think got marry him."

This convinced them all. They burst out in angry exclamations. It was not, however, for what they thought Bela had suffered. Each man was thinking of the wrong Sam had done him. Toward Bela [152] their attitude had subtly changed. She was now a damaged article, though still desirable. Their awe of her was gone.

"I'll grind my heel in his face for this," snarled Joe. "I'll kill him slow!"

"Come on!" cried Shand. "We're losing time. He can't have got far."

Bela scrambled out of the dugout. "I tak' you where he is," she said eagerly. "I can track him in the grass. I can't catch him myself. But you got give him to me for punish."

"We'll attend to that for you, my girl," said Jack grimly.

"No blood!" she cried. "If he is kill for cause of me I get a bad name around. A girl can't have no bad name."

They laughed with light scorn. "You're done for already," Joe said.

"Nobody knows him," said Jack. "He'll never be missed. We'll take good care he ain't found, neither."

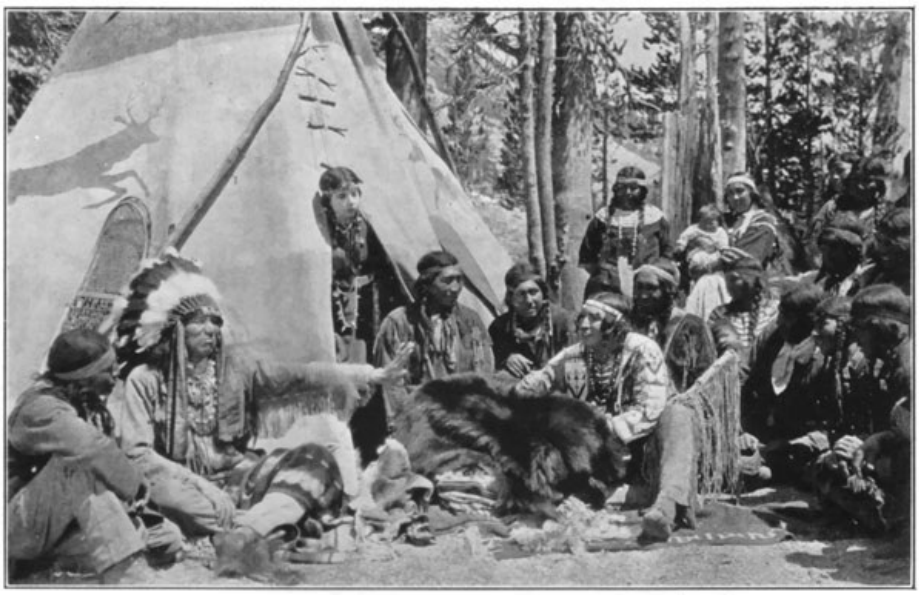
"The police will know," insisted Bela. "They can smell blood. Bam-by maybe you mad at each ot'er. One will tell."

This was a shrewd shot. The three scowled at each other furtively. There was no confidence between them.

"Well—what do you want to do?" asked Jack uneasily.

"I give him to the police," stated Bela eagerly. "They comin' up the river now. Come every year this tam. Then all will be known. It is not my fault he tak' me away. I good girl."

"Maybe she wants to get him to marry her," suggested Joe.



Bela (Colleen Moore) overhears the brave bargaining for her.
(Photoplay Edition—"The Huntress") *(A First National Picture)*

"No marry!" cried Bela with a fine assumption of anger. "He throw me down! Speak bad to me! I hate him! I want punish!" [153]

"Sounds fishy somehow," muttered Jack, hesitating.

"You come wit' me," she said, shrugging. "See all I do."

"Maybe the idea is to get us away from the boat so he can sneak back and swipe it," suggested Joe.

"You foolish!" said Bela, with a glance of scorn. "You can walk to Johnny Gagnon's and get your horses. Let one man stay here to watch the boats."

"Come on!" cried Shand from the top of the bank. "Catch him first and decide what we'll do to him after."

"Go on," said Bela sullenly. "I not track him wit'out you give him me for punish."

"You swear you'll hand him over to the police," demanded Jack sternly.

"I swear it!" she replied instantly, looking him in the eye and holding up her hand.

"All right. Come on. I'm satisfied," assented Jack.

"Wait!" she said. "You promise to me you not hurt him. Give me your hand."

She forced all three to shake hands on it, Joe submitting with an ill grace.

"Now come on," said Shand impatiently.

"Leave your guns," commanded Bela. "Maybe he run. You get mad and shoot. I want no blood."

Jack scowled at her with reawakened suspicions. "I keep my gun by me," he growled.

"He got no gun," sneered Bela scornfully. "You 'fraid catch him wit' hands?"

"You said he had your gun," said Big Jack.

"He give it back," said Bela. "He is bad man; but no steal. My big gun, my little gun—see?" She exhibited them. [154]

Jack knew that Sam owned no gun; still he was suspicious. "If you had your gun why didn't you plug him when he left you?" he demanded.

Bela paused for an instant. This was a poser, because in her heart she knew, supposing her story to be true, that she would have shot Sam. She had to think quickly. "I not want no blood," she murmured. "I 'fraid Père Lacombe."

It was well done. Big Jack nodded. "You leave your guns, too," he stipulated.

"Sure!" she said, willingly putting them in the dugout. "Leave one man to watch the boats and the guns. Two men and a woman enough to catch a cook, I guess."

They laughed.

Bela was playing for high stakes, and her faculties were sharpened to a sword-edge. Every look suggested the wronged woman thirsting for justice. She ostentatiously searched in her baggage, and drawing out a piece of moose-hide, cut it into thongs for bonds. Cleverer men than Big Jack and his pals might have been taken in.

"Boys, she's right!" cried Jack. "We don't want no blood on our hands to start off with, if we can see him punished proper. Shand, you stay here. Lead off, girl!"

Shand shrugged with a sour look, and came down the bank. It was always tacitly understood between him and Jack that young Joe was not to be trusted alone, so he submitted.

The other three started. Bela, making believe to be baffled for a moment, finally led the way up-stream. She went first at the rolling gait the Indians affect. The men were hard put to it to keep up with her over the uneven ground, for the grassy plain, which looked like a billiard-table, was [155] full of bumps.

She kept her eyes on the ground. It was a simple matter for her to follow Sam's tracks in the grass, but the men, though they could see the faint depressions when she pointed them out, could never have found them unaided.

The tracks led them parallel to the general direction of the river, cutting across from point to point of the willows on the outside of each bend. On the horizon ahead was the pine-clad ridge that bounded the lower end of the lake. Jack-Knife Mountain rose over it. The sea of grass was dazzling in the sunlight.

Half an hour's swift walking gave them no glimpse ahead of their quarry.

"Waste too much time talking," said Bela.

"Well, you did the most of it," retorted Joe.

It was evident from the direction of the tracks that Sam was taking care to keep under cover of each point of the willows until he gained the next one. Each point afforded his pursuers a new survey ahead. Not until they had walked another half-hour at that gruelling pace were they in time to see a black spot just about to disappear ahead.

"Down!" cried Bela, and they dropped full length in the grass until it had gone.

Bela, springing up, led the way at a run across the intervening grass. She had to hold herself back for the men. Joe was too heavy to be a runner, and Jack was beginning to feel the handicap of his years.

Nearing the willows, she held up her hand for caution. They ran lightly in the grass. Neither man could see or hear anything; nevertheless Bela indicated by signs that the one they sought was just around the bushes. At the last moment she held back and let them go first. [156]

Sam, having decided that the danger of immediate pursuit was over, was sitting on the ground eating his lunch when, without warning, Jack and Joe fell on him, bowling him over on his back. He struggled desperately, but was helpless under their combined weight. Joe, with a snarl, lifted his clenched hand over Sam's face. Big Jack held it.

"Not while he's down," he muttered.

Bela, following close, drew Sam's hands together and bound his wrists with her strips of hide.

Sam, seeing her, cried out: "You've sold me out again! I might have known it!"

Bela, fearing his words might start Jack thinking things over, cried out hysterically: "I got you now! You think you run away, eh? You done wit' me! You laugh w'en I cry. I fix you for that! I put you where you can't hurt no more girls!"

To Jack and Joe it seemed natural under the circumstances. Sam glared at her in angry amazement, and opened his mouth to reply. But thinking better of it, he set his jaw and kept quiet.

He submitted to superior force, and they immediately started back on the long walk to the boats. There was little said *en route*. Only Joe, unable to contain his rancour, occasionally burst out in brutal reviling. Sam smiled at him. More than once Big Jack was called on to restrain Joe's fist.

"A bargain is a bargain," he reminded him.

Bela, bringing up the rear, glared at the back of Joe's head with pure savage hatred. When any of them chanced to look at her, her face was wholly stolid.

Black Shand's face lightened as they brought Sam over the bank. [157]

"So it was on the level," he remarked.

It was now some time past noon, and the word was given to eat before embarking. Sam, with his bound hands in his lap, sat on a great sod which had fallen from the bank above, and watched the others curiously and warily.

He had cooled down. So many things had happened to him during the past two days that his capacity for anger and astonishment was pretty well used up. He now felt more like a spectator than the leading man in the drama.

Finally, Bela, with a highly indifferent air, came to him with a plate of food which she put on his knees. Evidently he was expected to feed himself as best he could with his hands tied. Bela, avoiding his eyes, whispered swiftly:

"I your friend, Sam. Jus' foolin' them. Wait and see."

Sam laughed scornfully. The other men looked over, and Bela had to go back.

Sam had no compunction against eating their food. Scorning them all, he fully intended to get the better of them yet. Meanwhile he was wondering what had taken place between them. He could not interpret the relations between Bela and the three men. They were apparently neither friendly nor inimical.

Afterward a discussion arose as to their disposition between the two boats. The rowboat was not big enough to carry them all.

"Lay him in the dugout," Bela said indifferently. "I paddle him."

"No you don't," said Joe quickly. "He goes with the men."

"All right," said Bela, shrugging. "You come wit' me." [158]

This arrangement pleased Joe very well, and by it Bela succeeded in parting him from Sam.

The two boats proceeded together down the smoothly flowing, willow-bordered stream. Shand and Jack took turns at sculling the larger craft, and Bela loafed on her paddle that they might keep up with her.

The view was as confined and unvarying as the banks of a canal, except that canals commonly are straight, while this watercourse twisted like Archimedes's screw. The only breaks in the endless panorama of cut-banks, mud-flats, willows, and grass were the occasional little inlets, gay with aquatic flowers.

Bela was most at home kneeling in the stern of her dugout. Joe, sitting opposite, watched her graceful action with a kindling eye.

"Drop behind a bit," he whispered. "I want to talk to you. Are you listening?"

She seemed not to have heard. Nevertheless the other boat drew away a little.

"Look here," Joe began with what he intended to be an ingratiating air, "this is a bad business for you. I'm not saying I blame you. Just the same your price has gone down, see? Do you get me?"

Bela lowered her eyes and watched the little whirl-pools in the train of her paddle. "I un'erstan'," she murmured.

"After an affair like this men look on a girl as fair game. I ain't saying it's right, but it's so. You want to look out for those other fellows now."

"I look out," said Bela.

"Come with me and I'll keep you from them," Joe went on, trying to speak carelessly; meanwhile his eyes were burning. "Of course, you can't expect me to marry you now, but I'll keep you in better style than you've ever known. There's nothing mean about me." [159]

Bela raised her eyes and dropped them quickly. There was a spark in their depths that would have warned a man less vain than Joe. She said nothing.

"Well, is it a go?" he breathlessly demanded.

"I don't know," said Bela slowly. Her voice gave nothing away. "I got get married if I can."

"Who would marry you now?" cried Joe.

"I don't know. Somebody, I guess. Pretty near every man I see want marry me."

Joe sneered. "Not now! Not when this gets about."

"Maybe the big man want marry me," she suggested. "Or the black one."

Joe laughed scornfully. At the same time a horrible anxiety attacked him. Those two were old; they couldn't afford to be so particular as he. One of them might——

"Any'ow I not go wit' you now," said Bela. "Plenty time."

"You'd better look out for yourself," Joe burst out, "or you'll get in worse than you are already. You'll be sorry then."

"All right," she returned calmly.

Joe sat fuming. Anger and balked desire made his comely, brutal face look absurd and piteous. It was like a wilful child denied the moon. Joe could never resist his emotions. Whether or not Bela had guessed it, it was bound to come.

"Oh, hell!" he cried. "Look here, if Jack or Shand offer to marry you, I'll match them, see? Is that a go? You'd sooner have me, wouldn't you? I'm young."

Bela neither smiled nor frowned. "I think about it," she said.

"No you don't!" he cried. "You've got to promise now or I'll withdraw it!" [160]

"I tell you somesing," said Bela, concealing the wicked sparkle in her eye. "I not want the big man. Not want the black man either. I tell you, if I marry any of the three, I tak' you."

Conceited Joe swallowed it whole. "I'm satisfied," he cried. "By George, I'd like to bind it with a kiss!"

"Look out, you turn us over," said Bela coolly. "The water moch cold."

Joe was quite carried away. "You beauty!" he cried. "Your skin is like cream. Your hair is like black velvet. You sit there as proud as a leading lady. I can't wait for you!"

"I ain't promise not'ing yet," said Bela warningly.

Johnny Gagnon's place was at the strategic point on Musquasepi where the forest ended and the meadows began. In the winter-time the freighters left the ice here, and headed straight across the bottom lands for the lake.

Gagnon kept a stopping-house for the freighters. It was the last house on the route to the head of the lake seventy-five miles away, excepting the shack at Nine-Mile Point, which had never been occupied until Big Jack and his party camped there.

Besides being a strategic point, it was one of those natural sites for a homestead that men pick out when there is a whole land to choose from. The bank rolled up gradually from the water's edge, and Gagnon's whole establishment was revealed from the river—dwelling, bunk-house, stable—all built of logs and crouching low on the ground as if for warmth.

The buildings had been there so long they had become a part of the landscape. The log walls were weathered to a silvery grey, and the vigorously sprouting sod roofs repeated the note of the surrounding grass. [161]

On this particular afternoon there was something afoot at Johnny Gagnon's. The different members of the large family were running about like ants in a disturbed hill. A cloud of dust was issuing from the house door, propelled by a resolute broom.

Innumerable pails of water were being carried up from the river, and windows and children washed impartially. One of the big boys was burning rubbish; another was making a landing-stage of logs on the muddy shore.

In any other place such a spasm of house-cleaning need excite no remark, but among the happy-go-lucky natives of the north it is portentous. Clearly a festival was imminent.

Such was the sight that met the eyes of those in the rowboat and the dugout as they came around the bend above. Johnny Gagnon himself came running down to meet them. He was a little man, purely Indian in feature and colouring, but betraying a vivacity which suggested the French ancestor who had provided him with a surname.

The surname lasts longer than most white characteristics. It is a prized possession up north. If a man has a surname he votes.

Johnny was a vivacious Indian. Such anomalies are not uncommon on the border of the wilderness. His sloe-black eyes were prone to snap and twinkle, and his lips to part over dazzling teeth.

His hands helped out his tongue in the immemorial Latin style. Though he was the father of four strapping sons and several marriageable girls, not to speak of the smaller fry, time had left surprisingly few marks on him. [162]

Johnny held up his hands at the sight of Sam, bound. He was delighted to have this additional excitement added to his brimming store.

"Wa! a prisoner!" he cried. "Good! we will have a trial. You must tell me all. You come back just right. Big tam! Big tam! Never was so much fun in my house before!"

"What's up?" asked Jack.

"Big crowd comin' to-morrow!" replied the excited Johnny Gagnon. "Trackin' up rapids to-day. Send a fellow up ahead ask my wife bake plenty bread."

"Who all is it?"

Johnny counted them off on his fingers: "Bishop Lajeunesse and two priests. Every year come to marry and baptize. That's three. Four, Indian agent. Him come pay Indians gov'ment money by the treaty. Got big bag money. Five, gov'ment doctor. He look at him for sick. It is in the treaty. Six, seven, Sergeant Coulson and 'not'er policeman. They go round wit' agent and ask all if any man do wrong to him. That is seven white men comin'! But wait! But wait! There is something else beside!"

"What?" asked Jack.

"A white woman!" announced Johnny triumphantly.

Bela frowned and stole a side glance at Sam. The men having lately come from the land of white women were not especially impressed.

"Only one white woman here before," Johnny went on. "Her comp'ny trader's wife. This her sister. Call Mees Mackall. Her old, but got no 'osban' at all. That is fonny thing I t'ink. Boys say all tam talk, laugh, nod head. Call her chicadee-woman."

Bela looked relieved at this description.

Sam, hearing of the expected company, smiled. Surely, with the law and the church at hand, an honest man had nothing to fear. He glanced at Bela a little triumphantly, but she made her face [163] inscrutable to him.

Somewhat to his surprise he perceived that Jack and the other men were also pleased at the news. There was something here he did not understand.

CHAPTER XIV [164]

AT JOHNNY GAGNON'S

Sam, tied hand and foot, was confined in the bunk-house at Gagnon's. All the heavy hours of his imprisonment were charged up against Bela, and by morning the score was a heavy one.

Big Jack, or one of the other men, was always in the room or at the door, and Bela had no opportunity to approach the prisoner.

Bela slept in the main house with the Gagnon girls. Before the general turning in that night Big Jack and Black Shand each contrived to separate her from the others long enough to make a proposal similar to Joe's. In each case Bela returned the same answer.

Next morning they were all early astir. The Gagnon boys put on clean blue-gingham shirts and red woollen sashes, and the girls tied their sable locks with orange and cerise ribbons. The cheeks of both boys and girls bore a high polish.

Squaw Gagnon tacked up lace window curtains for a final touch and brought out a square of carpet for the bishop to rest his reverend feet upon. To this household it was the greatest day in the year, and the sun was shining like the shiniest-cheeked Gagnon of them all. The younger children kept careful watch on Sam. He was an attraction fortuitously added to the big show.

Johnny Gagnon himself was the most excited of the family. [165]

"You come jus' right!" he was continually exclaiming to Jack. "They stop all day now. Have trial in my house. Maybe stay to-night, too. I wish we had a fiddle. We could dance. But we can slap and sing any'ow."

The girls giggled delightedly at this suggestion.

Each one of the white men thought: "Dance at my wedding, maybe!" and glanced covertly at Bela. Bela looked out of the window.

"What! dance with the bishop here?" said Jack, affecting to be scandalized.

"Sure!" cried Johnny. "Bishop Lajeunesse no long-chin *religieux*. Bishop say let yo'ng folks have a good time. Laugh and mak' fun wherever he go. He is a man!"

Early as they were they no sooner finished breakfast than they heard a shrill hail from down river. Every soul about the place excepting Sam dropped what he was about and scampered down to the water's edge.

Presently around the bend below appeared the tracking crew, slipping in the ooze, scrambling over fallen trunks, plunging through willows. Behind them trailed the long, thin line that must be kept taut, whatever the obstruction. Finally the York boat poked its nose lazily into view like a gigantic duck.

The other four of the crew stood upon the cargo with long poles to fend her off the shore, and the steersman was mounted on a little platform astern wielding an immense sweep. In the waist stood the passengers. As the celebrities were recognized a shout went up from the shore.

There was the bishop with red buttons, and the ordinary priests with black. There were the police in their gay, scarlet tunics; the Indian agent with his bag of money, and the doctor with his bag of [166] tools. Finally there was the blue hat with ostrich feathers that was already famous in the country.

Before the summer was out, news of that hat travelled all the way to the Arctic Ocean. Any one of these passengers would have made a gala day for Johnny Gagnon's family. To have them all at once was almost more than they could take in.

The tracking crew was on the opposite bank. Coiling up their line and jumping aboard, all hands poled her across. The bishop, gathering his cassock around his waist, was the first to leap ashore.

He was a little man, radiating goodness and fun. He had round, ruddy cheeks, looking as if the half of an apple had been glued to each side of his face, and a spreading, crinkly brown beard.

"*Bienvenue! Bienvenue!*" Cried Johnny Gagnon with sweeping obeisances.

"Well, Johnny, have you got a new one for me?" asked his lordship with a twinkle.

The river bank became a scene of delightful confusion; black cassocks, red tunics, orange ribbons, and blue ostrich feathers all mingled. The two slender boy priests showed strange hirsute adornments. One had a face like a round white doily with brown fringe; the other was spotted with hair like new grass.

The agent and the doctor were ordinary looking men. They did not add to the picturesqueness of the scene, but each carried a bag which was charged with romance for the natives.

The two policemen were almost as young as the boy-priests, but bigger and redder and clean-shaven. Here the eyes of the Gagnon girls lingered longest.

The greatest sensation, naturally, was created by the blue hat. It was the last to come ashore. It [167]
lingered on the gunwale with an appealing turn manwards until a red arm was offered on one side, a black arm on the other, whereupon it hopped ashore with a coy wag to the right and to the left. It was not hard to see why the boatmen had christened her the "chicadee-woman."

Young Joe, catching a glimpse of the face beneath, muttered "School-marm!" impolitely.

The natives, however, made no such distinctions. To them she was just a white woman, only the second they had ever seen. They had no means of knowing whether they came more beautiful than this.

Miss Mackall, booted, hatted, and corseted in town, was the headliner of the show.

The experience to one all her life lost in a crowd of women was novel and a little intoxicating. The blue hat waggled and cocked alarmingly. The wearer, exulting in the consciousness that everybody was looking at her, saw nothing of this strange land she was in.

As soon as the general hand-shaking was over, Big Jack addressed himself to Sergeant Coulson. "I've got a prisoner for you, sergeant."

Coulson instantly stiffened into an arm of the law. "What charge?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly the legal name of it. He carried off a girl against her will. This girl!"—pointing to Bela. "Regularly tied her up and carried her off in a canoe, and kept her prisoner on an island in the lake."

The policeman was startled under his military air. "Is this true?" he asked Bela.

Bela, without saying anything, allowed him to suppose that it was. [168]

"We'll have a hearing at once," said Coulson. "Gagnon, can we use your shack?"

Could he use it!

"Aristide! Michel! Maria!" shrieked Johnny. "Run, you turtles! Carry ever't'ing outside. Tak' down the stove!"

Bishop Lajeunesse went to Bela with kind eyes.

"My poor girl!" he said in her own tongue. "Have you had a bad time?"

"Wait," murmured Bela deprecatingly. "I tell everything in there."

"Mercy! Abducted!" cried Miss Mackall with an inquisitive stare. "She's bold enough about it. Not a trace of shame!"

"I'm afraid this will hardly be suitable for you to hear," murmured the doctor, who had constituted himself one of Miss Mackall's gallants. "Will you wait in the boat?"

"A trial! I wouldn't miss it for worlds," she retorted. "Which is the criminal? One of her own sort, I suppose. Fancy! carrying her off!"

Within a few minutes the Gagnon household effects were heaped out of doors, and the stage set for the "trial." It was strange how the squatty little shack with its crooked windows and doors instantly took on the look of a court.

All the seats were ranged across one end between the two doors for the policemen and the guests of honour.

Both doors were left open to give light to the proceedings, and a great bar of sunlight fell athwart the dusty floor.

Coulson sat in the middle with a table before him, and the other policeman at his left with note-book and pencil to take down the evidence. Both youngsters as the representatives of authority [169]
wore an air of gravity beyond their years.

Miss Mackall sat at the other side of Coulson, ever making play with the ostrich feathers. The

doctor and the Indian agent were next her.

At the other end of the line sat Bishop Lajeunesse. He had sent the boy-priests back to the boat to repack the baggage. Whatever their feelings, they had obeyed with a cheerful air.

Of all those present only the bishop showed any compassion. Bela stood near him, and he occasionally leaned forward and patted her arm. She received it with an odd look, at once grateful and apprehensive.

The body of the room was filled with the natives, including the Gagnon family, the boatmen, and the servants, all squatting on the floor facing the table of justice. While they waited for the appearance of the prisoner they occupied themselves with Miss Mackall's gloves and parasol, and the artificial bouquet at her girdle. No such articles as these had ever been seen before on Musquasepi.

Sam was led in with his hands tied before him. He held his head high. Jack left him standing in front of the table, and Jack, Shand, and Joe took up positions by the door across the room from Bela.

Feeling their importance in the scene, all looked a little self-righteous. Occasionally they relieved their feelings by spitting outside the door. Sam did not look greatly concerned; his conscience was clear. True, he felt the degradation of the bound wrists, but must he not presently be triumphantly vindicated? He had been waiting for this moment all night.

"Mercy! Not at all what I expected!" whispered Miss Mackall to the doctor. "The handsome wretch! Fancy! Carrying her off like what do you call him. Much too good for her. It's her they should punish!" [170]

The proceedings were opened by a formal questioning.

"Name?"

"Samuel Gladding."

"Age?"

"Twenty-four."

"Nativity?"

"American. Born in Orange, New Jersey."

"Citizen of Canada?"

"No."

"First came to Canada?"

"February 18 last."

"Arrived at Caribou Lake?"

"May 3. Travelling with Messrs. Skinner, Marr, Hagland, and Fraser in the capacity of cook."

During the course of the questioning the prisoner gradually apprehended that the sentiment of the room was against him. The suspicion crept into his mind that it might not be so easy as he had thought to clear himself.

"You are charged with having abducted this girl Bela," Coulson went on, "and keeping her a prisoner on Eagle Island. It is your right to waive examination, in which case I shall send you out to Miwasa Landing for trial. Do you wish to proceed?"

"Yes," said Sam.

Young Coulson's legal formula failed him here. "Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" he asked quite humanly.

As Sam was about to defend himself it suddenly rushed over him what a comic figure he would make, accusing a girl of abducting him. He closed his mouth and blushed crimson. Big Jack and his pals smiled at each other meaningly. [171]

"Well?" demanded Coulson.

"It's not true," mumbled Sam.

"Didn't you go with her?"

"Yes—but——"

"But what?"

"I had to."

"What do you mean?"

There was no help for it.

"It was she carried me off!" Sam burst out.

There was an instant's silence in the room. The white men stared at the unexpected answer. The red people hardly understood it.

"What do you mean?" demanded Coulson, scowling.

"Just what I said!" cried Sam recklessly. "Jumped on me when I was asleep; tied me hand and foot, and bundled me in her canoe."

There was a great burst of derisive laughter. The decorum of the court was entirely destroyed. Never had such an original defence been heard. Coulson and his clerk laughed with the rest. Even the bishop had to laugh, albeit indignantly. Jack, Shand, and Joe fairly doubled up by the door. Sam stood through it, blushing and glaring around at his tormentors.

"I believe him!" cried Miss Mackall; but nobody heard her.

When order was restored, Coulson said with a shake in his throat: "You hardly expect us to believe that, do you?"

"I don't care whether you believe it or not!" returned Sam hotly. "Let me question her, and I'll show you. I guess that's my right, isn't it?"

"Certainly," said Coulson stiffly. "Stand aside for a while, and let her tell her story without interruption. You can question her when she is through."

All the white people except the white woman looked at the girl with sympathetic eyes. Bela's face [172]
was pale, and one hand was pressed to her breast to control the agitated tenant there.

To be obliged to speak out before so many white people was a terrible ordeal for the girl of the lake. She suspected, too, that there would be some difficult questions to answer—and there was no Musq'oosis to advise her. Alas, if she had taken his advice she would not have been here at all!

"Go ahead," said Coulson sympathetically.

Bela drew a steadying breath and raised her head. Pointing at Sam with unconscious dramatic effect, she said clearly: "He speak true. I carry him off."

Again there was a silence in the court, while the spectators gaped in pure astonishment. The three men by the door scowled in an ugly fashion. Sam himself was surprised by her candour. He looked at her suspiciously, wondering what she was preparing for him.

Coulson regretted his sympathy. "What do you mean?" he demanded sharply. "Is this a joke?"

Bela shook her head. "I tie him up and tak' him away lak he say."

"Then what is all this about? What did you do it for?" asked the policeman.

This was the question Bela dreaded. A stubborn look came over her face. "He is my friend," she said. "I hear those ot'er men say they hate him. Say they goin' kill him and nobody know. I t'ink if I tell Sam that, he jus' laugh. So I got tak' him away myself to save him."

The white spectators leaned forward, mystified and breathlessly attentive. Here was a brand-new story which did not fit any of the time-honoured court-room situations. The bishop looked sad. He suspected from her face that she was lying. Jack, Shand, and Joe could not contain their angry [173]
exclamations.

"It's a lie!" cried Jack. "The cook was nothing to us, neither one way or the other. Of course, after we thought he carried her off, we were sore, naturally."

"She's just trying to shield him now!" cried Joe furiously.

"Well, I can't hold him if she doesn't want him held," said Coulson.

"She told me yesterday she wanted him punished," insisted Jack.

"One moment," said Coulson. "I'll get to the bottom of this." He returned to Bela with a severe air. "Is that true?"

"Yes; I tell him that," admitted Bela.

"What did you do that for?"

"He"—pointing to Sam—"run away from me." Here the spectators smiled. "I not strong enough to catch him. So I mak' them catch him. I mak' them bring him to the police so all is known. They cannot hurt him if all is known."

The bishop, watching Bela, was sadly puzzled. Poor Bela herself, if he had known, was confused between the truths and the untruths.

"Why should they want to hurt him?" demanded Coulson.

"I don' know." Here she was evasive again.

"What were you doing in their camp in the first place?" he asked.

"I jus' travellin'," said Bela.

"But you stayed there long enough to make friends. How long were you there?"

"Three—four days."

"What did you stay for?"

"Not'ing," said Bela sullenly. [174]

"That's no answer. You must have known the risks a girl ran in a camp of men."

"I tak' care of myself all right."

"Answer my question," he insisted. "What did you stay there for?"

"I not stay in their house," she parried.

"Never mind that. What did you stay around there for?"

Bela was cornered. True to her wild nature, her eyes turned desirously toward the open door. The bishop laid a hand on her arm.

"Tell the truth, my daughter," he said gently. "No one shall harm you."

Bela turned to him. "I am 'mos' white," she explained, as if he were the only reasonable person present. "I lak be wit' white people."

Here a titter passed over the native audience at what they considered her presumption. Bela's eyes flashed scorn on them. She forgot her terrors.

"I am not one of these!" she cried. "I am white! I want marry a white man!"

An odd start of surprised laughter escaped the white spectators. They glanced at each other to make sure they had heard aright.

"Oh!" cried Coulson. "Now we're getting down to it. The prisoner here was the one you picked out?"

"Yes!" answered Bela defiantly. "He is the best man."

"Well——" exclaimed Coulson.

Suddenly the richness of the situation broke on the spectators, and a gale of laughter swept through the room.

The bishop laughed, too, though he patted Bela's arm encouragingly. At least, she was telling the truth now. It was too extraordinary to be otherwise. [175]

Only the three men by the door did not laugh. With eyes full of hate, they glared at the girl and at the prisoner.

Big Jack, the most astute of the three, was the first to recover himself. It occurred to him that unless the rest of the story were prevented from coming out, their humiliation would be complete and abject.

With a glance of warning at his companions, he threw back his head and laughed louder than any. Shand and Joe, comprehending, followed suit. Their laughter had a bitter ring, but in a gale of laughter the difference passed unnoticed.

The prisoner turned white to his lips. He preserved an unnatural calmness. Only his wild, pained eyes betrayed the blinding, maddening rage that was consuming him.

Bela, whose eyes were only for him, turned pale to match. "Sam," she whispered imploringly.

"Cut me loose," he said thickly.

She looked about her. One passed her a knife, with which she cut his bonds, all the time searching his face with her terrified eyes, seeking to discover what he meant to do.

"I suppose I am free to go," he said stiffly to Coulson.

"Sure!" answered the policeman. He was kindly now—grateful, indeed, for the magnificent joke which had been provided.

"Sam! Sam!" Bela murmured piteously.

The spectators eagerly watched for the final scene of the humorous and original drama. Bela, unconscious of everybody but one man, made a lovely, appealing figure.

"Sam," she whispered, "now you know I your friend. Don' go! Wait little while. Sam—here is the bishop. Marry me, and let them laugh!" [176]

Sam flung off the timid arm. "Marry you!" he cried with a quiet bitterness that burned like lye. "I'd sooner jump into the river!"

Empty-handed and hatless, he strode out of the shack.

"Sam, wait!" she cried, despairingly flying after.

CHAPTER XV [177]

THE NORTH SHORE

Into the bay that occupies the north-easterly corner of Caribou Lake empties a creek too small to have a name. To the left of its mouth, as one faces the lake, ends the long, pine-clad dune that stretches along the bottom of the lake from the intake of Musquasepi.

To the right as the shore turns westward the land rises a little and the forest begins. Back of the beach the little creek is masked by thickly springing willows.

An hour after the sun had passed the meridian the branches of the willows were softly parted, and Bela's pale face looked through, her eyes tense with anxiety. She searched the lake shore right and left. The wide expanse of sunny water and the bordering shore were empty.

Reassured, she came from behind the bushes, walking in the creek, and splashed down to the beach, still keeping wary eyes about her. She carried her gun in one hand, and over the other shoulder the carcass of a wild goose hung limply.

Standing in the creek, she anxiously searched the sand of the beach for tracks. Finding none, a breath of relief escaped her. She flung the dead goose in the sand. From this position she could see down the beach as far as the intake of the little river, two miles or more away.

Careless of the icy water flowing over her feet, she stood for a while straining her keen, anxious [178]
eyes in this direction. Finally she made out a tiny dark spot moving toward her on the sand.

She retreated up the creek and crouched behind the willows in the pose of lifeless stillness she had inherited from the red side of the house. The red people in the first place learned it from the wild creatures. She watched through the leaves.

A coyote trotting with his airy gait came along the top of the dune, looking for ill-considered trifles. He squatted on his haunches a couple of hundred yards away, and his tongue hung out.

He saw the dead goose below, a rich prize; but he also saw Bela, whom no human eyes could have discovered. He hoped she might go away. He was prepared to wait until dark if necessary. However, the approach of another two-legged figure along the beach behind him presently compelled him to retreat down the other side of the dune.

Sam appeared trudging through the sand, bare-headed, coatless, tight-lipped. His eyes likewise were fastened eagerly on the dead goose. Reaching it, he stirred it with his foot. Dropping to his knees, he smelled of it. So far so good. Presently he discovered the cause of its death, a wing shattered by a bullet.

Seeing no tracks anywhere near, he concluded that it had fallen wounded from the sky. As such it was treasure trove. He set to work to gather bits of driftwood, and started a fire. His bright eyes and the celerity of his movements testified to his hunger.

From her hiding-place Bela watched him with avid eyes. No mask on her face now. The eyes brooded over him, over the fair hair, the bare throat, the pale, hard young face, that showed the lassitude following on violent anger. [179]

Her whole spirit visibly yearned toward him—but she was learning self-control in a hard school. When he began to pluck the goose she set her teeth hard and stole silently away up-stream.

In the Indian village beside Hah-wah-sepi, little, crooked Musq'oosis was squatting at the door of his teepee, making a fish net. This was work his nimble fingers could still perform better than any in the tribe. Meanwhile, he smoked and dwelt on the serene reminiscences of a well-spent life.

While he worked and meditated nothing in the surrounding scene escaped the glances of his keen, old eyes. For some time he had been aware of a woman's figure hiding behind the willows across the stream, and he knew it must be Bela, for there was no canoe on that side, but he would not give her any sign.

In Musq'oosis, as in all his race, there was a coy streak. Let the other person make the first move was his guiding maxim.

Finally the mournful, idiotic cry of a loon was raised across the stream. This was a signal they had used before. Musq'oosis started with well-simulated surprise, in case she should be watching him, and, rising, waddled soberly to his dugout. Nobody in the village above paid any particular attention to him. He crossed the stream.

Bela stepped into the bow of his boat. No greeting was exchanged. Each had the air of having

parted but a few minutes before. Bela had learned Musq'oosis's own manner from him. If he wouldn't ask questions, neither would she volunteer information. Thus the two friends played the little comedy out.

Sitting at the door of his teepee, Bela said: "Let me eat. I have nothing since I get up to-day." [180]

He put bread and smoked moose meat before her, and went on knotting his cords with an unconcerned air.

By and by Bela began to tell her story with the sullen, self-conscious air of a child expecting a scolding. But as she went on she was carried away by it, and her voice became warm and broken with emotion. Musq'oosis, working away, gave no sign, but the still turn of his head persuaded her he was not missing anything.

When she came to tell how she had fallen upon Sam while he slept the old man was betrayed into a sharp movement.

"What for you do that?" he demanded.

Bela came to a pause and hung her head. Tears dropped on her hands. "I don' know," she murmured. "He look so pretty sleepin' on the sand—so pretty! Moon shine in his face. I am pain in my heart. Don' know w'at to do, want him so bad. I t'ink I die if I got go 'way wit'out him. I t'ink —I don' know w'at I t'ink. Want him, that's all!"

"Tcha! White woman!" said Musq'oosis disgustedly.

During the rest of the tale he muttered and frowned and wagged his head impatiently. When she came to the scene of the hearing in Gagnon's shack he could no longer contain himself.

"Fool!" he cried. "I tell you all w'at to do. Many times I tell you not let a man see you want him. But you go ask him marry you before all the people! What you come to me for now?"

Bela hung her head in silence.

"You got white woman's sickness!" cried the old man with quaint scorn. "Tcha! *Love!*"

"Well, I am 'mos' white," muttered Bela sullenly. "Why you not tell me 'bout this sickness? Then I look out." [181]

"There is no cure for a fool," growled Musq'oosis.

Bela finally raised her head.

"I am cure of my sickness now," she said, scowling. "I hate him!"

"Hate!" said the old man scornfully. "Your face is wet."

She dashed the tears from her cheeks. "When he ran out of Johnny Gagnon's," she went on, "I run after. I hold on him. He curse me. He throw me down. Since then I hate him. I lak make him hurt lak me. I want see him hurt bad!"

The old man looked incredulous. Questioning her sharply, he drew out the incident of the dead goose. He laughed scornfully.

"You hate him, but you got put food in his trail."

Bela hung her head. "I hate him!" she repeated doggedly.

Musq'oosis filled his pipe, and puffed at it meditatively for a while.

"You could get him," he said at last.

Bela looked at him with a new hope.

"But you got do w'at I tell you. Crying' won't get him. A man hates a cryin' woman. Mak' a dry face and let on you don' care 'bout him at all. All tam laugh at him. You can't do that, I guess. Too moch fool!"

Bela frowned resentfully. "I can do it," she declared.

"All right," said Musq'oosis, "Let him go now. Keep away from him a while. Let him forget his mad."

"All right," agreed Bela.

"Now go see your mot'er," commanded Musq'oosis. "She sicken for you. She is white, too." [182]

Bela, however, made no move to go. She was painstakingly plucking blades of grass.

"Well, wa't you waitin' for?" demanded Musq'oosis.

"Sam walkin' this way," she said with an inscrutable face. "Got no blanket. Be cold to-night, I think."

"Wa! More foolishness!" he cried. "Let him shake a little. Cure his hot mad maybe."

"White man get sick with cold," persisted Bela. "Not lak us. What good my waitin', if he get sick?"

Musq'oosis held up both his hands. "There is not'ing lak a woman!" he cried. "Go to your mot'er. I will paddle by the lake and give him a rabbit robe."

Bela's eyes flashed a warm look on him. She got up without speaking, and hastened away.

About half-past nine, while it was still light, Sam found himself walked out. He built a fire on the pine needles above the stony beach and sat down with his back against a tree. The goose provided him with another meal. He was two hours' journey beyond the mouth of Hah-wah-sepi.

Wading across the bar of that stream, he had guessed his proximity to the Indian village as described by Bela, but his pride would not allow him to apply there for shelter.

He had no reason to suppose that Bela had already got home, but he feared she might arrive before he could get away. Anyhow, he had plenty to eat, he told himself; it would be strange if he couldn't last a night or two without a covering.

He lay down by his fire, but, tired as he was, he could get no rest. Whichever way he lay, a cold chill from the earth struck to his marrow. He fell into a wretched, half-waking condition, [183] tormented by images he could not control.

When he edged close enough to the fire to feel its warmth it was only to be brought leaping to his feet by sparks burning through his clothes. He finally gave it up and sat against the tree, hardening himself like an Indian to wait for dawn. His fagged nerves cried for tobacco. He had lost his pipe with his coat.

The lake stretched before him still and steely in the twilight. To-night the sun had withdrawn himself modestly and expeditiously, and the clear, cold face of the sky had an ominous look. The world was terribly empty. Sam received a new conception of solitude, and a heavy hand of discouragement was laid on his heart.

Suddenly he perceived that he was not alone. Close under the pine-walled shore a dugout was swimming toward him with infinite grace and smoothness. At the first sight his breast contracted, for it seemed to have sprung out of nothingness—then his heart joyfully leaped up. At such a moment anything human was welcome. A squat little figure was huddled amidships, swinging a paddle from side to side with long, stringy arms.

Sam perceived that the paddler was the aged hunchback who had once visited the camp at Nine-Mile Point across the lake. "Old Man of the Lake" they had called him. They had not learned his name.

A certain air of mystery enveloped him. When he stepped out on the stones with his long hair, his bent back, and his dingy blanket capote he looked like a mediæval grotesque—yet he had a dignity of his own, too.

"How?" he said, extending his hand.

Sam, dreading the inevitable questions, received him a little nervously. [184]

"Glad to see you. Sit down by the fire. You travel late."

"I old," observed Musq'oosis calmly. "I go when men sleep."

He made himself comfortable by the fire. To Sam's thankfulness he did not appear to notice the white man's impoverished condition. He had excellent manners.

"Are you going far?" asked Sam.

The old man shrugged. "Jus' up and down," he replied. "I lak look about."

He drew out his pipe. To save himself Sam could not help glancing enviously toward it.

"You got no pipe?" asked the Indian.

"Lost it," admitted Sam ruefully.

"I got 'not'er pipe," said Musq'oosis. From the "fire-bag" hanging from his waist he produced a red-clay bowl such as the natives use, and a bundle of new reed stems. He fitted a reed to the bowl, and passed it to Sam. A bag of tobacco followed.

"A gift," he stated courteously.

"I say," objected Sam, blushing, "I haven't anything to give in return."

The old man waved his hand. "Plaintee tam mak' Musq'oosis a gift some day," he said.

Sam looked up at the name. "So you're Musq'oosis?" he asked, hardening a little.

"W'at you know about me?" queried the other mildly.

"Oh, nothing!" returned Sam. "Somebody told me about you."

"I guess it was Bela," said Musq'oosis. With kindly guile he added: "Where is she?"

"You can search me!" muttered Sam. [185]

The tobacco was unexpectedly fragrant. "Ah, good!" exclaimed Sam with a glance of surprise.

"'Imperial Mixture,'" said Musq'oosis complacently. "I old. Not want moch. So I buy the best tobacco."

They settled down for a good talk by the fire. Musq'oosis continued to surprise Sam. On his visit to Nine-Mile Point the old man had been received with good-natured banter, which he returned in kind. Alone with Sam, he came out in quite a different character.

Sam made the discovery that a man may have dark skin yet be a philosopher and a gentleman. Musq'oosis talked of all things from tobacco to the differences in men.

"White man lak beaver. All tam work don' give a damn!" he observed. "Red man lak bear. Him lazy. Fat in summer, starve in winter. Got no sense at all."

Sam laughed. "You've got sense," he said.

Musq'oosis shrugged philosophically. "I not the same lak ot'er men. I got crooked back, weak legs. I got work sittin' down. So my head is busy."

He smoked with a reminiscent look.

"When I yo'ng I feel moch bad for cause I got crooked back. But when I old I think there is good in it. A strong man is lak a moose. Wa! So big and swift and 'an'some. All tam so busy, got no tam t'ink wit' his head inside. So w'en he get old his son put him down. He is poor then. But a weak man he got notin' to do but look lak eagle at ev'ryt'ing and remember what he see. So w'en he is old he rich inside. W'en a man get old bad turn to good. Me, w'en I was yo'ng I sore for cause no woman want me. Now I glad I got no old wife beat a drum wit' her tongue in my teepee." [186]

"Women! You're right there!" cried Sam explosively. "They're no good. They're savages! Women confuse and weaken a man; spoil him for a man's work. I'm done with them!"

A slow smile lighted Musq'oosis ugly old face. "W'en a man talk lak that," he remarked, "I t'ink pretty soon some woman goin' get him sure."

"Never!" cried Sam. "Not me!"

"I t'ink so," persisted Musq'oosis. "Man say woman bad, all bad. Come a woman smile so sweet, he surprise; he say this one different from the ot'ers."

"Oh, I know how it is with most fellows!" admitted Sam. "Not with me. I've had my lesson."

"Maybe," agreed Musq'oosis, politely allowing the matter to drop.

By and by the old man yawned. "I t'ink I sleep little while," he said. "Can I sleep by your fire?"

"Sure!" returned Sam. "Make yourself at home."

Musq'oosis brought his blanket from the dugout. "You goin' sleep, too?" he asked.

"In a bit," replied Sam uneasily.

"Where your blanket?"

"Oh, I lost that, too," confessed Sam, blushing.

"I got a rabbit-skin robe," said Musq'oosis.

Returning to his boat, he brought Sam one of the soft, light coverings peculiar to the country. The foundation was a wide-meshed net of cord, to which had been tied hundreds of the fragile, downy pelts. Sam could stick his finger anywhere through the interstices, yet it was warmer than a blanket, double its weight.

"But this is valuable," protested Sam. "I can't take it."

"You goin' to the head of the lake," said Musq'oosis. "I want trade it at French outfit store. Tak' it to Mahwoolee, the trader. Say to him Musq'oosis send it for trade." [187]

"Aren't you afraid I might steal it?" asked Sam curiously.

"Steal?" said the old man, surprised. "Nobody steal here. What's the use? Everything is known. If a man steal everybody know it. Where he goin' to go then?"

Sam continued to protest against using the robe, but Musq'oosis, waving his objections aside, calmly lay down in his blanket and closed his eyes. Sam presently followed suit. The rabbit-skin robe acted like a charm. A delicious warmth crept into his weary bones, and sleep overmastered his senses like a delicious perfume.

When he awoke the sun was high over the lake, and Musq'oosis had gone. A bag of tobacco was lying in his place.

At this era the "settlement" at the head of Caribou Lake consisted of the "French outfit," the "company post," the French Mission, the English Mission, and the police barracks, which last housed as many as three troopers.

These various establishments were strung around the shore of Beaver Bay for a distance of several miles. A few native shacks were attached to each. The principal group of buildings was comprised in the company post, which stood on a hill overlooking the bay, and still wore a military air, though the palisades had been torn down these many years.

The French outfit, the rival concern, was a much humbler affair. It stood half-way on the short stream which connects Beaver Bay with the lake proper, and was the first establishment reached by the traveller from outside. It consisted of two little houses built of lumber from the mission [188] sawmill; the first house contained the store, the other across the road was known as the "Kitchen."

Mahooley pointed to them with pride as the only houses north of the landing built of boards, but they had a sad and awkward look there in the wilderness, notwithstanding.

Within the store of the French outfit, Stiffy, the trader, was audibly totting up his accounts in his little box at the rear, while Mahooley, his associate, sat with his chair tipped back and his heels on the cold stove. Their proper names were Henry Stiff and John Mahool, but as Stiffy and Mahooley they were known from Miwasa Landing to Fort Ochre.

The shelves of the store were sadly depleted; never was a store open for business with so little in it. A few canned goods of ancient vintages and a bolt or two of coloured cotton were all that could be seen. Nevertheless, the French outfit was a factor to be reckoned with.

There was no fur going now, and the astute Stiffy and Mahooley were content to let custom pass their door. Later on they would reach out for it.

Mahooley was bored and querulous. This was the dullest of dull seasons, for the natives were off pitching on their summer grounds, and travel from the outside world had not yet started.

Stiffy and Mahooley were a pair of "good hard guys," but here the resemblance ended. Stiffy was dry, scanty-haired, mercantile; Mahooley was noisy, red-faced, of a fleshly temperament, and a wag, according to his lights.

"I'd give a dollar for a new newspaper," growled Mahooley. [189]

"That's you, always grousin' for nothin' to do!" said his partner. "Why don't you keep busy like me?"

"Say, if I was like you I'd walk down to the river here and I'd get in the scow and I'd push off, and when I got in the middle I'd say, 'Lord, crack this nut if you can! It's too much for me!' and I'd step off."

"Ah, shut up! You've made me lose a whole column!"

"Go to hell!"

Thus they bickered endlessly to pass the time.

Suddenly the door opened and a stranger entered, a white man.

As a rule, the slightest disturbance of their routine was heralded in advance by "moccasin telegraph," and this was like a bolt from the blue. Mahooley's chair came to the floor with a thump.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said, staring.

Stiffy came quickly out of his little box to see what was up.

"How are you?" began the stranger youth diffidently.

"Who the hell are you?" asked Mahooley.

"Sam Gladding."

"Is the York boat in? Nobody told me."

"No, I walked around the lake."

Mahooley looked him over from his worn-out moccasins to his bare head. "Well, you didn't bring much with you," he observed.

Sam frowned to hide his rising blushes. He offered the rabbit-skin robe to create a diversion.

"Musq'oosis sent it, eh?" said Mahooley. "Put it on the counter."

Sam came back to the red-faced man. "Can you give me a job?" he asked firmly. [190]

"Hey, Stiffy," growled Mahooley. "Look what's askin' for a job!"

Stiffy laughed heartily. Thus he propitiated his irritable partner. It didn't cost anything. Sam, blushing, set his jaw and stood it out.

"What can you do?" Mahooley demanded.

"Any hard work."

"You don't look like one of these here Hercules."

"Try me."

"Lord, man!" said Mahooley. "Don't you see me here twiddling my thumbs. What for should I hire anybody? To twiddle 'em for me, maybe."

"You'll have a crowd here soon," persisted Sam. "Four men on their way in to take up land, and others following. There's a surveying gang coming up the river, too."

"Moreover, you ain't got good sense," Mahooley went on. "Comin' to a country like this without an outfit. Not so much as a chaw of bacon, or a blanket to lay over you nights. There ain't no free lunch up north, kid. What'll you do if I don't give you a job?"

"Go to the company," returned Sam.

"Go to the company?" cried Mahooley. "Go to hell, you mean. The company don't hire no tramps. That's a military organization, that is. Their men are hired and broke in outside. So what'll you do now?"

"I'll make out somehow," said Sam.

"There ain't no make out to it!" cried Mahooley, exasperated. "You ain't even got an axe to swing. There ain't nothin' for you but starve."

"Well, then, I'll bid you good day," said Sam stiffly.

"Hold on!" shouted the trader. "I ain't done with you yet. Is that manners, when you're askin' for a job?" [191]

"You said you didn't have anything," muttered Sam.

"Never mind what I said. I ast you what you were goin' to do."

The badgered one began to bristle a little. "What's that to you?" he asked, scowling.

"A whole lot!" cried Mahooley. "You fellows have no consideration. You're always comin' up here and starvin' on us. Do you think that's nice for me? Why, the last fellow left a little pile of white bones beside the trail on the way to my girl's house, after the coyotes picked him clean. Every time I go up there I got to turn my head the other way."

Sam smiled stiffly at Mahooley's humour.

"Can you cook?" the trader asked.

Sam's heart sank. "So-so," he said.

"Well, I suppose I've got to let you cook for us and for the gang that's comin'. You'll find everything in the kitchen across the road. Go and get acquainted with it. By Gad! you can be thankful you run up against a soft-hearted man like me."

Sam murmured an inquiry concerning wages.

"Wages!" roared Mahooley with an outraged air. "Stiffy, would you look at what's askin' for wages! Go on, man! You're damned lucky if you get a skinful of grub every day. Grub comes high up here!"

Sam reflected that it would be well to submit until he learned the real situation in the settlement. "All right," he said, and turned to go.

"Hold on," cried Mahooley. "You ain't ast what we'll have for dinner."

Sam waited for instructions.

"Well, let me see," said Mahooley. He tipped a wink in his partner's direction. "What's your fancy, Stiffy." [192]

"Oh, I leave the mean-you to you, Mahooley."

"Well, I guess you can give us some patty de foy grass, and squab on toast, and angel cake."

"Sure," said Sam. "How about a *biscuit Tortoni* for dessert?"

"Don't you give me no lip!" cried Mahooley.

CHAPTER XVI [193]

AT THE SETTLEMENT

On the fourth day thereafter the long tedium of existence in the settlement began to be broken in earnest. Before they could digest the flavour of one event, something else happened. In the afternoon word came down to Stiffy and Mahooley that the bishop had arrived at the French Mission, bringing the sister of the company trader's wife under his care.

Likewise the Indian agent and the doctor had come to the police post. The whole party had arrived on horseback from the Tepiskow Lake district, where they had visited the Indians. Their boat was held up down the lake by adverse winds.

Before Stiffy and Mahooley had a chance to see any of these arrivals or hear their news, quite an imposing caravan hove in view across the river from the store, and shouted lustily for the ferry.

There were four wagons, each drawn by a good team, beside half a dozen loose horses. The horses were in condition, the wagons well laden. The entire outfit had a well-to-do air that earned the traders' respect even from across the river. Of the four men, one carried his arm in a sling.

Stiffy and Mahooley ferried them across team by team in the scow they kept for the purpose. The four hardy and muscular travellers were men according to the traders' understanding. They used the same scornful, jocular, profane tongue. Their very names were a recommendation: Big Jack [194] Skinner, Black Shand Fraser, Husky Marr, and Young Joe Hagland, the ex-pugilist.

After the horses had been turned out to graze, they all gathered in the store for a gossip. The newcomers talked freely about their journey in, and its difficulties, avoiding only a certain period of their stay at Nine-Mile Point, and touching very briefly on their meeting with the Bishop. Something sore was hidden here.

When the bell rang for supper they trooped across the road. The kitchen in reality consisted of a mess-room downstairs with a dormitory overhead; the actual kitchen was in a lean-to behind. When the six men had seated themselves at the long trestle covered with oilcloth, the cook entered with a steaming bowl of rice.

Now, the cook had observed the new arrivals from the kitchen window, and had hardened himself for the meeting, but the travellers were unprepared. They stared at him, scowling. An odd silence fell on the table.

Mahooley looked curiously from one to another. "Do you know him?" he demanded.

Big Jack quickly recovered himself. He banged the table, and bared his big yellow teeth in a grin.

"On my soul, it's Sammy!" he cried. "How the hell did he get here? Here's Sammy, boys! What do you know about that! Sammy, the White Slave!"

A huge laugh greeted this sally. Sam set his jaw and doggedly went on bringing in the food.

"How are you, Sam?" asked Jack with mock solicitude. "Have you recovered from your terrible experience, poor fellow? My! My! That was an awful thing to happen to a good boy!"

Mahooley, laughing and highly mystified, demanded: "What's the con, boys?" [195]

"Ain't you heard the story?" asked Jack with feigned surprise. "How that poor young boy was carried off by a brutal girl and kep' prisoner on an island?"

"Go 'way!" cried Mahooley, delighted.

"Honest to God he was!" affirmed Jack.

Joe and Husky not being able to think of any original contributions of wit, rang all the changes on "Sammy, the White Slave!" with fresh bursts of laughter. Shand said nothing. He laughed harshly.

"Who was the girl?" asked Mahooley.

They told him.

"Bela Charley!" he exclaimed. "The best looker on the lake! She has the name of a man-hater."

"I dare say," said Jack with a serious air. "But his fatal beauty was too much for her. You got to hand it to him for his looks, boys," he added, calling general attention to the tight-lipped Sam in his apron. "This here guy, Apollo, didn't have much on our Sam."

A highly coloured version of the story followed. In it Big Jack and his mates figured merely as disinterested onlookers. The teller, stimulated by applause, surpassed himself. They could not contain their mirth.

"Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord!" cried Mahooley. "This is the richest I ever heard! It will never be forgotten!"

Sam went through with the meal, gritting his teeth, and crushing down the rage that bade fair to suffocate him. He disdained to challenge Jack's equivocal tale. The laughter of one's friends is hard enough to bear sometimes, still, it may be borne with a grin; but when it rings with scarcely concealed hate it stings like whips.

Sam was supposed to sit down at the table with them, but he would sooner have starved. The effort of holding himself in almost finished him. [196]

When finally he cleared away, Mahooley said: "Come on and tell us your side now."

"Go to hell!" muttered Sam, and walked out of the back door.

He strode up the road without knowing or caring where he was going. He was moved merely by the impulse to put distance between him and his tormentors.

Completely and terribly possessed by his rage, as youths are, he felt that it would kill him if he could not do something to fight his way out of the hateful position he was in. But what could he do? He couldn't even sleep out of doors because he lacked a blanket. His poverty had him by the heels.

He came to himself to find that he was staring at the buildings of the company establishment mounted on a little hill. This was a mile from the French outfit. The sight suggested a possible way out of his difficulties. With an effort he collected his faculties and turned in.

The buildings formed three sides of a square open to a view across the bay. On Sam's left was the big warehouse; on the other side the store faced it, and the trader's house, behind a row of neat palings, closed the top. All the buildings were constructed of squared logs whitewashed. A lofty flagpole rose from the centre of the little square, with a tiny brass cannon at its base.

Sam saw the trader taking the air on his veranda with two ladies. The neat fence, the gravel path, the flower-beds, had a strange look in that country. A keen feeling of homesickness attacked the unhappy Sam. As he approached the veranda one of the ladies seemed vaguely familiar. She glided toward him with extended hand. [197]

"Mr. Gladding!" she exclaimed. "So you got here before us. Glad to see you!" In a lower voice she added: "I wanted to tell you how much I sympathized with you the other day, but I had no chance. So glad you got out of it all right. I knew from the first that you were not to blame."

Sam was much taken aback. He bowed awkwardly. What did the woman want of him? Her over-impressive voice simply confused him. While she detained him, his eyes were seeking the trader.

"Can I speak to you?" he asked.

The other man rose. "Sure!" he said. "Come into the house."

He led the way into an office, and, turning, looked Sam over with a quizzical smile. His name was Gilbert Beattie, and he was a tall, lean, black Scotchman, in equal parts good-natured and grim.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"Give me a job," replied Sam abruptly. "Anything."

"Aren't you working for the French outfit?"

"For my keep. That will never get me anywhere. I might as well be in slavery."

"Sorry," said Beattie. "This place is run in a different way. 'The Service,' we call it. The young fellows are indentured by the head office and sent to school, so to speak. I can't hire anybody without authority. You should have applied outside."

Sam's lip curled a little. A lot of good it did telling him that now.

"You seem to have made a bad start all around," Beattie continued, meaning it kindly. "Running away with that girl, or whichever way it was. That is hardly a recommendation to an employer."

"It wasn't my fault!" growled Sam desperately. [198]

"Come, now," said Beattie, smiling. "You're not going to put it off on the girl, are you?"

Sam bowed, and made his way out of the house. As he returned down the path he saw Miss Mackall leaning on the gatepost, gazing out toward the sinking sun over Beaver Bay. There was no way of avoiding her.

She started slightly as he came behind her, and turned the face of a surprised dreamer. Seeing who it was, she broke into a winning smile, albeit a little sad, too. All this pretty play was lost on Sam, because he wasn't looking at her.

"It's you!" murmured Miss Mackall. "I had lost myself!"

Sam endeavoured to sidle around the gate. She laid a restraining hand upon it.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I want to speak to you. Oh, it's nothing at all, but I was sorry I had no chance the other day. It seemed to me as I looked at you standing there alone, that you needed a friend!"

"A friend!"—the word released a spring in Sam's overwrought breast. For the first time he looked full at her with warm eyes. God knew he needed a friend if ever a young man did.

Miss Mackall, observing the effect of her word, repeated it. "Such a humiliating position for a manly man to be placed in!" she went on.

Sam's heart expanded with gratitude. "That was kind of you," he murmured.

It did not occur to him that her position against the gatepost was carefully studied; that the smile was cloying, and that behind the inviting friendliness of her eyes lay the anxiety of a woman growing old. It was enough that she offered him kindness. Both the gift and the giver seemed beautiful. [199]

"There is a bond between us!" she went on, half coquettish, half serious. "I felt it from the first moment I saw you. Arriving together as we did, in a strange and savage country. Ugh!"—a delicate shudder here. "You and I are not like these people. We must be friends!"

A humiliated and sore-hearted youth will swallow more than this. Sam lingered by the gate. At the same time, somewhere within, was a dim consciousness that it was not very nutritious food.

But it went to the right spot. It renewed his faith in himself a little. It gave him courage to face the night that he knew awaited him in the dormitory.

Events still followed fast at the settlement. Next morning a native came in to Stiffy and Mahooley's with the information that two York boats were coming up the lake in company. One was enough to make a gala day. Later came word that they had landed at Grier's Point. This was two miles east.

Owing to low water in the lake, laden boats could not come closer in. The first was the police boat, with supplies for the post and for the Indian agent. The second carried the Government surveyors, six strong, and forty hundredweight of implements and grub.

Presently the surveyors themselves arrived at the store, making a larger party of white men than had ever before gathered on Caribou Lake. The natives were in force also. Seeming to spring from nowhere, they gathered in quite a big crowd outside the store and peered through the windows at their betters.

Within, a great gossip was in progress. Especially was the story of Sammy, the White Slave, told and retold, amid uncontrollable laughter. At dinner-time they adjourned to the kitchen in a body to have a look at the hero or victim of the tale, according to the way you looked at it. [200]

It was considered that Sam did not take the chaffing in very good part, but they had to confess that he fed them adequately.

As soon afterward as riding horses could be secured, the whole party, excepting the traders, rode off around Beaver Bay. The Government land was to be laid off on the other side, and Big Jack and his pals were looking for locations there. As Graves, the chief surveyor, was mounting his horse, Mahooley said to him casually:

"How about freighting your outfit around?"

"Oh, that's all arranged for," was the answer.

Mahooley shrugged, supposing that the company had secured the contract outside.

When the excitement of the departure died away, Mahooley for the first time perceived a squat little figure in a blanket capote sitting patiently on the platform in front of the store.

"Musq'oosis!" he exclaimed. "Blest if I didn't overlook you in the shuffle. How did you come?"

"Graves bring me in his boat," Musq'oosis answered.

"Come on in."

"I come get trade for my rabbit-skin robe."

"Sure, what'll you have?"

"W'at you got?"

"Damn little. Take your choice."

After due observance on both sides of the time-honoured rules of bargaining, the matter was concluded, and Musq'oosis made a feint of gathering up his bundles. As a matter of fact, the old man had not yet reached what he had come for.

"What's your hurry?" said Mahooley. "Sit and talk a while."

This was not pure friendliness on the trader's part. He had a particular reason for wishing to cultivate the old Indian. [201]

Musq'oosis allowed himself to be persuaded.

"Where's Bela?" asked Mahooley.

"Home."

"What's all this talk about her carrying off the cook?"

Musq'oosis shrugged. "Fellas got talk."

"Well, what are the rights of the case?"

"I don't know," he returned indifferently. "I not there. I guess I go see Beattie now."

"Sit down," said Mahooley. "What do you want to see Beattie for? Why don't you trade with me? Why don't you tell all the Fish-Eaters to come here? They do what you tell them."

"Maybe," said Musq'oosis, "but we always trade wit' Beattie."

"Time you made a change then. He thinks he's got you cinched."

"Gilbert Beattie my good friend."

"Hell! Ain't I your friend, too? You don't know me. Have a cigar. Sit down. What do you want to see Beattie about in such a rush?"

"I goin' buy team and wagon," said Musq'oosis calmly.

Mahooley laughed. "What are you goin' to do with it? I never heard of you as a driver."

"I goin' hire driver," asserted Musq'oosis. "I sit down; let ot'er man work for me. So I get rich."

This seemed more and more humorous to Mahooley.

"That's the right ticket," he said. "But where will you get the business for your team?"

By way of answer Musq'oosis produced a folded paper from inside the capote. Opening it, Mahooley read: [202]

> This is to certify that I have awarded the Indian Musq'oosis the contract to freight all my supplies from Grier's Point to my camp on Beaver Bay during the coming summer at twenty-five cents per hundredweight.
>
> RICHARD GRAVES,
>
> Dominion Surveyor.

Mahooley whistled. This was no longer a joke. He looked at the old man with new respect.

"Well, that's a sharp trick," he said. "How did you get it?"

"Graves my friend," replied Musq'oosis with dignity. "We talk moch comin' up. He say I got good sense." The old man got up.

"Sit down!" cried Mahooley. "I got as good horses as the company."

"Want too much price, I t'ink," said Musq'oosis.

"Let's talk it over. There's my black team, Sambo and Dinah."

This was what Musq'oosis wanted, but nothing of his desire showed in his face. "Too small," he said.

"Small nothing!" cried Mahooley. "Those horses are bred in the country. They will thrive on shavings. They run out all winter."

"How moch wit' wagon and harness?" asked Musq'oosis indifferently.

"Six hundred and fifty."

"Wa!" said Musq'oosis. "You t'ink you got race-horses. I give five-fifty."

"Nothing doing!"

"All right, I go see Beattie."

"Hold on."

Thus it raged back and forth all afternoon. Half a dozen times they went out to look at the horses. Musq'oosis had to admit they were a nervy pair, though small. A dozen times the negotiations were called off, only to be renewed again. [203]

"Be reasonable," said Mahooley plaintively. "I suppose you want a year's credit. I've got to count that."

"I pay cash," said Musq'oosis calmly.

Mahooley stared. "Where the hell will you get it?"

"I got it now."

"Let me see it."

Musq'oosis declined.

Mahooley finally came down to six hundred, and Musq'oosis went up to five-seventy-eight. There they stuck for an hour.

"Five-seventy-eight!" said Mahooley sarcastically. "Why don't you add nineteen cents or so?"

"Tak' it or leave it," said Musq'oosis calmly.

Mahooley finally took it. "Now, let me see the colour of your money," he said.

Musq'oosis produced another little paper. This one read:

> I promise to pay the Indian, Musq'oosis, five hundred and seventy-eight dollars ($578.00) on demand.
>
> GILBERT BEATTIE.

Mahooley looked discomfited. He whistled.

"That's good money, ain't it?" asked Musq'oosis.

"Sure! Where did you get it?" demanded the trader. "I never heard of this."

"Beattie and me got business," replied Musq'oosis with dignity.

Mahooley was obliged to swallow his curiosity.

"Well, who are you going to get to drive?" he asked.

Musq'oosis's air for the first time became ingratiating. "I tell you," he returned. "Let you and I mak' a deal. You want me do somesing. I want you do somesing." [204]

"What is it?" demanded Mahooley suspiciously.

"You do w'at I want, I promise I tell the Fish-Eaters come to your store."

Mahooley's eyes gleamed. "Well, out with it!"

"I want you not tell nobody I buy your team. Nobody but Stiffy. I want hire white man to drive, see? Maybe he not lak work for red man. So you mak' out he workin' for you, see?"

"All right," agreed Mahooley. "That's easy. But who can you get?"

"Sam."

Mahooley indignantly exploded. Sam, the white slave, the butt of the whole camp, the tramp without a coat to his back or a hat to cover his head. He assured Musq'oosis more than once that he was crazy.

It may be that with his scorn was mixed a natural anxiety not to lose a cheap cook. Anyhow, Musq'oosis, calm and smiling, stuck to the point, and, of course, when it came to it the chance of getting the Fish-Eater's trade was too good to be missed. They finally shook hands on the deal.

Of the night that followed little need be said. As a result of the day's excitement the crowd stopping at the kitchen was in an uplifted state, anyway, and from some mysterious source a jug of illicit spirits was produced. It circulated in the bunk-room until far into the night.

They were not a hopelessly bad lot as men go, only uproarious. There was not one among them inhuman enough of himself to have tortured a fellow-creature, but in a crowd each dreaded to appear better than his fellows, and it was a case of egging each other on. Sam, who had thought he had already drained his cup of bitterness, found that it could be filled afresh. [205]

If he had been a tame spirit it would not have hurt him, and before this the game would have lost its zest for them. It was his helpless rage which nearly killed him, and which provided their fun. Mahooley, keeping what had happened to himself, led his tormentors. Sam was prevented from escaping the place.

Next morning, after he had fed them and they had gone out, he sat down in his kitchen, worn out and sick with discouragement, trying to think what to do.

This was his darkest hour. His brain was almost past clear thinking. His stubborn spirit no longer answered to his need. He had the hopeless feeling that he had come to the end of his fight. What was the use of struggling back to the outside world? He had already tried that. He could not face the thought of enduring another such night, either. Better the surrounding wilderness—or the lake.

He heard the front door flung open and Mahooley's heavy step in the mess-room. He jumped up and put his back against the wall. His eyes instinctively sought for his sharpest knife. He did not purpose standing any more. However, the jocular leer had disappeared from the trader's red face. He looked merely business-like now.

"Ain't you finished the dishes? Hell, you're slow! I want you to take a team and go down to Grier's Point to load up for Graves."

Sam looked at him stupidly.

"Can't you hear me?" said Mahooley. "Get a move on you!"

"I can't get back here before dinner," muttered Sam. [206]

"Who wants you back? One of the breed boys is goin' to cook. Freighting's your job now. You can draw on the store for a coat and a pair of blankets. You'll get twelve and a half cents a hundredweight, so it's up to you to do your own hustling. Better sleep at the Point nights, so you can start early."

Sam's stiff lips tried to formulate thanks.

"Ah, cut it out!" said Mahooley. "It's just a business proposition."

CHAPTER XVII [207]

AN APPARITION

On the way up the lake the surveyor's party had been driven to seek shelter in the mouth of Hah-wah-sepi by a westerly gale. They found the other York boat lying there. Its passengers, the bishop, the Indian agent, and the doctor, after ministering to the tribe in their several ways, had ridden north to visit the people around Tepiskow Lake.

The Fish-Eaters were still in a state of considerable excitement. The Government annuities—five dollars a head—changed hands half a dozen times daily in the hazards of jack-pot. All other business was suspended.

Musq'oosis called upon the chief surveyor, and the white man was delighted with his red brother's native courtesy and philosophy.

When finally the wind died down Musq'oosis had only to drop a hint that he was thinking of travelling to the settlement to receive a hearty invitation. Musq'oosis, instructing two boys, Jeresis and Hooliam, to come after him with a dugout in two days' time, accepted it.

Whatever may have been going on inside Bela during the days that followed, nothing showed in her wooden face. Never, at least when any eye was upon her, did she cock her head to listen for a canoe around the bend, nor go to the beach to look up the lake.

The Fish-Eaters were not especially curious concerning her. They had heard a native version of the happenings in Johnny Gagnon's shack from the boatmen, but had merely shrugged. Bela was [208] crazy, anyway, they said.

Finally on the seventh day Musq'oosis and the two boys returned. Bela did not run to the creek. When the old man came to his teepee she was working around it with a highly indifferent air.

Once more they played their game of make-believe. Bela would not ask, and Musq'oosis would not tell without being asked. Bela was the one to give in.

"What you do up at settlement?" she asked carelessly.

"I fix everyt'ing good," replied Musq'oosis. "Buy team for Sam wit' your money. Mahooley's black team."

"It's too good for Sam," said Bela scornfully.

The old man glanced at her with sly amusement, and shrugged. He volunteered no further information.

When Bela could stand it no longer she asked sullenly:

"You hear no news at the settlement?"

Musq'oosis laughed and took pity on her. He told her his story, suppressing only certain facts that he considered it unwise for her to know.

"I glad the men mak' mock of Sam," she said bitterly. "Maybe he get some sense now."

"Well, he all right now," observed Musq'oosis.

"All right!" she cried. "I guess he more foolish than before, now he got a team. I guess he think he bigges' man in the country."

Musq'oosis stared at her. "W'at's the matter wit' you? You send me all the way to get him team. Now you let on you mad 'cause he got it."

"I didn't send you," contradicted Bela. "You say yourself you go." [209]

"I go because you say you got go if I don't go. I don't want you to mak' anot'er fool lak before. I go for 'cause you promise me you stay here."

It was impossible for poor Bela to justify her contradictions, so she kept silent.

"You lak a woman, all right," declared Musq'oosis scornfully.

Bela had an idea that she could obtain a freer account of what was happening at the settlement from Jeresis or Hooliam, but pride would not allow her to apply directly to them.

Whenever she saw either of the boys making the centre of a group she managed to invent some business in the neighbourhood. But the talk always became constrained at her approach, and she learned nothing. The youngsters of the tribe were afraid of Bela. This had the effect of confirming her suspicion that there was something she needed to learn.

Word was passed around camp that there would be a "singing" on the lake shore that night. Bela, who had her own ideas about singing, despised the crude chanting of her relatives and the monotonous accompaniment of the "stick-kettle"; nevertheless, she decided to attend on this occasion.

Waiting until the party was well under way, she joined it unostentatiously and sat down in the outer circle of women. None but those immediately around her saw her come.

These parties last all night or near it. It needs darkness to give the wild part-song its full effect, and to inspire the drummers to produce a voice of awe from the muttering tom-toms. They work up slowly.

During a pause in the singing, while the drummer held his stick-kettle over the fire to contract the skin, some one asked Jeresis if he had seen Bela's white man. This was what she was waiting for. She listened breathlessly. [210]

"Yes," answered Jeresis.

"Is he big, fine man?"

"No, middle-size man. Not much. Other men call him white slave, 'cause Bela take him away."

"Bela is crazy," said another.

The speakers were unaware that she was present. The women around her eyed her curiously. Bela smiled disdainfully for their benefit.

"Other woman got him now," Jeresis went on indifferently.

The smile froze on Bela's face. A red-hot needle seemed thrust into her breast.

"Who?" someone asked.

"The white woman that was here. Make her head go this way, that way." Jeresis imitated.

"The chicadee woman," said another.

"I see them by the company fence," Jeresis went on idly. "She stand on one side. He stand on other side. They look foolish at each other, like white people do. She make the big eyes and talk soft talk. They say he goes up every night."

The matter was not of great interest to the company generally, and Jeresis's story was cut short by a renewed burst of singing. Bela continued to sit where she was, still as a stone woman, until she thought they had forgotten her. Then she slipped away in the dark.

Musq'oosis was awakened by being violently shaken. He sat up in his blanket in no amiable frame of mind.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

Bela was past all make-believe of indifference now.

"I promise you I not go to settlement," she said breathlessly. "I come tell you I got go, anyhow. I got tak' my promise back. I got go now—now! I got go quick!" [211]

"Are you as crazy as they say?" demanded Musq'oosis.

"Yes, I am crazy," she stammered. "No, I am not crazy. I will go crazy if I stay here. You are a bad friend to me. You not tell me that white woman is after my man. I got go to-night!"

"Oh, hell!" said Musq'oosis.

"Give me back my promise!" begged Bela. "I got go now."

"Go to bed," said Musq'oosis. "We talk quiet to-morrow. I want sleep now. You mak' me tired!"

"I got go now, now!" she repeated.

"Listen to me," said Musq'oosis. "I not tell you that for cause it is only foolishness. She is an old woman. She jus' a fool-hen. Are you 'fraid of her?"

"She is white," said Bela. "She know more than me. She know how to catch a man. Me, I am not all white. I live wit' Indians. He think little of me for that. Yes, I am afraid of her. Give me my promise back. I not be foolish. I do everything you say. But I got go see."

"Well, if you got go, you got go," said Musq'oosis crossly. "Don't come to me after and ask what to do."

"Good-bye!" said Bela, flying out of the teepee.

One day as Mrs. Beattie and Miss Mackall were sewing together, the trader's wife took occasion to remonstrate very gently with her sister concerning Sam. Somehow of late Miss Mackall found herself down in the road mornings when Sam was due to pass with his load, and somehow she was back there again at night when he came home empty. [212]

Mrs. Beattie was a quiet, wise, mellow kind of woman. "He's so young," she suggested.

Her sister cheerfully agreed. "Of course, a mere baby! That's why I can be friends with him. He's so utterly friendless. He needs a kind word from somebody."

"But don't you rather go out of your way to give it to him?" asked Mrs. Beattie very softly.

"Sister! How can you say such a thing?" said Miss Mackall in shocked tones. "A mere child like that—one would think—— Oh, how can you?"

Mrs. Beattie let the matter drop with a little sigh. She had not been home in fifteen years, and she found her elder sister much changed and difficult to understand. Somehow their positions had been reversed.

Later, at the table, Miss Mackall suggested with an off-hand air that the friendless young teamster might be asked to supper. Gilbert Beattie looked up quickly.

"This is the company house," he said in his grim way, "and we are, so to speak, public people. We must not give any occasion for silly gossip."

"Gossip?" echoed Miss Mackall, raising her eyebrows. "I don't understand you."

"Pardon me," said Beattie. "I think you do. Remember," he added with a grim twinkle, "the trader's sister must be like Cæsar's wife, above suspicion."

Miss Mackall tossed her head and finished her meal in silence. Persons of a romantic temperament really enjoy a little tyranny. It made her seem young and interesting to herself.

That afternoon she walked up the road a way and met Sam safely out of view of the house. Sam greeted her with a beaming smile.

It seemed to him that this was his one friend—the only soul he had to talk to. He was little disposed to find flaws in her. As for her age, he had never thought about it. Pressed for an answer, he would probably have said: "Oh, about thirty!" [213]

"Hello!" he cried. "Climb in and drive back with me."

"I can't," she replied with a mysterious air.

"Why not?"

"I mustn't be seen with you so much."

"Why?"

"It seems people are beginning to talk about us. Isn't it too silly?"

Sam laughed harshly. "I'm used to it," he said. "Of course, it's a different thing for you."

"I don't care for myself," she returned. "But my brother-in-law——"

"He's been warning you against me, eh?" asked Sam bitterly. "Naturally, you have to attend to what he says. It's all right." He made as if to drive on.

Miss Mackall seemed to be about to throw herself in front of the horses.

"How can you?" she cried reproachfully. "You know I don't care what anybody says. But while I'm living in his house I have to——"

"Sure!" replied Sam sorely. "I won't trouble you——"

"If we could write to each other," she suggested, "and leave the letters in a safe place."

Sam shook his head. "Never was any hand at writing letters," he said deprecatingly. "I run dry when I take a pen. Besides, I have no place to write, nor anything to write with."

"There is another way," she murmured, "but I suppose I shouldn't speak of it."

"What way?" asked Sam.

"There's a trail from the back of our house direct to Grier's Point. It is never used except when they bring supplies to the store in the summer. We keep very early hours. Everything is quiet by nine. I could slip out of the house and walk down the trail to meet you. We could talk a while, and I could be in again before dark." [214]

Sam felt a little dubious, but how can a young man hold back in a matter of this kind? "All right, if

you wish it," he agreed.

"I am only thinking of you," she said.

"I'll be there."

No better place for a tryst could have been found. No one ever had any occasion to use the back trail, and it was invisible for its whole length to travellers on the main road. After issuing from the woods of Grier's Point it crossed a wide flat among clumps of willows, and, climbing over the spur of a wooded hill, dropped in Beattie's back yard.

They met half-way across the flat in the tender dusk. The fairy light took away ten years of her age, and Sam experienced almost a *bona fide* thrill of romance at the sight of her slender figure swaying over the meadow toward him.

In his gratitude for her kindness he really desired to feel more warmly toward her, which is a perilous state of mind for a young man to be in. He spread his coat for her to sit on, and dropped beside her in the grass.

"Smoke your pipe," she said. "It's more cosy."

He obeyed.

"I wish I had a cigarette myself," she added with a giggle.

"Do you smoke?" asked Sam, surprised.

"No," she confessed; "but all the girls do, nowadays." [215]

"I don't like it," said Sam bluntly.

"Of course I was only joking," she returned hastily.

Their conversation was not very romantic. Sam, with the best intentions in the world, somehow frustrated her attempts in this direction. He was propped up on one elbow beside her.

"How thick and bright your hair is!" she murmured.

"You've got some hair yourself," returned Sam politely.

She quickly put both hands up. "Ah! don't look at it. A hair-dresser spoiled it. As a child it hung below my waist."

Sam not knowing exactly what to say to this, blew a cloud of smoke.

"What a perfect night!" she breathed.

"Great!" said Sam. "That near-horse of mine, Sambo, picked up a stone on the beach this morning. I didn't discover what was making him lame until we were half-way round the bay. I wish I knew more about horses. I pick up all I can, but you never can tell when these fellows are giving it to you straight."

"It's a shame the way they plague you!" she exclaimed warmly.

"Oh, it's nothing, now," replied Sam. "I can stand anything now that I've got a man's job. I'll make good yet. I think I can see a difference already. I think about it day and night. It's my dream. I mean, making good with these fellows. It isn't that I care so much about them either. But after what's happened. I've got to make them respect me!"

And so on, in entire innocence. Sam was aware of no feelings toward her save gratitude and friendliness. Nevertheless, it would not have been the first time it happened, if these safe and simple feelings had suddenly landed him in an inextricable coil. Men are babies in such matters. [216]

But nothing happened this night. Sam walked back with her to the foot of the hill, and they parted without touching hands.

"Shan't I see you through the wood?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Some one might see from the house. There's plenty of light yet. To-morrow night at the same time?"

"All right," said Sam.

She stood watching until he disappeared among the willows, then turned to mount the shallow hill. Down among the trunks of the big pines it was gloomier than she had expected. The patches of bright sky seemed immeasurably far overhead. The wood was full of whispers. She began to be sorry that she had let him go so soon, and hastened her steps.

Suddenly, as she neared the top of the hill, a human figure materialized in the trail before her. She was too much startled to scream. She stopped, petrified with terror, struggling to draw her breath. Its shadowy face was turned toward her. It was a very creature of night, still and voiceless. It blocked the way she had to pass. Her limbs shook under her, and a low moan of

terror escaped her breast.

Finding a little strength at last, she made to dart among the trees so that she could encircle the apparition.

"Stop!" It commanded.

Miss Mackall fell half fainting against a tree.

The figure came closer to her, and she saw that it was a woman. A horrible prescience of what was coming still further demoralized her. Women do not require explanations in words. Miss Mackall recognized the adventuress of Musquasepi, and knew what she had come for. She sought [217] to temporize.

"What do you want?" she faltered.

"I want kill you," said Bela softly. "My finger is hungry for the trigger."

She moved slightly, and a spot of light caught the barrel of the rifle over her arm. Miss Mackall moaned again.

"What did I ever do to you?" she wailed.

"You know," replied Bela grimly. "You tried tak' my man."

"How r-ridiculous!" stuttered Miss Mackall. "He isn't yours."

"Maybe," returned Bela. "Not yet. But no ot'er woman goin' get him from me."

"It isn't my fault if he wants me."

"Want you!" cried Bela scornfully. "An old woman! You try catch him lak he a fish!"

Miss Mackall broke into a low, hysterical weeping.

"Shut up!" said Bela. "Listen to w'at I say."

"Let me go! Let me go!" wept the other woman. "I'll scream!"

"No, you won't," said Bela coolly. "You not want Gilbert Beattie know you run out at night."

"I won't be murdered in cold blood! I won't! I won't!"

"Shut up!" said Bela. "I not goin' kill you jus' yet. Not if you do what I want."

Miss Mackall stopped weeping. "What do you want?" she asked eagerly.

"You got go 'way from here," said Bela coolly.

"What do you mean?"

"Bishop Lajeunesse goin' back down lake day after to-morrow. If you here after he gone I kill you." [218]

A little assurance began to return to Miss Mackall. After all, it was not a supernatural, but a very human enemy with whom she had to deal.

"Are you crazy?" she demanded with quavering dignity.

"Yes," replied Bela calmly. "So they say."

"Oh!" sneered Miss Mackall. "Do you think I shall pay any attention to your threats? I have only to speak a word to my brother-in-law and you will be arrested."

"They got catch me first," said Bela. "No white man can follow me in the bush. I go where I want. Always I will follow you—wit' my gun."

The white woman's voice broke again. "If anything happened to me, you'd be tried and hung for murder!"

"What do a crazy woman care for that?" asked Bela.

Miss Mackall commenced to weep again.

Bela suddenly stepped aside. "Run home!" she said contemptuously. "Better pack your trunk."

Miss Mackall's legs suddenly recovered their function, and she sped up the trail like a released arrow. Never in her life had she run so fast. She fell into her room panting and trembling, and offered up a little prayer of thankfulness for the security of four walls and a locked door.

Next morning she was unable to get up in time to see Sam pass. She appeared at the dinner table pale and shaky, and pleaded a headache in explanation. During the meal she led the conversation by a round-about course to the subject of Indians.

"Do they ever go crazy?" she asked Gilbert Beattie, with an off-hand air.

"Yes, indeed," he answered. "It's one of the commonest troubles we have to deal with. They're fanatics by nature, anyway, and it doesn't take much to turn the scale. *Weh-ti-go* is their word for [219]

insanity. Among the people around the lake there is an extraordinary superstition, which the priests have not been able to eradicate in two hundred years. The Indians say of an insane man that his brain is frozen. And they believe in their hearts that the only way to melt it is by drinking human blood—a woman's or a child's by preference. That is the real explanation of many an obscure tragedy up here."

Miss Mackall shuddered and ate no more.

Late that afternoon she managed to drag herself down to the road. She waited for Sam at the entrance to a patch of woods a little way toward the French outfit.

"What's the matter?" he exclaimed at the sight of her.

"Ah, don't look at me!" she said unhappily. "I've had an awful night. Sick headache. I just wanted to tell you not to come to-night."

"All right," said Sam. "To-morrow night?"

She shook her head. "I—I don't think I'll come any more. I don't think it's right."

"Just as you say," said Sam. "If you feel all right to-morrow afternoon, you might get a horse and ride around the bay."

"I—I'm afraid to ride alone," she faltered.

"Well," said Sam, ever quick to take offence, "if you don't want to see me again, of course——"

"I do! I do!" she cried. "I've got to have a talk with you. I don't know what to do!"

"Very well," he said stoutly. "I'll come up to the house to-morrow night. I guess there's no reason why I shouldn't."

"Yes, that is best," she agreed. "Drive on now."

Sam clucked to his team, and they started briskly down the trail. "Lord, she looks about seventy!" [220]
he was thinking. Miss Mackall stood watching until they rounded the first bend. When she turned around, there stood Bela beside a big tree, a few feet to the side of the road. Evidently she had been hidden in the underbrush behind. Miss Mackall gasped in piteous terror and stood rooted to the spot.

Bela's face was as relentless as a high priestess's. "I listen if you goin' tell him 'bout me," she said. "If you tell him, I ready to shoot."

The other woman was speechless.

"You not goin' be here to-morrow night," Bela went on quietly. "Bishop Lajeunesse leave to-morrow morning."

Miss Mackall turned and flew up the trail.

The trader's house was built bungalow style, all the rooms on a floor. Miss Mackall's room was at the back of the house, her window facing the end of the back trail, where it issued from the woods. The nights were now mild and fragrant, and doors and windows stood wide. Locks are never used north of the landing. Or if they are, the key hangs hospitably within reach.

Miss Mackall, however, insisted on locking the doors and securing her window. There were no blinds, and she hung a petticoat inside the glass. Laughing at her old-maidish precautions, they let her have her way. As a further safeguard against nervousness during the night, she had one of her nieces to bed with her.

There was no sleep for her. In every little stir and breath she heard the footfall of her enemy. She was tormented by the suspicion that there was something lurking outside her window. She regretted leaving the petticoat up, for it prevented her seeing outside. She brooded on it until she [221]
felt as if she would go out of her mind, if she were not reassured.

Finally she mustered up sufficient courage to get out of bed and creep to the window. Holding her breath, she gathered the petticoat in her hand and smartly jerked it down. She found herself looking into the face of the native girl, who was peering through the glass. There was a little light in the sky behind her.

Bela sprang back, and Miss Mackall saw the gun-barrel. She uttered a piercing scream and fell fainting to the floor. The whole family rushed to her door. Hysterics succeeded. They could make nothing of her wild cries. When she recovered she was mum.

In the morning Gilbert Beattie and his wife discussed it soberly. "Nerves," said the man. "We'd best let her go out with the bishop, as she wants. This is no country for her. We might not get another chance this year to send her out with a proper escort."

"It's too bad!" sighed his wife. "I thought she would make such a good wife for one of the new men that are coming in now. They need wives so badly!"

"H-m!" said Gilbert.

CHAPTER XVIII [222]

THE "RESTERAW"

Gilbert Beattie, driving home by way of the French outfit, after having seen his sister-in-law embark, found that another party of settlers had arrived. Many of the natives, attracted by news of these events, had also come in, and the settlement presented a scene of activity such as it had never known.

It gave the trader much food for thought. Clearly the old order was passing fast, and it behooved an enterprising merchant to adjust himself to the new. Beattie was no longer a young man, and he felt an honest anxiety for the future. Would he be able to maintain his supremacy?

When he reached his own store he found a handsome native girl waiting to see him. He had seen her before, but could not place her. He asked her name.

"Bela Charley," she answered.

"O-ho!" he said, looking at her with a fresh curiosity. "You are she, eh?" Whatever they might be saying about this girl, he commended the calm, self-respecting air with which she bore his scrutiny. "Do you want to trade?" he asked. "One of the clerks will wait on you."

She shook her head. "Want see you."

"What can I do for you?"

"Company got little house beside the road down there. Nobody livin' there."

"Well, what of it?" [223]

"You let me live there?" she asked.

"You'd better go home to your people, my girl," he said grimly.

"I have left them," she returned coolly.

"What would you think of doing?" he asked curiously. "How could you make your living?"

"Plenty people here now," she said. "More comin'. I goin' keep stoppin'-house for meals."

"Alone?" he asked, frowning.

"Sure!" said Bela.

He shook his head. "It wouldn't do."

"Why?"

"You're too good-looking," he replied bluntly. "It wouldn't be respectable."

"I tak' care of myself," averred Bela. "Anybody say so."

"How about that story that's going the rounds now?"

"Moch lies, I guess."

"Very like; but it can't be done," he said firmly. "I can't have a scandal right in front of my wife's door."

"Good for trade," suggested Bela insinuatingly. "Mak' the new people come up here. Now they always hangin' round Stiffy and Mahooley's."

This argument was not without weight; nevertheless, Beattie continued to shake his head. "Can't do it unless you get a chaperon."

"Chaperon?" repeated Bela, puzzled.

"Get a respectable woman to come live with you, and I'll say all right."

Bela nodded and marched out of the store without wasting any further words.

In an hour she was back, bringing Mary, Bateese Otter's widow. Mary, according to the standards of the settlement, was a paragon of virtue. Gilbert Beattie grinned. [224]

"Here is Mary Otter," said Bela calmly. "She poor. She goin' live with me. I guess she is respectable. She live in the mission before, and scrub the floors. Père Lacombe tell her come live wit' me. Is that all right?"

Since Bela had secured the sanction of the Church upon her enterprise, Beattie felt that the responsibility was no longer his. He gladly gave her her way.

The astonishing news spread up and down the road like lightning. Bela Charley was going to open a "resteraw." Here was a new and fascinating subject for gossip.

Nobody knew that Bela was in the settlement. Nobody had seen her come. Exactly like her, said those who were familiar with her exploits in the past. What would happen when Bela and Sam met again? others asked.

While everybody had helped this story on its rounds, no man believed that Bela had really carried off Sam. Funny that this girl should turn up almost at the moment of the other girl's departure! Nobody, however, suspected as yet that there was anything more than coincidence in this.

The main thing was Bela was known to be an A1 cook, and the grub at the French outfit was rotten. Mahooley himself confessed it.

Within two hours six men, including Big Jack and his pals, arrived for dinner. Bela was not at all discomposed. She had already laid in supplies from the company. Dinner would be ready for all who came, she said, six bits per man. Breakfast and supper, four bits.

To-day they would have to sit on the floor, but by to-morrow proper arrangements would be [225] completed. No, there would be no accommodations for sleeping. Everybody must go home at ten o'clock. While they waited they could cut some good sods to mend the roof, if they wanted.

Some of the guests, thinking of the past, approached her somewhat diffidently; but if Bela harboured any resentment, she hid it well. She was the same to all, a wary, calm, efficient hostess.

Naturally the men were delighted to be given an opportunity to start fresh. Three of them laboured at the roof with a will. Husky, who only had one good arm, cleaned fish for her. The dinner, when it came on, was no disappointment.

Sam, rattling back over the rough trail that afternoon, stamped in his empty wagon-box and whistled cheerfully. Things were going well with him. The long, hard-working days in the open air were good for both health and spirits. He liked his job, and he was making money. He had conceived a great affection for his lively little team, and, lacking other companions, confided his hopes and fears in them.

Not that he had yet succeeded in winning from under the load of derision that had almost crushed him; the men still greeted him with their tongues in their cheeks. But now that he had a man's job, it was easier to bear.

He believed, too, that he was making progress with them. The hated gibe "white slave" was less frequently heard. Sam, passionately bent on making good in the community, weighed every shade of the men's manner toward him, like a lover his mistress's.

He met Big Jack and his pals driving back around the bay in Jack's wagon. They had staked out their land across the bay, but still spent most of their time in the settlement. Both drivers pulled [226] up their horses.

The men hailed Sam with at least the appearance of good nature. As for Sam himself, he had made up his mind that since he was going to live among them, he would only make himself ridiculous by maintaining a sore and distant air. He was learning to give as good as he got.

"Heard the news?" asked Big Jack, glancing around at his companions, promising them a bit of sport.

"What news?" asked Sam warily.

"Your new girl has flew the coop."

"What do you mean?" demanded Sam, scowling.

"Wafted. Vamosed. Fluffed out. Beat it for the outside."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Beattie's wife's sister."

"Miss Mackall?"

"Went back with the bishop this morning."

Sam's face was a study in blank incredulity.

"Didn't you know she was goin'?" asked Jack with pretended concern. He turned to his mates. "Boys, this here's a serious matter. Looks like a regular lovers' quarrel. We ought to have broke it to him more gentle!"

"I don't believe it!" said Sam. "But if it is true, she's got a right to go when she likes without

asking me." He made a move to drive on.

"Hold on!" cried Big Jack. "I've got another piece of news for you."

"Spit it out," snapped Sam, scornful and unconcerned.

"Your old girl's come to town. Ring out the new, ring in the old, as the song says. Lucky for you they didn't happen simultaneous."

This affected Sam more than the first item. In spite of him, a red tide surged up from his neck. He [227]
scowled angrily at having to betray himself before them. They laughed derisively.

"I suppose you mean Bela," he said stiffly. "The settlement is free to her, I guess. She's no more mine than the other."

"Opened a resteraw in the shack below the company store," Big Jack went on. "We had our dinner there. Six bits a man. Better drop in to supper."

"Not by a damn sight!" muttered Sam.

He shook his reins, and drove on to the tune of their laughter.

His feelings were much mixed. He felt that he ought in decency to be chiefly concerned on Jennie Mackall's account, but he could not drive Bela out of his head. He was both angry and terrified at her coming. Just when he was beginning to feel free and easy she had to come and start up the old trouble in his breast. Just when men were beginning to forget the story which humiliated him, she came along and gave it new point!

Sam had to get mad at something, and, like young persons generally, he concentrated on a side issue. By the time he got into the settlement he had succeeded in working himself up to a great pitch of indignation against the Beatties, who, he told himself, had sent Jennie Mackall home to part her from him.

Reaching the company reservation, he drove boldly up the hill to ask for an explanation. Mrs. Beattie was on the porch sewing, as ever her bland, capable self.

"They tell me Miss Mackall has gone away," said Sam stiffly.

"She was taken sick last night," replied Mrs. Beattie. "We all thought it best for her to go when she had a good chance."

Sam stood undecided. [228]

Mrs. Beattie arose.

"She left a note to bid you good-bye. I'll get it."

This was what Sam read, written in a well nigh illegible scrawl:

> Dear Boy,
>
> I cannot stay here. I am sick. I can't explain further. Can scarcely hold a pen. It's dreadful to have to go without seeing you. But don't try to follow me. I will write you from outside, when I can think more calmly. Oh, it's horrible! Oh, be careful of yourself! Don't let yourself be deceived. I would say more if I dared. Tear this up instantly. Don't forget me.
>
> Ever thine,
>
> Jennie.

Sam bowed stiffly to Mrs. Beattie, and turned away. The letter mystified and exasperated him. The emotion it breathed found no response in his own breast. The phrasing sounded exaggerated and silly. Why on earth should he follow? He understood the veiled reference to Bela. Little need for Jennie to warn him against her!

At the same time Sam felt mean because he experienced no greater distress at Jennie's going. Finally, manlike, he swore under his breath, and resolved again to have no more to do with women. No suspicion of the real state of affairs crossed his mind.

Returning down hill in his wagon, he had to pass the little house where they had told him Bela was. Smoke was rising from the chimney. A great disquiet attacked him; he was not thinking of Jennie at all then. He heard sounds of activity from within the shack. Wild horses could not have [229]
dragged his head around to look. Urging his horses, he got out of sight as quick as he could. But out of sight was not out of mind.

"What's the matter with me?" he asked himself irritably. "I'm my own master, I guess. Nobody can put anything over on me. What need I care if she opens a dozen restaurants? One would think I was afraid of the girl! Ridiculous! Lord! I wish she were at the other side of the world!"

There was no escaping her. During the days that followed, Bela was the principal topic of

conversation around the settlement. Her place became a general rendezvous for all the white men.

Graves's young men saved the Government their rations, but took it out in horse-flesh riding around the bay to sup at Bela's. The policemen spent their hours off duty and wages there.

Stiffy and Mahooley fired their cook and went with the rest. The shack proved inadequate to hold them all, and Graves sent over a tent to be used as a kitchen annex.

Since Sam was the only white man who did not patronize the place, he had to submit to be held up on the road half a dozen times a day while they forced him to listen to the details of the last wonderful meal at Bela's.

"No bannock and sow-belly; no, sir! Real raised outside bread and genuine cow-butter from the mission. Green stuff from the mission garden. Roasted duck and prairie-chicken; stewed rabbit and broiled fish fresh out of the lake! Pudding with raisins in it, and on Sunday an apricot pie!"

Bela, it seemed, brought everybody under contribution. They told how even Mrs. Beattie, the great lady of the place, was giving her cooking lessons. [230]

It was not only the food that made Bela's place attractive. The men told how agreeably she welcomed them, making every man feel at home. She remembered their likes and dislikes; she watched to see that their plates were kept full.

When the table was cleared they were allowed to smoke and to play cards. Bela was good for a bit of fun, too; nothing highty-tighty about her. She had a clever tongue in her head. But all fair and above-board, you understand. Lord! if any fellow got fresh he'd mighty soon be chucked out by the others. But nobody ever tried it on—there was something about her——A fine girl!

That was how the panegyrics always ended: "A fine girl, sir!" Every man felt a particular gratitude to Bela. It was a place to go nights. It combined the advantages of a home and a jolly club. Up north men were apt to grow rusty and glum for the lack of a little amusement.

All of which evidenced a new side of Bela's character. She was coming on. In such a favourable atmosphere she might well develop. It seemed that she moved like a queen among her courtiers. They scrambled to do her behests.

Poor Sam, after listening to these tales, was obliged to drive past the house of entertainment eyes front, and cook his supper in solitude at Grier's Point. He could no longer count on even an occasional companion, for nowadays everybody hurried to Bela's.

The plain fact of the matter was, he suffered torments of lonesomeness. Lying in his blankets waiting for sleep, perhaps in a cold drizzle, in his mind's ear he could hear the sounds of merriment in the shack three miles away. As his heart weakened, he was obliged to batter himself harder and harder to keep up his rage against the cause of all his troubles. [231]

One afternoon returning from around the bay earlier than usual, in a straight stretch of the road between the two trading posts, he saw her coming. No mistaking that slender, skirted figure with a carriage as proud and graceful as a blooded horse.

His heart set up a tremendous thumping. There was no way of avoiding a meeting, unless he turned tail and fled before her. That was not to be thought of. It was the first time they had come face to face since the unforgettable morning in Johnny Gagnon's shack.

Sam steeled himself, and commenced to whistle. He would show her! Exactly what he meant to show her he could not have told, but it necessitated a jaunty air and a rollicking whistle. It was his intention to hail her in a friendly off-hand way like any of the men might—provided his heart did not leap out of his breast before he reached her.

It did not. But as they passed he received the shock of his life. Whatever it was he expected from her, an angry scowl maybe, or an appealing look, or a scornfully averted head, he did not get it. She raised calm, smiling eyes to his and said provokingly:

"Hello, Sam!"

That was what he had meant to do, but it missed fire. He found himself gaping clownishly at her. For something had leaped out of her eyes into his, something sweet and terrible and strange that threw him into a hopeless confusion.

He whipped up his horses and banged down the trail. All night he tossed in his blankets, hungry and exasperated beyond bearing. Cursing her brought him no satisfaction at all. It rang hollowly. [232]

As the days passed, stories of another kind reached Sam's ears. It appeared that many of Bela's boarders desired to marry her, particularly the four settlers who had first arrived. They had offered themselves in due form, it was said, and, much to the satisfaction of the company in general, had been turned down in positive terms.

Whether or not this was precisely true, Husky Marr suddenly sold out his outfit and went out on a York boat, while Black Shand Fraser packed up his and trekked over to the Spirit River. Later word came back that he had built himself a raft, and had gone down to Fort Ochre, the farthest point that white men had reached.

The other two stuck it out. Big Jack Skinner philosophically abandoned his pretensions, but Joe Hagland would not take his answer. He continued to besiege Bela, and the general opinion was that he would wear her out in the end. All of which did not help smooth Sam's pillow.

Another piece of news was that old Musq'oosis had come to live with Bela and help her run her place. That night on his way back Sam saw that a teepee had been pitched beside the road near the stopping-house. In the end, as was inevitable, Sam began to argue with himself as to the wisdom of his course in staying away from Bela's.

"Every time they see me drive past it revives the story in their minds," he told himself. "They'll think I'm afraid of her. She'll think I'm afraid of her. I've got to show them all. I'm just making a fool of myself staying away. It's only a public eating-house. My money's as good as anybody else's, I guess. I'll never make good with the gang until I can mix with them there as if nothing had happened."

Bela's hands toiled with chores while her eyes dreamed of love. (Colleen Moore as Bela).
(*Photoplay Edition—"The Huntress"*) (*A First National Picture*)

Thus do a young man's secret desires beguile him. But even when he had persuaded himself that [233]
it would be the part of wisdom to eat at Bela's, Sam did not immediately act on it. A kind of nervous dread restrained him.

One afternoon he was delayed across the bay, and as he approached the "resteraw" the fellows were already gathering for supper. Sam listened to the jovial talk and laughter coming through the door with a sore and desirous heart.

"Why can't I have a good time, too?" he asked himself rebelliously. But he did not pull up. A few yards beyond the shack he met Stiffy and Mahooley riding to supper.

"Hey, Sam!" cried the latter teasingly. "Come on in to supper. I'll blow!"

"Much obliged," said Sam good-naturedly. "My horses' feed is down at the Point. I have to be getting on."

"There's plenty feed here," said Mahooley.

Sam shook his head.

"I believe you're afraid of the girl."

The shaft went home. Sam laughed scornfully and pulled his horses' heads around. "Oh, well, since you put it that way I guess I will eat a meal off you."

CHAPTER XIX [234]

THE NEW BOARDER

Sam tied his team to a tree and walked to the door of the shack. Within those twenty paces he experienced a complete revulsion of feeling. Having cast the die, he enjoyed that wonderful lightness of heart that follows on a period of painful indecision.

"What the deuce!" he thought. "What a simpleton I am to worry myself blind! Whatever there is about Bela she doesn't exactly hate me. Why shouldn't I jolly her along? That's the best way to

get square. Lord! I'm young. Why shouldn't I have my bit of fun?"

It was in this gay humour that he crossed the threshold. Within he saw a long oilcloth-covered table reaching across the room, with half a score of men sitting about it on boxes.

"Hey, fellows! Look who's here!" cried Mahooley.

A chorus of derisive welcome, more or less good-natured, greeted the new-comer.

"Why, if it ain't Sammy the stolen kid!"

"Can I believe my eyes!"

"There's pluck for you, boys!"

"You bet! Talk about walking up to the cannon's mouth!"

"Look out, Sam! The rope and the gag are ready!"

"Don't be askeared, kid, I'll pertect you from violence!" [235]

Sam's new-found assurance was proof against their laughter.

"You fellows think you're funny, don't you?" he returned, grinning. "Believe me, your wit is second-hand!"

Mahooley stuck his head out of the back door. "Hey, Bela!" he cried. "Come look at the new boarder I brought you!"

The crowd fell silent, and every pair of eyes turned toward the door, filled with strong curiosity to see the meeting between these two. Sam felt the tension and his heart began to beat, but he stiffened his back and kept on smiling. Bela came in wearing her most unconcerned air. They were not going to get any change out of her!

"Hello, Bela!" cried Sam. "Can I have some supper?"

She looked him over coolly. "Sure," she said. "Sit down by Stiffy."

They roared with laughter at her manner. Sam laughed, too, to hide the discomfiture he privately felt. Sam took his allotted place. The laughter of the crowd was perfectly good-natured, except in the case of one man whom Sam marked.

Opposite him sat Joe Hagland. Joe stared at Sam offensively, and continued to laugh after the others had done. Sam affected not to notice him. To himself he said:

"I've got to fight Joe, big as he is. He stands in my way."

Outside in the canvas kitchen a little comedy was in progress all unknown to the boarders. Bela came back breathing quickly, and showing a red spot in either ivory cheek. Forgetting the supper, she began to dig in her dunnage bag. [236]

Getting out a lace collar, she flew to the mirror to put it on. Her hair dissatisfied her, and she made it fluff out a little under the rich braid which crowned her brow. Finally, she ruthlessly tore a rose from her new hat and pinned it to her girdle as she had seen Jennie Mackall do.

She turned around to find old Mary Otter staring at her open-mouthed while the turnovers in the frying-pan sent up a cloud of blue smoke.

"The cakes are burning!" stormed Bela. "What's the matter with you? All that good grease! Do I pay you to spoil good food? You gone crazy, I think!"

"Somebody else crazy I think me," muttered the old woman, rescuing the frying-pan.

Bela's boarders were not a very perspicacious lot, but when she came in again to serve the dinner the dullest among them became aware of the change in her. The lace collar and the rose in her belt were significant enough, but there was more than that.

Before she had been merely the efficient hostess, friendly to all—but sexless. Now she was woman clear through; her eyes flashed with the consciousness of it, there was coquetry in every turn of her head, and a new grace in every movement of her body.

The effect on the company was not a happy one. The men lowered jealousy on Sam. The atmosphere became highly charged. Only Sam's eyes lighted with pleasure.

Sam, Bela pointedly ignored. It was on Joe that she bestowed all her smiles. No one present was deceived by her ruse excepting Joe himself, whose vanity was enormously inflated thereby. Sam's instinct told him that it was to himself her coquetry was addressed.

After the humiliations she had put upon him, it was deliciously flattering thus to see her in her own way suing for his favour. This made him feel like a man again. He was disposed to tease her. [237]

"Hey, Bela!" he cried. "What kind of soup is this?"

"No kind," she retorted. "Jus' soup."

"The reason I asked, a fellow told me you made your soup out of muskrat-tails and goose-grass."

"I put the goose-grass in for you," said Bela.

Shouts of laughter here.

Bela lowered her head and whispered in Joe's ear. Joe guffawed with an insolent stare across at Sam. Sam smiled undisturbed, for the provoking glance which had accompanied the whisper had been for him. Joe had not seen that.

"What's next?" demanded Sam.

"Wait and see," said Bela.

"They say your toasted bull-bats are out o' sight."

"I save them for my regular boarders."

"Count me in!" cried Sam. "It was only the yarns of the poisonous food that kept me away before. Now I'm inoculated I don't care!"

Sam proceeded to higher flights of wit. The other men stared. This was a new aspect of the stiff-necked young teamster they had known. They did not relish it overmuch. None of them dared talk back to Bela in just this strain.

Meanwhile Bela scorned Sam outrageously. Beneath it he perceived subtle encouragement. She enjoyed the game as much as he did, and little he cared how the men were pleased. The choicest morsels found their way to Sam's plate.

Sam's eyes were giving away more than he knew. "You are my mark!" they flashed on Bela, while he teased her, and Bela's delighted, scornful eyes answered back: "Get me if you can!" [238]

In the end Sam announced his intention of investigating the kitchen mysteries. Bela chased him back to his seat, belabouring his back soundly with a broom-handle. The company looked on a little scandalized. They knew by instinct the close connection between love and horse-play.

The party broke up early. Up to to-night every man had felt that he had an equal chance, but now Bela was making distinctions. As soon as they finished eating, they wandered outside to smoke and make common cause against the interloper. For their usual card-game they adjourned to Stiffy and Mahooley's.

Only Joe and Sam were left, one sitting on each side of the fire with that look in his eyes that girls know of determination not to be the first to leave.

Bela came and sat down between them with sewing. Her face expressed a calm disinterestedness now. The young men showed the strain of the situation each according to his nature. Joe glowered and ground his teeth, while Sam's eyes glittered, and the corners of his mouth turned up obstinately.

"The fool!" thought the latter. "To give me such an advantage. He can't hide how sore he is. I will entertain the lady."

"That's a great little team of mine! They keep me laughing all day with their ways. They're in love with each other. At night I picket Sambo, and Dinah just sticks around. Well, the other night Sambo stole some of her oats when she wasn't looking, and she was sore. She didn't say anything, but waited till he went to sleep, then she stole off and hid behind the willows.

"Well, say, when he woke up there was a deuce of a time! He ran around that stake about a hundred times a minute, squealing like a pig at the sight of the knife. Miss Dinah, she heard him [239] all right, but she just stayed behind the willows laughing.

"After a time she came walking back real slow, and looking somewhere else. Say, he nearly ate her up. All the way around the bay he was promising he'd never steal another oat, so help me Bob! but she was cool toward him."

Bela laughed demurely. She loved stories about animals.

While he talked on in his light style Sam was warily measuring his rival.

"It'll be the biggest job I ever tackled," he thought. "He's got thirty pounds on me, and ring training. But he's out of condition and I'm fit. He loses his head easily. I'll try to get him going. Maybe I can turn the trick. I've *got* to do it to make good up here. That would establish me for ever."

At the end of one of Sam's stories Bela stood up. "Time for go. Both!" she said succinctly.

Sam got up laughing. "Nothing uncertain about that," he said. He waited for Joe by the door.

Joe was sunk in a sullen rage. "Go ahead," he said, sneering.

"After you," Sam retorted with a smile.

Joe approached him threateningly, and they stood one on each side of the door, sizing each other up with hard eyes. The smallest move from either side would have precipitated the conflict then. Bela slipped through the other door and came around the house.

"Joe!" she called from in front.

He drove through the door, followed by Sam.

"Anyhow he didn't make me go first," thought the latter.

Bela faced them with her most scornful air. "You are foolish! Both foolish! Lak dogs that growl. Go home!" [240]

Somewhat sheepishly they went to their respective teams. Bela turned back into the house. As they drove out side by side they looked at each other again. Sam laughed suddenly at Joe's melodramatic scowl.

"Well, ta-ta, old scout!" he said mockingly.

"Damn you!" said Joe thickly. "Keep away from me! If you tread on my toes you're going to get hurt! I've a hard fist for them I don't like!"

Sam jeered. "Keep your toes out of my path if you don't want them trodden on. As for fists, I'll match you any time you want."

Joe drove off around the bay, and Sam headed for Grier's Point, whistling.

Next morning he awoke smiling at the sun. Somehow since yesterday the world was made over. As usual he had Grier's Point to himself. His bed was upon spruce-boughs at the edge of the stony beach. Stripping, he plunged into the icy lake, and emerged pink and gasping.

After dressing and feeding his horses, upon surveying his own grub-box—salt pork and cold bannock!—it took him about five seconds to decide to breakfast at Bela's. This meant the hard work of loading his wagon on an empty stomach. Unlocking the little warehouse, he set to work with a will.

Three hours later he drove in before the stopping-house, and, hitching his team to the tree, left them a little hay to while the time. The "resteraw" was empty. Other breakfast guests had come and gone.

"Oh, Bela!" he cried.

She stuck her head in the other door. Her expression was severely non-committal. [241]

"Bela, my stomach's as empty as a stocking on the floor! I feel like a drawn chicken. For the love of mercy fill me up!"

"It's half-past eight," she said coldly.

"I know, but I had to load up before I could come. A couple of slices of breakfast bacon and a cup of coffee! Haven't tasted coffee in months. They say your coffee is a necktie for the gods!"

"I can't be cooking all day!" said Bela, flouncing out.

Nevertheless he heard the stove-lids clatter outside, and the sound of the kettle drawn forward. He was going to get fresh coffee at that!

In a few minutes it was set before him; not only the coffee with condensed milk, a luxury north of fifty-four, but fried fish as well, and a plate of steaming cakes. Sam fell to with a groan of ecstasy. Bela stood for a moment watching him with her inscrutable, detached air, then turned to go out.

"I say," called Sam with his mouth full, "pour yourself a cup of coffee, and come and drink it with me."

"I never eat with the boarders," she stated.

"Oh, hang it!" said Sam like a lord, "you give yourself too many airs! Go and do what you're told."

He found a delicious, subtle pleasure in ordering her about. As for Bela, she gasped a little and stared, then her eyes fell—perhaps she liked it too. Anyhow, she shrugged indifferently, cast a look out of the window to see if anyone was coming up the road, and disappeared in the kitchen. Presently she returned with a steaming cup, and, sitting opposite Sam, stirred it slowly without looking up.

Sam's eyes twinkled wickedly. "That's better. You know with all these fellows coming around and praising up your grub and everything, you're beginning to think you're the regular queen of Beaver Bay. You need to be taken down a peg!" [242]

"What do you care?" she asked.

"Bless you, I don't care," replied Sam. "I'm only telling you for your own good. I don't like to see a nice girl get her head turned."

"What's the matter wit' you so quick?" retorted Bela. "You're talkin' pretty big since yesterday."

Sam laughed delightedly. His soul was not deceived by her scornful airs, nor was hers by his pretended hectoring. While they abused each other, each was thrilled by the sense of the other's

nearness. Moreover, each knew how it was with the other.

Sam, having eaten his fill, planted his elbows, and leaned nearer to her across the narrow board. She did not draw back. Under the table their moccasined feet touched by accident, and each breast was shaken. Bela slowly drew her foot away. Their heads involuntarily came closer. The sweetness that emanated from her almost overpowered him.

His breath came quicker; his eyes were languorous and teasing. Bela gave him her eyes and he saw into them a thousand fathoms deep. It was that exquisite moment when the heart sees what the tongue will not yet acknowledge, when nearness is sweeter than touch. Yet he said with curling lip:

"You need a master!"

And she answered scornfully: "You couldn't do it."

There was a sound of wheels outside. They sprang up. Sam swore under his breath. Bela looked out of the door.

"It's Joe," she said.

Sam hardened.

"You've got to go," she said swiftly and peremptorily. "You've finished eating. I won't have no trouble here." [243]

Sam scowled. "Well—I'll go after he comes in," he returned doggedly. "I won't run away at the sight of him."

Joe entered with a sullen air. He had already seen Sam's team outside.

"Morning," said Sam. His was the temper that is scrupulously polite to an enemy.

Joe muttered in his throat.

"Well, I'm just off," observed Sam. "How's the mud?"

Joe sneered. "No worse than usual," he replied.

It was hard for Sam to go after the sneer. He hesitated. But he had promised. He looked at Bela, but she would not meet his eye. Finally he shrugged and went out. They heard him talking to his horses outside. Joe, scowling and avoiding Bela's eye, dropped into the seat the other man had vacated.

"Breakfast," he muttered.

Bela knew very well that it was his custom to eat before he started out in the morning. She said nothing, but glanced at the clock on the dresser.

"Ah, you'll feed him any time he wants!" snarled Joe.

"I treat everybody the same," she answered coolly. "You can have breakfast if you want."

"Well, I do," he muttered.

She went into the kitchen and started her preparations. Returning, she cleared away the dirty dishes, not, however, before Joe had marked the second cup on the table.

When she put his food before him he said: "Get yourself a cup of coffee and sit down with me." He was really trying to be agreeable, not, however, with much success. [244]

"I got work to do," Bela mildly objected.

He instantly flared up again. "Ah! I thought you treated everybody the same!"

Bela shrugged, and, bringing coffee, sat down opposite him.

There was a silence. Joe, merely playing with the food on his plate, watched her with sullen, pained eyes, trying to solve the riddle of her. One could almost see the simple mental operations. Sam got along with her by jollying her. Very well, he would do the same.

"I ain't such a bad sort when I'm took right," he began, with a ghastly attempt to be facetious.

"No?"

"I like my joke as well as another."

"Yes?"

"You're a deep one!" he said with a leer, "but you can't fool me."

"Eat your breakfast," said Bela.

"This mysteriousness is a bluff!"

"Maybe."

Lacking encouragement, he couldn't keep this up long. He fell silent again, staring at her hungrily. Suddenly, with a sound between an oath and a groan, he swept the dishes aside. Bela sprang up warily, but he was too quick for her. Flinging an arm across, he seized her wrist.

"By George! I can't stand it any longer!" he cried. "What's behind that smooth face of yours? Ain't you got no heart making a man burn in hell like me?"

"Let go my arm!" said Bela.

"You're mine!" he cried. "You've got to be! I've said it, and I stick to it. If any man tries to come between us I'll kill him!" [245]

"Let go my arm!" she repeated.

"Not without a kiss!"

Instantly Bela was galvanized into action. Some men are foredoomed to choose the wrong moment. Joe was hopelessly handicapped by the table between them. He could not use his strength. As he sought to draw her toward him Bela, with her free hand, dealt him a stinging buffet on the ear.

They fell among the dishes. The coffee scalded him, and he momentarily relaxed his hold. Bela wriggled clear, unkissed. Joe capsized of his own weight, and, slipping off the end of the table, found himself on his back among broken dishes on the floor.

He picked himself up, scarcely improved in temper. Bela had disappeared. He sat down to wait for her, dogged, sheepish, a little inclined to weep out of self-pity.

Even now he would not admit the fact that she might like another man—a small, insignificant man—better than himself. Joe was the kind of man who will not take a refusal.

In a few minutes, getting no sign of her, he got up and looked into the tent kitchen. Old Mary Otter was there, alone, washing dishes with a perfectly bland face.

"Where's Bela?" he demanded, scowling.

"Her gone to company house for see Beattie's wife mak' jam puddin'," answered Mary.

Joe strode out of the door scowling and drove away. His horses suffered for his anger.

CHAPTER XX [246]

MALICIOUS ACTIVITY

Joe found the usual group of gossipers in the store of the French outfit. Beside the two traders, there were two of the latest arrivals from the outside, a policeman off duty, and young Mattison, of the surveying party, who had ridden in on a message from Graves, and was taking his time about starting back.

Up north it is unfashionable to be in a hurry. Of them all only Stiffy, in his little compartment at the back, was busy. He was totting up his beloved figures.

Joe found them talking about the night before, with references to Sam in no friendly strain. Joe had the wit to conceal from them a part of the rage that was consuming him, though it was not easy to do so. He sat down in the background, and for the most part kept his mouth shut. Anything that anybody could say against Sam was meat and drink to him.

"Blest if I can see what the girl sees in him," said Mahooley. "There are better men for her to pick from."

"He's spoiled our fun, damn him!" said another. "The place won't be the same again."

"Who is this fellow Sam?" asked one of the newcomers.

"A damn ornery little cook who's got his head swole," muttered Joe. [247]

"He kept his place till he got a team to drive," said Mattison.

"We kep' him in it, you mean."

"What for did you want to give him the job of teaming, Mahooley?" asked Mattison.

"Matter of business," replied the trader carelessly. "He was on the spot."

"Well, you can get plenty more now. Why not fire him?"

Mahooley looked a little embarrassed.

"Business is business," he said. "I don't fancy him myself, but he's working all right."

Joe's perceptions were sharpened by hate. He saw Mahooley's hesitation, and began speculating

on what reason the trader could have for not wanting to discharge Sam. He scented a mystery. Casting back in his mind, he began to fit a number of little things together.

Once, he remembered, somebody had told Mahooley one of the black horses had gone lame, and Mahooley had replied unthinkingly that it was not his concern. Why had he said that? Was somebody besides Mahooley backing Sam? If he could explode the mystery, maybe it would give him a handle against his rival.

"Well, I shouldn't think you'd let an ex-cook put it all over you," remarked the stranger.

This was too much for Joe's self-control. A dull, bricky flush crept under his skin.

"Put it over nothing!" he growled. "You come over to Bela's to-night if you want to see how I handle a cook!"

"Who is the old guy camped beside Bela's shack?" asked the stranger.

"Musq'oosis, a kind of medicine man of her tribe," answered Mahooley. [248]

"Is he her father?"

"No; her father was a white man."

"Who was he?" Joe asked.

Mahooley shrugged. "Search me! Long before my time."

"If old Musq'oosis is no relation, what does he hang around for?" asked the first questioner.

"Oh, he's always kind of looked after her," said Mahooley. "The other Indians hate her. They think she's too uppish."

"She feeds him; I guess that's reason enough for him to stick around," remarked Mattison.

Here Stiffy spoke up from his cubby-hole: "Hell! Musq'oosis don't need anybody to feed him. He's well fixed. Got a first-class credit balance."

Joe, ever on the watch, saw Mahooley turn his head abruptly and scowl at his partner. Stiffy closed his mouth suddenly. Joe, possessed by a single idea, jumped to the conclusion that Musq'oosis had something to do with the mystery he was on the track of. Anyhow, he determined to find out.

"A good balance?" he asked carelessly.

"I mean for an Indian," returned Stiffy quickly. "Nothing to speak of."

Joe was unconvinced. He bided his time.

The talk drifted on to other matters. Joe sat thrashing his brain for an expedient whereby he might get a sight of Musq'oosis's account on Stiffy's ledger.

By and by a breed came in with the news that a York boat was visible, approaching Grier's Point. This provided a welcome diversion for the company. A discussion arose as to whether it would be Stiffy and Mahooley's first boat of the season, or additional supplies for Graves. Finally they decided to ride down to the Point and see. [249]

"Come on, Joe," said one.

Joe assumed an air of laziness. "What's the use?" he said. "I'll stay here and talk to Stiffy."

When they had gone Joe still sat cudgelling his brain. He was not fertile in expedients. He was afraid to speak even indirectly of the matter on his breast for fear of alarming Stiffy by betraying too much eagerness. Finally an idea occurred to him.

"I say, Stiffy, how does my account stand?"

The trader told him his balance.

"What!" cried Joe, affecting indignation. "I know it's more than that. You've made a mistake somewhere."

This touched Stiffy at his weakest. "I never make a mistake!" he returned with heat. "You fellows go along ordering stuff, and expect your balance to stay the same, like the widow's cruse. Come and look for yourself!"

This was what Joe desired. He slouched over, grumbling. Stiffy explained how the debits were on one side, the credits on the other. Each customer had a page to himself. Joe observed that before turning up his account Stiffy had consulted an index in a separate folder.

Joe allowed himself to be reluctantly satisfied, and returned to his seat by the stove. He was advanced by learning how the book was kept, but the grand difficulty remained to be solved; how to get a look at it without Stiffy's knowledge.

Here fortune unexpectedly favoured him. When he was not adding up his columns, Stiffy was for ever taking stock. By rights, he should have been the chief clerk of a great city emporium. Before the others returned he began to count the articles on the shelves.

He struck a difficulty in the cans of condensed milk. Repeated countings gave the same total. "By Gad, we've been robbed!" he cried. "Unless there's still a case in the loft." [250]

He hastened to the stairs. The instant his weight creaked on the boards overhead the burly, lounging figure by the stove sprang into activity. Joe darted on moccasined feet to Stiffy's little sanctum, and with swift fingers turned up M in the index.

"Musq'oosis; page 452." Silently opening the big book, he thumbed the pages. The noises from upstairs kept him exactly informed of what Stiffy was doing.

Joe found the place, and there, in Stiffy's neat copper plate, was spread out all that he wished to know. It took him but a moment to get the hang of it. On the debit side: "To team, Sambo and Dinah, with wagon and harness, $578.00." Under this were entered various advances to Sam. On the other side Joe read: "By order on Gilbert Beattie, $578.00." Below were the different amounts paid by Graves for hauling.

Joe softly closed the book. So it was Musq'oosis who employed Sam! And Musq'oosis was a kind of guardian of Bela! It did not require much effort of the imagination to see a connection here. Joe's triumph in his discovery was mixed with a bitter jealousy.

However, he was pretty sure that Sam was ignorant of who owned the team he drove, and he saw an opportunity to work a pretty piece of mischief. But first he must make still more sure.

When Stiffy, having found the missing case, came downstairs again, Joe apparently had not moved.

A while later Joe entered the company store, and addressed himself to Gilbert Beattie concerning a plough he said he was thinking of importing. Beattie, seeing a disposition in the other man to linger and talk, encouraged it. This was new business. In any case, up north no man declines the offer of a gossip. Strolling outside, they sat on a bench at the door in the grateful sunshine. [251]

From where they were they could see Bela's shack below, with smoke rising from the cook tent and the old man's tepee alongside. Musq'oosis himself was squatting at the door, engaged upon some task with his nimble fingers. Consequently, no management on Joe's part was required to bring the conversation around to him. Seeing the trader's eye fall there, he had only to say:

"Great old boy, isn't he?"

"One of the best," said Beattie warmly. "The present generation doesn't produce 'em! He's as honest as he is intelligent, too. Any trader in the country would let him have anything he wanted to take. His word is as good as his bond."

"Too bad he's up against it in his old age," suggested Joe.

"Up against it, what do you mean?" asked Beattie.

"Well, he can't do much any more. And he doesn't seem to have any folks."

"Oh, Musq'oosis has something put by for a rainy day!" said Beattie. "For years he carried a nice little balance on my books."

"What did he do with it, then?" asked Joe carelessly.

Beattie suspected nothing more in this than idle talk.

"Transferred it to the French outfit," he said with a shrug. "I suppose he wanted Mahooley to know he's a man of means. He can't have spent any of it. I'll probably get it back some day." [252]

"How did he get it in the first place?" asked Joe casually. "Out of fur?"

"No," said Beattie; "he was in some kind of partnership with a man called Walter Forest, a white man. Forest died, and the amount was transferred to Musq'oosis. It's twenty years ago. I inherited the debt from my predecessor here."

Joe, seeing that the trader had nothing more of special interest to tell him, let the talk pass on to other matters. By and by he rose, saying:

"Guess I'll go down and talk to the old boy until dinner's ready."

"It is always profitable," said Beattie. "Come in again."

"I'll let you know about the plough," said Joe.

"Hello, Musq'oosis!" began Joe facetiously. "Fine weather for old bones, eh?"

"Ver' good," replied Musq'oosis blandly. The old man had no great liking for this burly youth with the comely, self-indulgent face, nor did he relish his style of address; however, being a philosopher and a gentleman, this did not appear in his face. "Sit down," he added hospitably.

Musq'oosis was making artificial flies against the opening of the trout season next month. With bits of feather, hair, and thread he was turning out wonderfully lifelike specimens—not according to the conventional varieties, but as a result of his own half-century's experience on neighbouring streams. A row of the completed product was stuck in a smooth stick, awaiting possible customers.

"Out of sight!" said Joe, examining them.

"I t'ink maybe sell some this year," observed Musq'oosis. "Plenty new men come." [253]

"How much?" asked Joe.

"Four bits."

"I'll take a couple. There's a good stream beside my place."

"Stick 'em in your hat."

After this transaction Musq'oosis liked Joe a little better. He entered upon an amiable dissertation on fly-fishing, to which Joe gave half an ear, while he debated how to lead up to what he really wanted to know. In the end it came out bluntly.

"Say, Musq'oosis, what do you know about a fellow called Walter Forest?"

Musq'oosis looked at Joe, startled. "You know him?" he asked.

"Yes," said Joe. Recollecting that Beattie had told him the man had been dead twenty years, he hastily corrected himself. "That is, not exactly. Not personally."

"Uh!" said Musq'oosis.

"I thought I'd ask you, you're such an old-timer."

"Um!" said Musq'oosis again. There was nothing in this so far to arouse his suspicions. But on principle he disliked to answer questions. Whenever it was possible he answered a question by asking another.

"Did you know him?" persisted Joe.

"Yes," replied Musq'oosis guardedly.

"What like man was he?"

"What for you want know?"

"Oh, a fellow asked me to find out," answered Joe vaguely. He gained assurance as he proceeded. "Fellow I met in Prince George. When he heard I was coming up here he said: 'See if you can find out what's become of Walter Forest. Ain't heard from him in twenty year.'"

"What this fellow call?" asked Musq'oosis. [254]

"Er—George Smith," Joe improvised. "Big, dark-complected guy. Traveller in the cigar line."

Musq'oosis nodded.

"Walter Forest died twenty year ago," he said.

"How?" asked Joe.

"Went through the ice wit' his team."

"You don't say!" said Joe. "Well! Well! I said I'd write and tell George."

Joe was somewhat at a loss how to go on. He said "Well! Well!" again. Finally he asked: "Did you know him well?"

"He was my friend," said Musq'oosis.

"Tell me about him," said Joe. "So I can write, you know."

Musq'oosis was proud of his connection with Walter Forest. There was no reason why he should not tell the story to anybody. Had he not urged upon Bela to use her own name? It never occurred to him that anyone could trace the passage of the father's bequest from one set of books to the other. So in his simple way he told the story of Walter Forest's life and death in the country.

"Well! Well!" exclaimed Joe. "Smitty will be interested. You said he was married. Did he leave any family?"

"His baby come after," said Musq'oosis. "Two months."

"What's become of it?"

Musq'oosis nodded toward the shack. "That is Bela," he said.

Joe clenched his hands to keep from betraying a start. This was what he wanted. He bit his lip to hide the cruel smile that spread upon it.

"Why you smile?" asked Musq'oosis. [255]

"No reason," replied Joe hastily. "I thought her name was Bela Charley."

"Her mot'er marry Charley Fish-Eater after," explained Musq'oosis. "People forget Walter Forest's baby. So call Bela Charley. Right name Bela Forest."

"Well," said Joe, "that's quite a story. Did he leave any property?"

Musq'oosis glanced at him sharply. His suspicions began to be aroused. "No," he said shortly.

"That's a lie!" thought Joe. Now that he had learned what he wanted to know, he took no further pains to hide his sneers. "I'll tell Smitty that Forest's got a fine girl for a daughter," he said, rising.

Musq'oosis's eyes followed him a little anxiously into the house.

The dinner-hour was drawing near, but none of the boarders had arrived yet. Joe found Bela putting the plates and cups on the table. Seeing him, she stood fast without fear, merely glancing over her shoulder to make sure her retreat was open.

"Hello!" said Joe, affecting a boisterous air. "Am I the first?"

She declined to unbend. "You got be'ave if you comin' here," she said coldly.

"Got to, eh? That's a nice way to speak to a friend."

"If you don' act decent you can't come here no more," she said firmly.

"How are you going to stop me?" he demanded truculently.

"I tell the ot'er boys," she said coolly. "They keep you out."

"You won't do that," he returned, sneering.

"You find out pretty soon." [256]

"You won't do that," he repeated. "Because I got something on you now."

She looked at him sharply. Then shrugged scornfully. "Everybody know all about me."

"There's something Sam don't know yet."

In spite of herself, she was betrayed into a sharp movement. Joe laughed.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

It was his humour to be mysterious. "Never mind. I know what I know."

Bela unconcernedly resumed her work. "You jus' bluffin'," she said.

"Oh, I'm bluffing, am I?" snarled Joe. He was the picture of a bad-tempered schoolboy. "If you don't treat me right you'll see if I am. I'll out with the story to-night before them all, before Sam."

"What story?" asked Bela. "You crazy, I t'ink."

"The story of how you're paying Sam's wages."

Bela stopped dead, and went pale. She struggled hard to command herself. "It's a lie!" she said.

"Like fun it is!" cried Joe, triumphing. "I got it bit by bit, and pieced it all together. I'm a little too clever for you, I guess. I know the whole thing now. How your father left the money to Musq'oosis when he died, and Musq'oosis bought the team from Mahooley, and made him give it to Sam to drive. I can see Sam's face when I tell that and hear all the fellows laugh."

Bela abandoned the useless attempt to bluff it out. She came opposite to where he was sitting, and put her hands on the table. "If you tell that I kill you!" she said softly.

Joe leaned back. "Pooh! You can't scare a man with threats like that. After I tell the mischief's done, anyhow." [257]

"I will kill you!" she said again.

Joe laughed. "I'll take my chance of it." Hitting out at random, he said: "I'll bet it was you scared the white woman into fits!"

To save herself Bela could not help betraying it in her face. Joe laughed uproariously.

"Gad! That'll make another good story to tell!"

"I will kill you!" repeated Bela dully.

Something in her desperate eyes warned him that one might press a primitive nature too far. He changed his tone.

"Mind you, I don't say I'm going to tell. I don't mean to tell if you do what I want."

"What you want?" she asked softly with glittering eyes.

"Not to be treated like dirt under anybody's feet, that's all," he replied threateningly. "To be treated as good as anybody else. You understand me?"

"I mak' no promise," said Bela.

"Well you know what you've got to expect if you don't."

CHAPTER XXI

[258]

SAM IS LATE

On the afternoon of the same day, Sam, clattering back from Graves's camp in his empty wagon, suddenly came upon Musq'oosis squatting like a little Buddha under a willow bush.

The spot was at the edge of the wide flats at the head of Beaver Bay. Immediately beyond the road turned and followed the higher ground along the water into the settlement. It was about half a mile to Bela's shack. Musq'oosis rose, and Sam pulled up.

"Come aboard," invited Sam. "What are you waiting up here for?"

"Waitin' for you," replied Musq'oosis.

He climbed into the wagon-box and Sam chirruped to his horses. The nervous little beasts stretched their flanks and were off at a bound. The whole outfit was in a hurry. Sam was hoping to be the first to arrive at the stopping-house.

Musq'oosis laid a claw on his arm. "Drive slow," he said. "I want talk. Too much bang and shake."

Sam reluctantly pulled his team into a walk. "Anything up?" he asked.

Musq'oosis shrugged, and answered the question with another. "Anybody comin' be'ind you?"

"Not near," replied Sam. "They weren't ready to start when I left. And I've come quick."

"Good!" said Musq'oosis. [259]

"What's the dope?" asked Sam curiously.

"Stiffy and Mawoolie's York boat come to-day," said Musq'oosis conversationally. "Bring summer outfit. Plenty all kind goods. Bring newspapers three weeks old."

"I heard all that," said Sam. "Mattison brought word around the bay."

"There's measles in the Indians out Tepiskow Lake."

Sam glanced sidewise at his passenger. "Is this what you wanted to tell me?"

Musq'oosis shrugged.

"Out with it!" said Sam. "I want to get a word with Bela before the gang comes."

"Don't stop at Bela's to-night," said Musq'oosis.

Sam frowned. "So that's it! Why not?"

"Goin' be bad trouble I t'ink."

"I know," said Sam. "Joe's been talking big around the settlement all day. Mattison told that, too."

Musq'oosis looked at him surprised. "You know it, and you want go! You can't fight Joe. Too much big!"

"Maybe," said Sam grimly; "but I'll do my damnedest."

Musq'oosis was silent for a moment. Evidently this contingency had not entered into his calculations.

"Bela can't have no trouble there," he finally suggested. "If the place get a bad name Gilbert Beattie put her out."

Sam was taken aback. "I'm sorry!" he said, frowning. "I never thought of that. But I've got to consider myself a little, too. I can't let Joe bluff me out. Nice name I'd get around here."

"Nobody 'spec' you fight big man lak Joe."

"I've got to do it just the same."

"Only to-night." [260]

"What good putting it off? To-morrow it would be the same. I'm just beginning to get on. I've got to make good! Lord! I know what it is to be the under dog! No more of that! Joe can lay me out cold, but I'll never quit!"

"If Beattie put Bela out, she got no place to go," pleaded Musq'oosis.

Sam scowled helplessly. "What can I do?" he asked. "Bela's nearly done for me already up here. She shouldn't ask this of me. I'll put it up to her. She'll understand."

"No use stoppin'," said Musq'oosis. "Bela send me up road tell you not stop to-night."

Sam, in his helplessness, swore under his breath and fell silent for awhile. Finally his face cleared a little. "Tell you what I'll do," he said. "I won't stop now and let them find me there. I'll drive on down to the point and fix my horses for the night. Then I'll walk back. By that time everybody will be there. They will see that I'm not afraid to come, anyhow. The rest is up to Bela. She can refuse to let me in if she wants. And if Joe wants to mix things up, I'll oblige him down the road a piece."

"All right, I tell Bela," said Musq'oosis. "Let me down now. Not want anybody know I talk to you."

Sam pulled up. As the old man was about to get down he offered Sam his hand.

"Ain't you little bit scare of Joe?" he asked curiously.

Sam smiled wryly. "Sure!" he confessed. "I'm a whole lot scared of him. Hasn't he got thirty pounds on me, weight and reach beside. It's because I'm so scared that I can't take anything from him. Do you understand that?"

"I on'er stan'," the old Indian said pithily. "Walter Forest tell me lak that long tam ago. You brave lak him, I t'ink." [261]

Sam shook his head. "'Tisn't a case of bravery, but of plumb necessity!"

From the window of the French outfit store Sam was seen driving down to Grier's Point.

"Scared off!" cried Joe with a great laugh. "Lucky for him, too!"

An hour later Bela was feeding the largest number of men that had ever gathered in her shack. Except the policeman on duty, and Gilbert Beattie, every white man in the district had been drawn by the word passed from mouth to mouth that there was "going to be something doing to-night."

Even Musq'oosis, who had never before ventured among the white men without a particular invitation, came in. He did not eat at the table, but sat on the floor in the corner, watching and listening with bright eyes, like some queer, philosophic little ape.

As time passed, and Sam did not turn up, the company was frankly disappointed. They abused him thoughtlessly, forgetting in their chagrin at losing a sensation, that Sam might have declined a contest so unequal with entire honour. Bela kept her eyes down to hide their angry glitter at the men's comments.

Joe Hagland was in the highest spirits. In him this took the form of boisterousness and arrogance. Not only did he usurp the place at the head of the table, but he held everybody off from the place at his right.

"That's reserved," he said to all comers.

As in every party of men, there was an obsequious element that encouraged Joe with flattery. Among the sturdier spirits, however, Big Jack, Mahooley, Coulson, an honest resentment developed. [262]

In particular they objected to Joe's changed air toward Bela. He was not openly insulting to her, but into his voice had crept a peremptory note apparent to every ear. He called her attention to empty plates, and otherwise acted the part of a host. In reality he was imitating Sam's manner of the night before, but the effect was different.

If Bela had shown any resentment it would have been all up with Joe. They would have thrown him out in less time than it takes to tell. But Bela did his bidding with a cold, suppressed air. The other men watched her, astonished and uneasy. None had ever seen her like this.

When the dinner was fairly under way it transpired who the vacant place was for.

"Come and sit down, Bela!" cried Joe. "Lend us the light of your handsome face to eat by. Have something yourself. Don't be a stranger at your own table!"

Big Jack scowled into his plate, and Coulson bit his lip. Their hands itched for Joe's collar. Unfortunately among men, no man likes to be the first to administer a public rebuke. The least sign from Bela would have been sufficient, but she gave them none. She made believe not to have heard Joe. He repeated his invitation in louder tones.

"I never sit," she said quietly.

"Time that rule was broken!" cried Joe.

"I busy."

"Hang it, let the old woman serve! Every man has had one plateful. Come and talk to me."

All eyes were on Bela. She hesitated, then went and sat as Joe commanded. The other men could scarcely believe their eyes. Bela to take orders in public like this! Her inscrutable exterior gave [263] no indication of what was passing within.

There was, perhaps, a hint of pain, anger in her eyes, but hidden so deep they could not see it. The obvious inference was that Joe had won her at last. She went down in their estimation. Every man shrugged, so to speak, and let Joe have his way.

That youth swelled with gratified vanity. He heightened his jocular air; his gallantry had an insolent ring. "Say, we'll pay double if you let us look at you while we eat. You'll save money, too; we won't eat so much. We'll take you for dessert!"

The other men were uneasy. If this was Joe's and Bela's way of making love they wished they would do it in private. They were slow-thinking men, accustomed to taking things at face value. Like all men, they were shy of inquiring too far into an emotional situation.

Bela did not eat, but sat still, silent and walled-up. At such moments she was pure Indian. Long afterward the men recollected the picture she made that night, still and dignified as a death mask.

Joe could not leave Sam alone. "I wonder where our friend the ex-cook is to-night?" he inquired facetiously of the company. "Boiling his own pot at the Point, I suppose. He don't seem to hanker much for the society of men. That's as it should be. Men and cooks don't gee."

Anyone looking closely would have seen Bela's breast rise and fall ominously, but no one looked closely. Her face gave no sign.

"Sam was a little too big for his shoes last night," Joe went on. "To-day I guess he thinks better ——" [264]

"Hello! Somebody talking about me?" cried a cheerful voice from the door.

Sixteen men turned their heads as one. They saw Sam by the door smiling. Bela involuntarily jumped up, and the box she was sitting on fell over. Joe, caught up in the middle of a sentence, stared with his mouth open, a comic expression of dismay fixed on his features.

Sam came in. His eyes were shining with excitement.

"What's the matter?" he asked, laughing. "You all look as if you saw a ghost!" To Bela he said: "Don't disturb yourself. I've had my supper. I just walked up for a bit of sociability before turning in, if you've no objection."

He waited with a significant air for her to speak. There was nothing naive about Sam's light manner; he was on the *qui vive* for whatever might come.

Bela tried to answer him, and could not. Her iron will was no longer able to hide the evidences of agitation. Her lips were parted and her breath was coming fast. She kept her eyes down.

There was a highly charged silence in the shack. All knew that the turn of the drama depended on the next word to be spoken. They watched Bela, bright-eyed.

By this time Joe had partly recovered his self-possession. "Let him go!" he said roughly. "We don't want no cooks around!"

Sam ignored him. "Can I stay?" he asked Bela, smiling with a peculiar hardness. "If you don't want me, all right. But it must come from you."

Bela raised her eyes imploringly to him and let them fall again.

Sam refused to take it for an answer.

"Can I stay?" he asked again. [265]

"Ah, tell him to go before he's thrown out!" cried Joe.

That settled it. Bela's head went up with a jerk, and her eyes flashed savagely at Joe. To Sam she said clearly: "Come in, my house is open to all."

"Thanks," said Sam.

Bela glared at Joe, defying him to do his worst. Joe refused her challenge. His eyes bolted. He scowled and muttered under his breath.

Sam, taking in the situation, walked quickly to Bela's place, and picking up the box sat on it, and smiled directly into Joe's discomfited face.

That move won him more than one friend in the shack. Young Coulson's eyes sparkled with admiration. Big Jack frowned at Sam, divided between old resentment and new respect.

Sam quickly followed up his advantage.

"Seems you weren't expecting me this evening," he said quietly. "I wouldn't have missed it for a lot. Heard there was going to be something special doing. How about it, Joe?"

Joe was no match for him at this kind of game. He looked away, muttering.

"What's on, boys?" asked Sam. "Vaudeville or parlour charades?"

He won a hearty laugh by it, and once more Joe felt the situation slipping away from him. Finally he thought of a way of getting back at Sam.

"Bela!" he cried roughly. "You bring another box and sit down here."

Sam stared, genuinely amazed at his tone.

"There is no room," said Bela in a wooden voice.

"You bring over a box!" cried Joe peremptorily.

Sam's face was grim. "My friend, that's no way to speak to a lady," he said softly. [266]

This was the kind of opening Joe wanted. "What the hell is it to you?" he shouted.

"And that's no way to speak to a man!"

"A man, no; but plenty good enough for a—cook!"

At Sam's elbow was a cup with tea-dregs in the bottom. He picked it up with a casual air and tossed the contents into Joe's face.

CHAPTER XXII [267]

MUSCLE AND NERVE

A gasp went around the table. Joe sprang up with a bellow of rage. Sam was already up. He kicked the impeding box away. When Joe rushed him he ran around the other side of the table.

Sam had planned everything out. Above all he wished to avoid a rough and tumble, in which he would stand no chance at all. He had speed, wind, and nerve to pit against a young mountain of muscle.

"Will you see fair play, boys?" he cried.

"Sure!" answered half a dozen voices.

Big Jack stopped Joe in mid-career. "Let's do everything proper," he said grimly.

By this time all were up. Of one accord they shoved the trestles back against the wall and kicked the boxes underneath. Every breast responded to the thrill of the keenest excitement known to man—a fight with fists.

Sam and Joe, obeying a clothed creature's first impulse, wriggled out of their coats and flung them on the ground. Joe took off his boots. Sam was wearing moccasins.

Young Coulson came to Sam with tears of vexation actually standing in his eyes. He gripped Sam's hand.

"I can't be present at a thing like this," he said. "Oh, damn the luck! I'd lose my stripes if it came out. But I'm with you. I hope you'll lick the tar out of him! I'll be watching through the window," [268] he added in a whisper. He ran out.

Big Jack took the centre of the floor. "I'll referee this affair if agreeable to both," he said.

"Suits me," replied Sam briefly.

Jack pointed out their respective corners and called for a second for each. Several volunteered to help Joe. He chose young Mattison.

Sam remained alone in his corner. While his pluck had won him friends, there was no man who wished to embrace a cause which all thought was hopeless. Young Joe was a formidable figure. He had calmed down now.

From behind the tall white men a little bent figure appeared and went to Sam.

"I be your man," he whispered; "if you not ashame' for a red man."

Sam smiled swiftly in his white, set face, and gripped the old man's hand hard. "Good man!" he said. "You're the best!"

Mahooley, Birley, and another, abashed by this little scene, now stepped forward. Sam waved them back.

"Musq'oosis is my second," he said.

"Straight Marquis of Queensberry rules," said Big Jack. "No hitting in the break-away."

This was an advantage to Sam.

"Time!" cried Big Jack.

The adversaries stepped out of their corners.

All this while Bela had been standing by the kitchen door with her hands pressed tight to her breast and her agonized eyes following all that went on. She did not clearly understand. But when they advanced toward each other she knew. She ran into the middle of the room between them. [269]

"Stop!" she cried. "This is my house. I won't have no fightin' here!" She paused, shielding Sam and glaring defiantly around her. "You cowards, mak' them fight! This is no fair fight. One is too big!"

All the men became horribly uneasy. In this man's affair they had completely overlooked the woman. After all, it was her house. And it was too dark now to pull it off outside.

The silence was broken by a sneering laugh from Joe. He made a move as if to get his boots again. The sound was like a whiplash on Sam. He turned to Bela, white with anger.

"Go to the kitchen!" he commanded. "Shut the door behind you. I started this, and I'm going to see it through. Do you want to shame me again?"

Bela collapsed under his bitter, angry words. Her head fell forward, and she retreated to the kitchen door like a blind woman. She did not go out. She stayed there through the terrible moments that followed, making no sound, and missing no move with those tragic, wide eyes.

The adversaries advanced once more, Big Jack stepping back. The two circled warily, looking for an opening. They made a striking contrast. "David and Goliath," somebody whispered.

Joe's head was thrust forward between his burly shoulders and his face lowered like a thundercloud. Sam, silent and tense, smiled and paraded on his toes.

"Why don't you start something, Jeffries?" asked Sam.

Joe, with a grunt of rage, leaped at him with a sledge-hammer swing that would have ended the fight had it landed. Sam ducked and came up on the other side. Joe's momentum carried him clear across the room. [270]

Sam laughed. "Missed that one, Jumbo," he taunted. "Try another."

Joe rushed back and swung again. Once more Sam ducked, this time as he went under Joe's arm, contriving to land an upper-cut, not of sufficient force to really shake the mountain, but driving him mad with rage.

Joe wheeled about, both arms going like flails. This was what Sam desired. He kept out of reach. He kept Joe running from one side of the room to the other. Joe was not built for running. At the end of the round, the big man was heaving for breath like a foundered horse.

Such was the general style of the battle. The spectators, pressed against the wall to give them plenty of room, roared with excitement.

In the beginning the cries were all for Joe. Then Sam's clever evasions began to arouse laughter. Finally a voice or two was heard on Sam's side. This was greatly stimulating to Sam, who had steeled himself to expect no favour, and correspondingly depressing to Joe.

For three rounds Sam maintained his tactics without receiving a serious blow. He was trying to break the big man's wind—not good at the best—and to wear him out in a vain chase. He aimed to make him so blind with rage he could not see to land his blows. To this end he kept up a running fire of taunts.

"I shan't have to knock you out, Blow-Hard. You're doing for yourself nicely. Come on over here. Pretty slow! Pretty slow! Who was your dancing teacher, Joe? You're getting white around the lips now. Bum heart. You won't last long!"

Between rounds little Musq'oosis, watching all that Mattison did, did likewise for his principal. [271]

Finally the spectators began to grow impatient with too much footwork. They required a little blood to keep up their zest. Sam was blamed.

"Collide! Collide!" they yelled. "Is this a marathon or hare and hounds? Corner him, Joe! Smash him! Stand, you cook, and take your punishment!"

Big Jack fixed the last speaker with a scowl.

"What do you want—a murder?" he growled.

The referee's sympathies were clearly veering to Sam's corner. Big Jack, whatever his shortcomings, was a good sport, and Joe was showing a disposition to fight foul. Jack watched him closely in the clinches. Joe was beginning to seek clinches to save his wind. Jack, in parting them, received a sly blow meant for Sam.

Like a flash, Jack's own experienced right jabbed Joe's stomach, sending him reeling back into his corner. The spectators howled in divided feelings. Jack, however, controlled the situation with a look.

In the fourth round Joe turned sullen and refused to force the fighting any longer. He stood in front of his corner, stooping his shoulders and swinging his head like a gorilla. Such blows as Sam had been able to land had all been addressed to Joe's right eye. His beauty was not thereby improved.

Now he stood, deaf alike to Sam's taunts and to the urgings of his own supporters. Sam, dancing in front of him, feinting and retreating, could not draw a blow. Strategy was working in Joe's dull brain. He dropped his arms.

Instantly Sam ran in with another blow on the damaged eye. Over-confidence betrayed him. Joe's right was waiting. The slender figure was lifted clean from the floor by the impact. He crashed down in a heap and, rolling over, lay on his face, twitching. [272]

A roar broke from the spectators. That was what they wanted.

Bela ran out from her corner, distracted. Musq'oosis intercepted her.

"No place for girl," he said sternly. "Go back."

"He's dead! He's dead!" she cried wildly.

"Fool! Only got wind knocked out!" He thrust her back to her place by the door.

Big Jack was stooping over the prostrate figure, counting with semaphore strokes of his arm: "One! Two! Three!"

The spectators began to think it was all over, and the tension let down. Joe grinned, albeit wearily. There was not much left in him.

Meanwhile Sam's brain was working with perfect clearness. He stirred cautiously.

"Nothing broken," he thought. "Take nine seconds for wind enough to keep away till the end of the round. Then you have him!"

At the count of nine he sprang up, and the spectators roared afresh. Joe, surprised, went after him without overmuch heart. Sam managed to escape further punishment.

A growing weariness now made Joe's attacks spasmodic and wild. He was working his arms as if his hands had leaden weights attached to them. A harrowing anxiety appeared in his eyes. At the sight of it a little spring of joy welled up in Sam's breast.

"Pretty near all in, eh?" he said. "You're going to get licked, and you know it! There's fear in your eye. You always had a yellow streak. Crying Joe Hagland!"

Joe, missing a wild swing, fell of his own momentum amid general laughter. Derision ate the heart out of him. He rose with a hunted look in his eyes. Sam suddenly took the offensive, and [273] rained a fusillade of blows on the damaged eye, the heart, the kidneys. Joe, taken by surprise, put up a feeble defence.

The next round was the last. Around Caribou Lake they still talk about it. A miracle took place before their eyes. David overcame Goliath at his own game. Jack beat down the giant. At the referee's word, Sam sprang from his corner like a whirlwind, landing right and left before Joe's guard was up.

The weary big man was beaten to his knees. Struggling up, he tried to clinch, only to be met by another smashing blow in the face. He turned to escape, but the dancing figure with the battering fists was ever in front of him.

He went down again, and, stretching out on the floor, began to blubber aloud in his confusion and distress.

"He's had enough," said Sam grimly.

The result was received in the silence of surprise. A few laughed at the spectacle Joe made. Others merely shrugged. The victory was not a popular one.

Big Jack went through the formality of counting, though it was patent to all that the fighting was done. Afterward he turned to Sam and shook his hand.

"I didn't think you had it in you," he said.

This was sweet to Sam.

Joe raised himself, snivelling, and commenced to revile Sam.

"Aw, shut up!" cried Big Jack, with strong disgust. "You're licked!"

Joe got to his feet. "Only by trickery!" he cried. "He wouldn't stand up to me! I could have knocked him out any time. Everybody was against me! It takes the heart out of a man." Tears threatened again.

General laughter greeted this. [274]

"That's all right!" cried Joe furiously from the door. "I'll get you yet!" He went out.

The others now began to crowd around Sam, congratulating him a little sheepishly, slapping his back. A great, sweet calm filled Sam. This was the moment he had dreamed of during his long days on the trail and his lonely nights at Grier's Point.

He had made good. He was a man among men. They acknowledged it. It was like a song inside him. The hideous wound that Bela had dealt him was healed.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. From her corner she was gazing at him as at a young god. Calm filled her breast, too. Joe was gone, and her secret still safe. Surely after to-night, she thought, there would be no need of keeping it.

They heard Joe climb into his wagon outside and curse at his horses. Instead of turning into the road, he drove back to the door and pulled up. Bela turned pale again.

Joe shouted through the doorway: "Anyhow, no woman keeps me!"

"Damn you! What do you mean?" cried Sam.

"You owe the clothes you wear to her, and the gun you carry! The horses you drive are hers!"

"You lie!" cried Sam, springing toward the door.

Joe whipped up his horses. "Ask her!" he shouted back.

Sam whirled about and, seizing the wrist of the shrinking Bela, dragged her out of her corner.

"Is it true," he demanded—"the horses? Answer me before them all!"

She fought for breath enough to lie.

He saw it. "If you lie to me again I'll kill you!" he cried. "Answer me! Is it your team that I drive?" [275]

His violence overbore her defences. "Yes," she said tremulously. "What difference does it make?"

The men looked on, full of shamefaced curiosity at this unexpected turn. One or two, more delicate-minded, went outside.

Sam's ghastly wound was torn wide open again. "What difference?" he cried, white and blazing. "Oh, my God, it means you've made a fool of me a second time! It means I've nerved myself and trained myself to fight this brute only to find he's able to give me the laugh after all!"

"Sam—you so poor, then," she murmured.

It was like oil on the flames. He flung off her beseeching hand. "I didn't ask your help!" he cried passionately. "I told you to leave me alone! You can't understand a man has his pride. You're loathsome to me now!"

Mahooley interfered with good intent. "Sam, you're foolish. What difference does it make? Nobody blames you!"

"Keep your mouth out of this!" cried Sam, whirling on him.

To Bela he went on blindly: "The team is at the Point. I'll have it here in an hour! My credit at the store is yours! You hear that, Mahooley? Turn over what's coming to me to her. The gun, the axe, the blankets I'll keep. I'll pay you for them when I earn it. I'll make you a present of my labour, driving for you. And I hope to God I'll never see you again!" He ran out.

Bela stood in an oddly arrested attitude, as if an icy blast had congealed her in full motion. There was no sense in her eyes. In acute discomfort, the men stood on one foot, then the other. [276]

Mahooley, as the leader, felt that it was incumbent on him to make the first move.

"Look here, Bela," he began. "Don't you take on——"

The sound of his voice brought her to life. She threw back her head with a laugh. It had a wretched, mirthless sound; but a laugh is a laugh. They were glad to be deceived. They laughed with her.

"Tak' on?" cried Bela recklessly. Her voice had a tinny ring. "W'at do I care? I glad he gone. I glad both gone. I never let them come here again. Maybe we have some peace now."

Naturally the other men were delighted.

"Good for you, Bela!" they cried. "You're a game sport, all right! You're right; they're not worth

bothering about. We'll stand by you!"

She seemed unimpressed by their enthusiasm.

"Time to go," she said, shepherding them toward the door. "Come to-morrow. I have ver' good dinner to-morrow."

"You bet I'll be here!" "Count on me!" "Me, too!" "You're all right, Bela!" "Good night!" "Good night!"

They filed out.

Only Musq'oosis was left sitting on the floor, staring into the fire. He did not turn around as Bela came back from the door.

"Why don't you go, too?" she demanded in a harsh, tremulous voice.

"T'ink maybe you want talk to me."

"Talk!" she cried. "Too moch talk! I sick of talkin'!" Her voice was breaking. "Go 'way! Let me be!"

He got up. He had dropped his innocent affectations. "My girl——" he began simply. [277]

"Go 'way!" cried Bela desperately. "Go quick, or I hit you!"

He shrugged and went out. Bela slammed the door after him and dropped the bar in place. She barred the other door.

She looked despairingly around the disordered cabin, and moving uncertainly to the nearest box, dropped upon it, and spreading her arms on the table, let her head fall between them and wept like a white woman.

CHAPTER XXIII [278]

MAHOOLEY'S INNINGS

The next day, as far as the settlement was concerned, Sam Gladding had ceased to be. Bringing the team to Bela's as he had promised, he left it tied outside, and the night had swallowed him.

At first it was supposed he had started to walk out around the north shore, the way he had come; but Indians from below Grier's Point reported that no white man had passed that way. They found likewise that he had not gone toward Tepiskow. He could not have crossed the river, save by swimming, an impossible feat burdened with a rifle and an axe.

Those who came in from around the bay said he had not been seen over there, though Joe Hagland had barricaded himself in his shack in the expectation of a visit.

It was finally decided that Sam must be hiding in the bush somewhere near, and that he would come in with his tail between his legs when he got hungry.

There was not much concern one way or the other. Most of the men indulged in the secret hope that Sam would stay away. He was a game kid, they were now ready to confess, but altogether too touchy; there was no getting along comfortably with him. Had he not almost put the resteraw out of business? It was as Bela said—if both the hotheads kept out of the way, they might have [279] some peace and comfort there.

Sergeant Coulson had compunctions. He proposed getting up a search-party for Sam. The idea was laughed down. Nice fools they'd make of themselves, opined Mahooley, setting out to look for a man in good health and in the full possession of his faculties who hadn't committed any crime.

There was a good attendance at Bela's dinner, and a full house at night. To their undiscerning eyes Bela seemed to be her old self. That is to say, she was not moping over what had happened. A wise man would have guessed that she was taking it much too quietly; he would have seen the danger signals in that unnaturally quick eye. Bela had dropped her usual air of reserve. To-night she seemed anxious to please. She smiled on each man in a way that bade him hope. She laughed oftener and louder. It had a conscious, provocative ring that the wise man would have grieved to hear. Competition became keen for her smiles.

When they finished their supper there were loud calls for her to come in and sit among them. Bela shrugged and, picking up a box, stood looking over them. They fell suddenly silent, wondering which she would choose. She laughed mockingly and, turning, carried her box in front of the fire.

From this point Mahooley, in the midst of the general chaffing, unexpectedly received a narrow-eyed look over her shoulder that went to his head a little. He promptly arose and carried his box to her side. Mahooley was the greatest man present, and none presumed to challenge him.

Bela bridled and smiled. "What for you come over here?" she demanded. "I not tell you to."

"Oh, I took a chance," said the trader coolly. At the same time his wicked, dancing little eyes informed her that he knew very well she had asked him over. The sanguine Mahooley was no [280] celibate, and he cared not who knew it.

"You think 'cause you the trader you do w'at you like," said Bela mockingly.

"Any man can do pretty near what he wants if he has the will."

"What is will?"

"Oh—determination."

"You got plenty 'termination, I suppose." This with a teasing smile.

Mahooley looked at her sharply. "Look here, what are you getting at?" he demanded.

"Not'ing."

"I'm no hand to bandy words. I'm plain spoken. I go direct to a thing."

Bela shrugged.

"You can't play with me, you know. Is there anything you want?"

"No," said Bela with a provoking smile.

As Mahooley studied her, looking into the fire, a novel softness confused him. His astuteness was slipping from him, even while he bragged of it. "Damned if you're not the handsomest thing in this part of the world!" he said suddenly. It was surprised out of him. His first maxim was: "A man must never let anything on with these girls."

"Pooh! W'at you care about 'an'some?" jeered Bela. "Girls all the same to you."

This flecked Mahooley on the raw. A deep flush crept into his face. "Ah, a man leads a man's life," he growled. "That ain't to say he don't appreciate something good if it comes his way."

"They say you treat girls pretty bad," said Bela.

"I treat 'em as they deserve," replied Mahooley sullenly. "If a girl don't get any of the good out of [281] me, that's up to her."

It was the first time one of these girls had been able to put him out of countenance.

"Poor girls!" murmured Bela.

He looked at her sharply again. The idea that a native girl might laugh at him, the trader, was a disconcerting one. "Some time when the gang ain't around I'll show you I ain't all bad," he said ardently.

Bela shrugged.

Musq'oosis was in the shack again to-night. He sat on the floor in the corner beyond the fire-place. Neither Bela nor Mahooley paid any attention to him, but he missed nothing of their talk.

By and by the group around the table moved to break up.

"I'll go with them and come back after," whispered Mahooley.

"No you don't," said Bela quickly. "W'en they go I lock the door. Both door."

"Sure! But it could be unlocked for a friend."

"Not for no man!" said Bela. "Not to-night any'ow," she added with a sidelong look.

"You devil!" he growled. "Don't you fool yourself you can play with a man like me. A door has got to be either open or shut."

"Well, it will be shut—to-night," she said, with a smile dangerous and alluring.

When they had gone she sent Musq'oosis also.

"Not want talk?" he asked wistfully.

She laughed painfully and harshly.

"I your good friend," he said.

"Go to bed," she returned.

He waited outside until he heard her bolt both doors. For an hour after that he sat within the [282] door of his tepee with the flap up, watching the road. Nothing stirred on it.

Bela had obtained Gilbert Beattie's permission to keep her team in the company's stable for the

present. After breakfast next morning, without saying anything to anybody, Musq'oosis climbed the hill and hitched Sambo and Dinah to the wagon. Taking a native boy to drive, he disappeared up the road. He was gone all day.

Bela was setting the table for supper when he came in. With an elaborate affectation of innocence he went to the fire to warm his hands.

"Where you been?" she demanded, frowning.

"Drivin'."

"Who tell you tak' the horses?"

"Nobody."

"Those my horses!" she said stormily.

Musq'oosis shrugged deprecatingly. "Horses go out. Get wicked in stable all tam."

"All right," said Bela. "I say when they go out."

"W'at's the matter?" asked Musq'oosis mildly. "Before w'at is mine is yours, and yours is mine."

"All right. Don't tak' my horses," Bela repeated stubbornly.

Musq'oosis sat down by the fire. Bela rattled the cups to justify herself. The old man stole a glance at her, wondering how he could say what he wished to say without bringing about another explosion.

"For why you mad at me?" he asked finally.

"You mind your business!" Bela cried passionately. "Keep out of my business. I know where you been to-day. You been lookin' for Sam. Everybody t'ink I send you look for Sam. That mak' me [283] mad. I wouldn't go to Sam if he was bleed to death by the road!"

"Nobody see me," said Musq'oosis soothingly.

"Everyt'ing get known here," she returned. "The trees tell it."

"I know where he is," Musq'oosis murmured with an innocent air.

Bela made a clatter among the dishes.

After a while he said again: "I know where he is."

Bela, still affecting deafness, flounced into the kitchen.

She did not come back until the supper guests were arriving.

With a glance of defiance toward Musq'oosis, Bela welcomed Mahooley with a sidelong smile. That, she wished the Indian to know, was her answer. The red-haired trader was delighted. To-night the choicest cuts found their way to his plate.

When she was not busy serving, Bela sat on a box at Mahooley's left and suffered his proprietary airs. Afterward they sat in front of the fire, whispering and laughing together, careless of what anybody might think of it.

This was not particularly entertaining to the rest of the crowd, and the party broke up early.

"Bela is changed," they said to each other.

At the door Stiffy said, as a matter of form: "Coming, Mahooley?"

Mahooley, glancing obliquely at the inscrutable Bela, decided on a bold play.

"Don't wait for me," he said. "I'll stop and talk to Bela for a while. Musq'oosis will play propriety," he added with a laugh. [284]

Bela made no remark, and the shack emptied except for the three of them. Mary Otter had gone to call at the mission.

For a while Mahooley passed the time in idly teasing Musq'oosis after his own style.

"Musq'oosis, they tell me you were quite a runner in your young days."

"So," said the old man good-humouredly.

"Yes, fellow said when the dinner-bell rang in camp, you beat the dog to the table!"

Mahooley supplied the laughter to his own jest.

"Let him be," said Bela sullenly.

"Don't mak' stop," observed Musq'oosis, smiling. "I lak hear what fonny thoughts come in his head."

Mahooley glanced at him narrowly, suspecting a double meaning.

When the rumble of the last wagon died away in the distance, Mahooley said carelessly: "Well, Musq'oosis, you know the old saying: 'Two is company, three is none.'"

Musq'oosis appeared not to have understood.

"In other words, your room is preferred to your company."

Musq'oosis did not budge from the position of the squatting idol. His face likewise was as bland and blank as an image's.

"Oh, in plain English, get!" said Mahooley.

"Go to your teepee," added Bela shortly.

Musq'oosis sat fast.

Mahooley jumped up in a rage. "This is a bit too thick! Get out before I throw you out!"

Musq'oosis, with the extraordinary impassivity of the red race, continued to stare before him. Mahooley, with an oath, seized him by the collar and jerked him to his feet. This was too much for [285] Bela. Her hard air broke up. Jumping to her feet, she commenced to belabour Mahooley's back with her fists.

"Let him go! Let him go!" she commanded.

Mahooley dropped the old man and turned around astonished. "What's the matter with you? You told him yourself to go."

"I don't care," said Bela. "Now I want him stay."

"What do you think I am?" cried Mahooley. "I don't want no third party present when I call on a girl."

She shrugged indifferently. "It wouldn't do you no good to put him out. I got not'ing for you. Not to-night."

Mahooley seized her wrist. "My God, if you think you're going to play fast and loose——"

Bela smiled—scornfully, unafraid, provoking. "W'at you t'ink?" she said. "I not same lak those girls down by your place. They come w'en you whistle. I come when I ready. Maybe I never come."

There was a battle between their eyes. "You need a master!" cried Mahooley.

Her eyes glowed with as strong a fire as his. "You can't get me easy as them," said Bela.

Mahooley laughed and dropped her wrist. "Oh, you want a bit of wooing!" he cried. "All right. You're worth it."

Bela changed her tactics again. She smiled at him dazzlingly. "Go now. Come to-morrow."

He went willingly enough. He did not know it, but he was well on the way of being tamed.

"Go!" said Bela to Musq'oosis.

"I got talk to you," he said.

"Talk! Talk!" cried Bela irritably. "You bus' my head open wit' your talk. I had enough talk. Go to [286] bed."

"No, to-night I goin' stay," said Musq'oosis calmly. "I your fat'er's friend, I your friend. I see you goin' to the bad. I got say somesing, I guess."

Bela laughed harshly. "Bad! Ol' man talk! What is bad? Everything is bad!"

"Mahooley is bad to women," said Musq'oosis.

"I know that. He can't hurt me. Because I hate him. I goin' mak' a fool of him. You see."

"Mahooley never marry you," said the old man.

"Marry me if I want," said Bela defiantly. "I got him goin' already. But I not want marry him. Not marry no man, me! When you marry a man, you his slave. Always I goin' live in my house and have men come see me. Men are fools. I do w'at I like wit' 'em."

"That is bad talk," said Musq'oosis.

"All right!" cried Bela passionately. "I goin' be bad woman now. I lak that. I am good woman before. W'at do I get? I get throw down. I get cursed. Now I goin' be bad! I have a fire inside me burn me up lak dry grass. I got do somesing. I goin' be moch bad. Everybody talk about me. Men fight for me! I am handsome. What's the use bein' good? I not goin' cry again. I goin' laugh and have some fun now!"

Musq'oosis let it all come out before he spoke. When his opportunity came he said calmly: "You

are a big fool. You don't know w'at's the matter wit' you."

She fell into his trap. "W'at is the matter wit' me?" she demanded sullenly.

"Sam!" he said scornfully. "I tell you before. You what they call in love wit' Sam. It is the white woman's sickness."

Bela gazed at him a moment in white silence. Her tongue was unable to convey its load of anger. [287]
She flung her arms up helplessly.

"Love him!" she stammered. "I hate him! I hate him! I am burning with my hate! I—I can't say it! I lak see Joe strike him down. I lak see the men mak' mock of him. I would laugh. That mak' me feel little better."

Musq'oosis shrugged.

"Maybe before I love him," she went on passionately. "I want be friends. I want help him because he poor. Always I am think how can I help him, not mak' him mad. I buy horses for him. I come here so I feed him good and mak' him strong. W'at he do for me? He shame me! Twice he shame me before all the people! He throw me away lik' dirt. Now, all my good feeling is turn bad inside. I hate him!"

Tears poured down her cheeks, and sobs choked her utterance. Fearful that he might misunderstand these evidences, she cried: "I not cry for sorry. I cry for hate!"

Again Musq'oosis waited patiently until she was in a state to hear him.

"Sam gone to Spirit River," he said calmly.

"I don' care!" cried Bela. "He can't go too far from me!"

"Maybe he sorry now," suggested the old man.

"Not sorry him!" cried Bela. "He not care for nobody. Got hard heart!"

"If you let me tak' team I lak go see him."

Bela stared at him full of excitement at the idea, but suspicious.

"W'at you want see him for?"

"Maybe I bring him back."

"Don' you tell him I want him back," she said. "I hate him!" [288]

"Can I tak' horses?"

"Yes," she cried suddenly. "Go tell Sam I crazy 'bout Mahooley. Tell him I gone wit' Mahooley. He rich. Give me ev'ryt'ing I want."

"I not tell Sam that kind of stuff," returned Musq'oosis scornfully.

"It is truth," she insisted sullenly. "I goin' all right."

"If Sam come back sorry you feel bad you gone wit' Mahooley."

"No, I glad!" she cried passionately. "I hope he want me when it is too late. I want turn him down. That mak' me feel good."

Musq'oosis debated with himself. It was a difficult case to deal with.

"Tak' the team," said Bela. "Tell Sam all I say."

The old man shook his head. "W'at's the use if you goin' wit' Mahooley, anyway? You wait a while. Maybe I bring him back. Mak' say him sorry."

Bela hesitated. Angry speech failed her, and her eyes became dreamy. In spite of herself, she was ravished by the picture of Sam at her feet, begging for forgiveness.

"Well, maybe I wait," she said.

Musq'oosis followed up his advantage. "No," he said firmly. "Not lak travel in wagon, me. Mak' my bones moch sore. I am old. I not go wit'out you promise wait."

"Not wait all tam," declared Bela.

"Six days," suggested Musq'oosis.

She hesitated, fighting her pride.

"If you go wit' Mahooley, Sam get a white wife," went on Musq'oosis carelessly. "Maybe him send letter to chicadee woman to come back." [289]

"All right," said Bela with an air of indifference, "I promise wait six days. I don' want go wit' Mahooley before that, anyhow."

They shook hands on it.

CHAPTER XXIV

[290]

ON THE SPIRIT RIVER

The sun looked over the hills and laid a commanding finger on Sam's eyelids. He awoke, and arose from under the little windbreak he had made of poplar branches.

Before him rolled a noble green river with a spruce-clad island in the middle, stemming the current with sharp prow like a battleship. On the other side rose the hills, high and wooded. More hills filled the picture behind him on this side, sweeping up in fantastic grass-covered knolls and terraces.

The whole valley up and down, bathed in the light of early morning, presented as fair a scene as mortal eyes might hope to behold.

Sam regarded it dully. He looked around him at the natural meadow sloping gently up from the river-bank to the grassy hills behind, a rich field ready to the farmer's hand and crying for tilth, and he said to himself, "This is my land," but there was no answering thrill. Life was poisoned at its source.

He had walked for three days borne up by his anger. His sole idea was to put as much distance as possible between him and his fellow-men. He chose to trail to Spirit River, because that was the farthest place he knew of.

Each day he walked until his legs refused to bear him any longer, then lay down where he was in his blankets and slept. The day-long, dogged exercise of his body and the utter weariness it induced drugged his pain. [291]

His gun kept him supplied with grouse and prairie chicken, and he found wild strawberries in the open places and mooseberries in the bush.

Bread he went without until he had the luck to bring down a moose. Returning to an Indian encampment he had passed through, he traded the carcass for a little bag of flour and a tin of baking-powder.

His sufferings were chiefly from thirst, for he was crossing a plateau, and he did not know the location of the springs.

Excepting this party of Indians, he met no soul upon the way. For the most part the rough wagon trail led him through a forest of lofty, slender aspen-trees, with snowy shafts and twinkling, green crowns.

There were glades and meadows, carpeted with rich grass patterned with flowers, and sometimes the road bordered a spongy, dry muskeg.

All the country was flat, and Sam received the impression that he was journeying on the floor of the world. Consequently, when he came without warning to the edge of a gigantic trough, and saw the river flowing a thousand feet below, the effect was stunning.

At any other time Sam would have lingered and marvelled; now, seeing some huts below, he frowned and thought: "I'll have to submit to be questioned there."

This was Spirit River Crossing. The buildings consisted of a little company store, a tiny branch of the French outfit, kept by a native, and the police "barracks," which housed a solitary corporal.

The coming of a white man was an event here, and when Sam got down the hill the company man and the policeman made him heartily welcome, glancing curiously at the slenderness of his outfit. They wanted to hear the latest news of the settlement, and Sam gave it, suppressing only the principal bit. He left that to be told by the next traveller. [292]

In the meantime he hoped to bury himself farther in the wilderness. As soon as he told his name Sam saw by their eyes that they were acquainted with his earlier adventures. Everything is known up north.

In answer to Sam's questions, they informed him there was first-rate bottom-land fifteen miles up the river on the other side. This was the famous Spirit River land, eighteen inches of black loam on a sandy subsoil.

A white man, Ed Chaney, had already squatted on a piece of it, a lonely soul. There were some Indians nearer in.

Naturally, they were keen to know what Sam had come for. The last time they had heard of him he was a freighter. His reticence stimulated their curiosity.

"Come to look over the land before you bring your outfit in, I suppose?" suggested Sollers, the trader.

"No, I'm going to stop," said Sam.

"How are you going to farm with an axe and a gun?"

"I'll build me a shack, and hunt and fish till I have a bit of luck," said Sam.

The two exchanged a look which said either this young man was concealing something or he hadn't good sense.

"Luck doesn't come to a man up here," said the trader. "Nothing ever happens of itself. You've got to turn in and make it."

Declining invitations to stop a night or a few days, or all summer, Sam got the trader to put him across the river in a canoe. There was also a scow to transport heavier loads. Landing, he turned [293] up-stream. Their description of the utter lonesomeness of that neighbourhood had appealed to him.

The sun was growing low when he spied a little tent in the meadow, rising from the river. The faint trail he was following ended at the gate of a corral beside it. There was a cultivated field beyond. These objects made an oddly artificial note in a world of untouched nature. At the door of the tent stood a white man, gazing. A shout reached Sam's ears. He was lucky in his man. Though he and Ed Chaney had had but the briefest of meetings when the latter passed through the settlement, Ed hailed him like a brother. He was a simple soul, overflowing with kindness.

"Hello! Hello!" he cried. "Blest if I didn't think you was a ghost! Ain't seen one of my own colour since I come. Gee! a fellow's tongue gets rusty for the lack of wagging. Come on in. Ain't got much to show, but what there is is yours. I'll have supper for you in two shakes. It certainly was white of you to come on to me for the night."

Ed seemed to see nothing strange in Sam's situation, nor was he in the least curious concerning the gossip of the country. This comforted Sam strangely. Ed was a little, trim, round-headed man, with a cropped thatch of white, and dancing brown eyes. Sixty years had in nowise impaired his vigour. He was an incorrigible optimist and a dreamer.

His long-pent tongue ran like a mechanical toy when the spring is released. He had a thousand schemes for the future, into all of which, as a matter of course, he immediately incorporated Sam. Sam had come to be his partner. That was settled without discussion. Sam, weary in body and mind, was content to let somebody run him. [294]

"West of me, on the other side of the gully yonder, there's another handsome piece of land. Slopes down from the hills to the river-bank smooth as a lady's bosom! Not a stick on it, either; all ready to turn over. Now you take that and put up a shack on it, and we'll work the two pieces together with my tools.

"In the meantime, till you get a little ahead, you work for me for wages, see? I've got my crop in, all right—potatoes and barley; now I've got to build me a house. I need help with it. I'll pay you in grub."

"That certainly is decent of you," murmured Sam.

"Cut it out!" cried Ed. "A man has got to have a partner. Say, in a month already I'm near gibbering with the lonesomeness. It was a lucky stroke for both of us that brought you to my door."

They talked until late—that is to say, Ed talked. Sam warmed gratefully to his friendliness—it was genuine friendliness, that demanded nothing in return; but in the end the uninterrupted stream of talk confused his dulled faculties.

He could neither take it in properly nor answer intelligently. When Ed suggested turning in, therefore, he declined to share the tent.

"I like to lie by myself," he said.

"That's all right!" cried Ed. "Many is like that. Maybe you wouldn't get much sleep with me anyhow. I ain't half talked out yet."

"I'll go lie in my own field," said Sam with a wry smile.

So he had made the little shelter of leaves, facing the river, and built a fire in front. But to-night he could not win forgetfulness.

In three days he had walked close on a hundred miles, and the last long day had overtaxed his strength. He was in that most wretched of states, too fatigued to sleep. His body ached all over, [295] and his mind was filled with black hopelessness.

As long as he had been on the road he had been buoyed up by movement, by the passing scene. To youth a journey always suggests escape from oneself. Now that he had arrived he found that he had brought his burden along with him.

There was no more fight left in him. He was conscious only of an immense desire for something he would not acknowledge to himself.

When at last he did fall asleep it was only to dream of Bela. By the irony of fate he saw Bela as she might have been, wistful, honest, and tender; anything but the sullen, designing liar his anger had built up in the daytime. In dreams she smiled on him, and soothed his weariness with

an angel's touch.

He awoke with all his defences undermined and fallen. He could have wept with vexation at the scurvy tricks sleep played him. Then he would drop off and dream of her again; combing her hair in the firelight; leading him by the hand through forests; paddling him down rivers; but always transfigured with tenderness.

That was why he found no zest in the morning sunshine.

Ed Chaney, casting a glance at him, said: "You've overdone it. Better lay off for a couple of days."

"I'm able to work," replied Sam. "I want to work."

"All right!" agreed Ed cheerfully. "You can hoe the garden. I'll go to the piny ridge and chop."

All day Sam kept himself doggedly at work, though as soon as Ed disappeared he had to fight the impulse to drop everything and fly farther. It did not matter where he went, so he kept moving. It seemed to him that only in movement was any escape to be had from the weight pressing on his brain. He wanted to be alone. In his disorganized state of nerves even Ed's friendliness was a kind of torture. [296]

Nevertheless, when night came, another reaction set in, and he elected to sleep with Ed because he could not face such another night alone. They lay down side by side in their blankets. Ed babbled on as inconsequentially as a child. He required no answers.

"We'll build a two-room house so's you can be by yourself when you want. Two men living together get on each other's nerves sometimes, though both are good fellows, and friends, too. Begin to grouse and snarl like man and wife. Why, up here they tell of a man who up and murdered his partner for no reason but he was tired looking at him.

"Afterward we will build you a house of your own, so you can hold your land proper. Expect there'll be quite a rush next spring. This year most of them is stopping by Caribou Lake. But I want a river. I love a flowing river at my door; it seems to bring you new thoughts. This river is navigable for six hundred miles up and down. Some day we'll see the steamboats puffing in front here. I'll put out a wharf for them to land at.

"And you and me's got the best piece of land the whole way! Eighteen inches of black loam! We'll be rich men before we die. Wheat ought to be the best. When others come around us we will put in a little mill to grind the crop. The company would buy all our flour. What do you think of that for a scheme, eh?... Bless my soul, he's dropped off!"

In the middle of the night Sam awoke to find the moon shining in his face through the open door of the tent. He had had a real sleep. He felt better. He was irresistibly drawn to look outside. [297]

In the pale sky the great, full moon shone with an extraordinary transparency. The field sloping down to the water was powdered with silver dust. The river was like a steel shield with a bar of shining gold athwart it.

On the other side the heights crouched like black beasts at the feet of the moon. The night seemed to be holding its breath under the spell of beauty. Only a subtle murmur arose from the moving river.

So much loveliness was like a knife in Sam's breast. The pain surprised him. It was as if nature had rested him with sleep only to enable him to suffer more keenly.

"What's the use of it if a man must be alone!" his heart cried. "No beauty, no happiness, no peace ever for me! I want her! I want her! I want her!"

Terrified by the trend of his own thoughts, he turned inside and shook Ed Chaney by the shoulder. Ed, with many a snort and grunt, slowly came back to consciousness.

"What's the matter?" he demanded. "The horses—wolves?"

"No, everything is all right," said Sam.

"What's the matter, then?"

"Would you mind staying awake a little?" begged Sam. "I—I can't sleep. Got the horrors, I guess."

"Sure thing!" said Ed. He took "horrors" quite as a matter of course. He was a comfortable soul. He crept to the door and looked out, gradually yawning himself into complete wakefulness.

"God! what a night!" he said simply. "The moon is like a lady coming down to bathe!"

"I hate it!" cried Sam shakily. "Close the flaps."

Ed did so, and returned to his blankets. "Let's have a smoke," he suggested cosily. [298]

They lit up. Sam's pipe, however, went out immediately.

"I suppose you think I'm crazy," he said deprecatingly.

"Oh, I've been young myself," replied Ed.

"If you don't mind I want to talk about it," said Sam. "It's driving me crazy!"

"Fire away," assented Ed. "Is it a woman?"

"Yes," replied Sam. "How did you know?"

Ed smiled to himself.

"She's no good!" went on Sam bitterly. "That's what hurts. She's just a scheming, lying savage! She's only working to get me in her power. I can't trust her. I've got good reason to know that, and yet—oh God! she's right in my blood! I can't stop thinking about her a minute.

"Sometimes I think she's a good woman, you know, the real thing, gentle and true! It's my imagination makes me think that. I *know* she's no good—but it's driving me crazy. I want her so bad, it seems as if I'd die if I didn't go back to her. That's what she wants, to get me under her thumb. I'm a fool! I've got no strength to resist her!"

"Well, now," said Ed comfortably, "you're all excited. Maybe she ain't as bad as all that."

"She is! She is!" cried Sam. "I've got good reason to know it."

"'Tain't the thing itself that drives you crazy," Ed went on philosophically. "It's thinking about it too much. Your brain goes round like a squirrel in his little cage, and you don't know where you are. Now, if you could put the whole business out of your mind a little while, shut a door on it, so to speak, by and by, when you open it again, there's the right answer standing there plain as a pike-staff!" [299]

"Forget it!" cried Sam. "It's with me night and day! If I let go, I'll cave in. I'll go running back! God help me, if she ever gets hold of me. I'd be the laughing-stock of the whole country! I couldn't look a child in the face! No! No! If you're my friend, keep me from going back! Have you got a Bible?"

"Sure," said Ed. "There in the top of that dunnage bag at your hand. What do you want it for?"

"I'll settle it," Sam muttered, searching for the book. He found it.

"I'll take an oath on it," he said to Ed. "I want you to hear it. Because a man can find a way to get out of an oath he swears to himself. Listen!"

A faint effulgence filtering through the canvas revealed him kneeling on his blankets, with the book in his hands.

He said solemnly: "I swear on this holy book and on my honour that I will never go back to this woman. And if I break this oath may all men despise me! So help me God. Amen!"

"That's a good strong one," remarked Ed cheerfully.

"Yes, a man could hardly break that," murmured Sam, oddly calmed.

"Light up," said Ed.

"No, I think I can sleep now."

Sam did sleep until morning. He arose, not exactly in a jovial mood, nevertheless calm. He might have a dull ache in the bottom of his breast, but the wild struggle was over. The matter was disposed of for good.

After breakfast he and Ed hitched up the team and went to the pine ridge to haul the logs Ed had cut the day before. They had returned with a load, and were throwing them off at the site of the proposed house, when Ed suddenly cocked his head to listen. [300]

"Horses," he said, "and wheels."

"Some of the natives," suggested Sam.

Ed shook his head. "No occasion for them to bring a wagon. They come horseback."

Sam scowled; dreading, hoping—what he knew not.

By and by the team and wagon clattered into view from among the trees along the river.

"My horses!" cried Sam involuntarily. Filled with a kind of panic, his eyes sought the hills.

A second glance showed him both the figures visible in the wagon-box were of men. He calmed down. Whether his principal feeling was of relief or disappointment, he could not have said. Ed was looking at him curiously.

"Not mine," said Sam, blushing. "I mean the team I used to drive."

As the horses mounted the rise, Sam called in a softened voice: "Sambo! Dinah!"

The little black pair pricked up their ears and whinnied. Sam went to meet them. The two men he dimly remembered as breed-boys around the settlement. Scarcely regarding them, he pulled the horses' ears and rubbed their noses, while they nozzled him capriciously with delicate

whickerings.

"Old boy! Old girl!" whispered Sam. "You haven't forgotten me, eh? Maybe you miss me just the same as I miss you!"

"How did you come by this team?" he demanded of the driver.

As he looked up he saw that a third head and shoulders had risen above the edge of the box. He saw a face incredibly wrinkled, framed in long, straggling grey hair. The bright eyes twinkled merrily. [301]

"Hello, Sam!"

"Musq'oosis!" cried Sam, recoiling. Fearful of other surprises, he hastened to look in the wagon-box. There was nothing more in it save their bedding and grub.

Musq'oosis clambered down and shook hands with Sam and Ed.

"Tell them to unhitch," said Sam, mindful of the duties of hospitality.

Musq'oosis shook his head. "Got go back," he said. "Got sleep to-night on Little Prairie. Home to-morrow night."

Sam felt relieved. His ordeal was not to be long continued then. Whatever colour might be given it, he knew what Musq'oosis had really come for.

Ed, out of a sentiment of delicacy, retired to finish unloading his wagon. Musq'oosis sent the two breed-boys to help him. Musq'oosis himself squatted in the grass, while Sam stood caressing the horses.

"Then you not comin'," said Musq'oosis, a quarter of an hour later. He had spent his best efforts in vain.

Sam gloomily shook his head.

"I moch sorry," said the old man.

"Did she send you after me?" demanded Sam abruptly.

"No."

"What made you come, then?"

"I t'ink she look too moch at Mahooley. He bad man to woman. Bela, she mos' lak my daughter. I feel bad."

A horrible pain went through Sam's breast. He laughed as he thought blithely. "If she wants Mahooley she'll marry him. You and I have got nothing to do with it." [302]

"You could come and tak' her 'way from him maybe."

"Nothing doing," said Sam grimly.

"Mahooley maybe not marry her honest," suggested Musq'oosis.

A spasm passed over Sam's face. The horses strained back, startled, from his hand. "Oh, for God's sake, I've told you a dozen times it is nothing to me!" he cried. "Nobody can make Bela do what she doesn't want to do. If she goes with Mahooley, that's her look out!"

Fearing that his self-control was about to escape him altogether, Sam walked away a few steps. When he came back his face was set.

Musq'oosis saw no hope there. He shrugged. "Well—got no more to say. I moch sorry!"

Sam wished with all his heart that he would go and be done with it.

"You say goin' tak' up land here," said Musq'oosis politely. "Let me see your land."

Sam, calling to one of the boys to watch the horses, led the way across the planted ground and over the gully to his own fair field.

Musq'oosis surveyed it with bright eyes. "Ah, *miwasan*!" he cried. "Beautiful! There is no better land!"

"Good enough," said Sam indifferently.

"There on that little hill. You will build good house there."

"I suppose so."

"You will have porch lak Gilbert Beattie got for sittin' on. You sit in chair, and look up and down river every night. You build big barn. Have moch horse and cattle, I guess. You will be rich, all right."

Sam laughed mirthlessly. "You're as bad as Ed." [303]

"What good your richness do you if you all alone," asked Musq'oosis slyly. "You want a wife to mak' your heart glad. A handsome wife and many fat babies. There is only one girl for you. Good face to see; good hands to work; good heart to love. I know her, and I say so. There was never any girl so fine as her in this country. Will you let ot'er man get her?"

Sam turned on him with extraordinary violence. "I told you to cut it out!" he cried. "By God, if you say another word——You make me mad! Once I thought you were my friend. Get out of here before I forget you're old and helpless! For the last time, I tell you I will not go! I have sworn an oath. It is ended!"

Musq'oosis shrugged. "All right! I go back!" he said dully.

CHAPTER XXV [304]

CONCLUSION

On the second morning after, as the walls of Ed Chaney's house were beginning to rise from the ground, the partners were astonished to see a little black horse appear loping along the river-bank, bearing a rider.

It proved to be the elder of the Indian boys who had accompanied Musq'oosis. His name was St. Paul. His smooth, brown face and bright, flat eyes gave no hint of the nature of his errand. The horse had been ridden hard.

"What's the matter?" demanded Sam, frowning.

"Musq'oosis sick," returned the boy, without a flicker of expression. He spoke good English.

"Where?"

"Jus' 'cross Little Prairie, I guess twenty miles from river."

"What did you come to me for?" said Sam. "There were white men nearer. I don't know anything about doctoring."

"Musq'oosis say want nobody come but Sam," answered the boy. "Him say doctor got not'ing for him. Him say time has come. Him say want friend to close his eyes. Him say mak' Sam mad before. Him sorry. Want Sam tak' his hand before he go."

"Better go right back," suggested Ed with quick sympathy. "The poor old guy!"

Sam debated the matter scowling. Musq'oosis had made him angry, and he distrusted him. Yet he could not but be drawn to the quaint little philosopher, too. He could not but remember that [305] Musq'oosis had been kind to him at a time when he most needed it.

"How did it happen?" he asked, partly softened.

The boy illustrated his story with the graphic gesticulation of his race.

"Yes'day Musq'oosis not wake up at all. I got shake him in his blanket. Wake moch slow. Say feel moch bad. All tam sleepy. Can't stan' up. Can't eat not'ing. So we put him in the wagon and go.

"Bam-by say stop! Say can't go no furder. Wagon too moch shake. So we lay him on the ground in his blankets. We wait a while. T'ink maybe get better. Afternoon spell no better. He say no goin' get better. Say to me go get Sam. Ot'er boy Jack stay by him. So I come. Sleep las' night at the crossing."

The story was detailed and convincing, and Sam's suspicions were partly lulled.

"You and the boy take my team," said Ed gravely. "Leave the black horse here to rest up."

A few minutes later they were on the way.

St. Paul had made an appointment with Sollers to come and get them in his canoe, and the trader was waiting when they got there. They swam the horses across. On the way over Sam discussed the case with Sollers. The trader, in addition to everything else, was often obliged to be a doctor.

"Sounds like general collapse," he suggested. "He's over seventy. That's the way they go at last. Under a bush beside the trail."

"I wish you'd come with us," said Sam.

"I'll follow as soon as I can catch a horse."

Sam swung himself on his horse and clapped heels to his ribs. St. Paul lingered to tighten girths. Looking over his shoulder, Sam saw him in talk with Sollers. He had an impression that both [306] turned their heads as he looked around.

When the boy overtook him, he demanded to know what they had been talking about.

"I say to Sollers better bring some pain-killer out of the store," the boy answered readily. "Sollers say all right."

Reaching the flat country above at the end of the long pull, they halted for the briefest possible time to eat and let the horses feed. As they prepared to mount again, Sam said:

"Funny Sollers hasn't overtaken us."

"Guess can't catch his horse," said St. Paul.

They rode forward through the aspen woods, and across the open spaces. Having crossed the widest of these that goes by the name of Little Prairie, Sam began to keep watch ahead for evidences of the camp. Every few minutes he asked St. Paul where it was.

"On'y little way now," was the boy's invariable reply.

"You said twenty miles from the river."

"Maybe I mak' little mistak'."

After an hour of this Sam turned sullen. "If it's a trick it won't do anybody any good," he said. "I shall ride back without dismounting."

St. Paul merely looked bland.

Finally Sam looked at the sun. "Four o'clock," he said. "If we don't arrive in half an hour I'll turn back anyway."

"Jus' little way, now," said St. Paul.

"Don't say that again!"

"Ot'er side this muskeg, then piny ridge and little small prairie. It is there."

This time St. Paul proved to be telling the truth. As they issued out on the meadow Sam saw the wagon standing under a tree on the other side. Coming closer he made out a recumbent figure [307] under a willow-bush. The other boy and the other horse were not visible.

It was Musq'oosis. The bush protected him from the sun. With the first glimpse Sam had of his face, remorse attacked him for his suspicions. In truth the old man was far gone. His skin had taken on a waxy, yellow consistency. He looked as serene and unearthly as if he had already passed away. His eyes were closed. Sam spoke his name in alarm.

He opened his eyes and smiled, and feebly moved his hand toward Sam's. "I glad you come," he murmured. "Wait long."

Sam gripped his hand. He forgot all his anger. It seemed shocking to him to find the old man untended in his extremity. He had heard tales of Indian callousness.

"Where's the other boy?" he demanded. "Has he run away?"

Musq'oosis shook his head. "Jack good boy," he said. "I send him look for ot'er horse. I 'fraid horse run home."

Sam ordered St. Paul to unsaddle the horses, to make a fire, and put on water.

"How do you feel?" he asked Musq'oosis solicitously.

"Pretty good," the old man answered, smiling. "I not feel bad no more I guess."

"Sollers will be along directly with medicine. He will know what to do for you."

"Medicine not mak' old heart go on," said Musq'oosis. "I have finish my hunt."

"I wish I could get you home!" murmured Sam.

The old man moved his head from side to side to see the trees and the sky. "This my home," he said. "It is good grass. There is no better bed." [308]

"You mustn't talk like that," cried Sam, distressed. "You mustn't give up."

Musq'oosis smiled. "Not givin' up w'en old man die," he returned. "I lak live ver' well. I lak the summer an' the winter. Mos' of all I lak my big lak. I lak smooth and rough. I lak the green shore and the round bays and the little rivers that come down. It is a good worl'. But I lak leave it now. I lak go to bed after big hunt."

"You shouldn't talk so much," said Sam. "It tires you."

"Let me talk," returned Musq'oosis, smiling still. "I soon done talkin'. I lak tell yo'ng man all an old man know. But not moch good, I guess. Yo'ng man got learn same lak his fat'er."

The old man murmured on out of his store of wisdom. Sometimes he appeared to doze, but always he kept hold of Sam's hand. It was a tremendous and arresting experience for young Sam. He was profoundly affected.

From time to time he endeavoured to get the old man to take a little stimulant. Tea was all he had to offer him. Musq'oosis refused it.

"I don't see why Sollers doesn't come!" said Sam.

"He not comin'," replied Musq'oosis. "I tell St. Paul tell him not come. I only want my friend."

"Why do you like me?" asked Sam.

"I don't know," answered Musq'oosis, smiling. "Got good heart, I guess."

At last Sam did hear horses' hoofs in the distance. "Here he is now," he said, only to realize presently that the sound was from the other direction. "It's Jack," he added.

Soon he could make out that there were two horses coming from the east. He frowned uneasily, and would have risen, but Musq'oosis had his hand. The old man appeared to be sleeping. [309]

Sam had to kneel there while the horses came closer and closer, galloping at top speed. His beating heart warned him of what was in store. Was it possible the old man had lied to him at death's door? There was no shadow on that peaceful face.

The two horses dashed into sight around the bushes, and were sharply pulled up on their haunches. They were ridden by Bela and Jack. At the sight of her the old wild commotion was resumed in Sam's breast. Forgetting all else, he jumped up, snatching his hand out of Musq'oosis's.

"You tricked me!" he cried furiously to him.

The motionless figure gave no sign.

Bela turned on the native boy. "You lie to me!" she cried, raising the switch she carried.

He put heels to his horse and evaded her.

Bela turned on Sam. "You t'ink I come here see you," she cried furiously. "It's not true. I hate you!"

"God knows I didn't come to see you!" retorted Sam bitterly.

"I'll go back," she said, instantly turning her horse.

"Wait!" cried Sam. "Look after Musq'oosis. He's really sick. I'll go."

Bela looked at the little figure lying so still, and her anger failed her. Her face broke up. Slipping out of her saddle, she went to him, keeping her back turned toward Sam. Sam picked up his bridle and went to catch his horse.

He had to lead it back close to where she was in order to get his saddle. He could not help looking at her once. She was kneeling on the other side of Musq'oosis, bending over him, and clasping both his hands to her breast as if to warm them. She had forgotten Sam. Her lovely face [310] was soft and haggard with grief. Tears coursed down her cheeks.

"My friend! My friend!" Sam heard her whisper. "Speak to me. Say you forgive me. Ah, don't leave me! I have no friend but you!"

Sam looked on in a kind of horror. He began to tremble. He dropped the bridle rein, and the horse strayed away again. If he could believe his eyes, if Bela was a gentle, loving woman, what had he done? Seeing her like this, his heart went to her like a bird to its nest.

Musq'oosis opened his eyes and murmured. She lowered her head close to listen. They talked together. Sam looked on like one stricken. Finally Bela turned her face toward him, though it was not Sam she seemed to see.

"Come," she said. "He want you."

Sam knelt at the other side of Musq'oosis. He held one hand, Bela the other. The old man's face wore a look that humbled him. At the same time the nearness of Bela was making him dizzy. She did not appear to be aware of him.

"I'm sorry I spoke like I did," Sam said involuntarily.

The old man smiled. "You right," he whispered. "I trick you. Trick both. I want you mak' up before I go."

Bela and Sam both turned their heads in keen discomfort.

"Never mind that now," said Bela.

"Yes," he said. "So foolish! Both! You are crazy 'bout each ot'er. I know it. W'at for you got quarrel and speak bad words? W'at for you run away? W'at for you say goin' wit' 'not'er man, you? All foolishness! Yo'ng people lak babies. Throw down their food. Bam-by got cry for it." [311]

Musq'oosis drew his hands together and tried to place the woman's hand that he held in the man's. Both resisted, and he had not strength enough.

"Well—good-bye," he sighed.

Instantly Sam took Bela's hand, and hers crept into his as if at home there. The old man smiled faintly.

"Look at each ot'er," he whispered.

But it was at him they looked. Still smiling, a dread change came over his face. His body quivered slightly, there was a strange sound in his throat. His jaw dropped.

"Oh, he's gone!" whispered Bela.

Then they looked at each other, looked straight into each other's souls. She swayed toward him, and his arms went around her swiftly. The still figure was between them on the ground.

"My love! My love!" he murmured. "I have been a fool! I didn't know you. I was full of false pride. I ask your pardon."

"I love you!" she breathed. "I think I die when you leave me!"

Their lips met.

Bela struggled to free herself. "This no tam be happy," she whispered.

They looked down at Musq'oosis again. His eyes were wide open, and he was smiling at them in a different way.

"I feel better," he said slyly.

Bela and Sam sprang up in terror and retreated a little way, staring at him, staring at each other with wild eyes. Gradually they realized how they had been tricked, and the old scowls returned to each face. Both were silent. [312]

Musq'oosis sat up in his blankets.

"For goodness, don' begin any more foolishness," he said calmly. "I am ongry. To-day I shoot four partridge while I waitin'. Let's have supper. I will wash the clay off my face."

Sam suddenly straightened his back. "I don't care!" he cried. "Do you, Bela?"

"No!" she answered, flying to his open arms.

THE END

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