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[Transcriber's note: this book has essentially the same story as Bindloss's "The Intriguers", Project Gutenberg (www.gutenberg.org) #14406, however, the differences in text, paragraphing, and chapter structure range from minor to radically different. As an example, this book has 32 chapters, while Intriguers has only 24.]

BLAKE'S BURDEN

By

HAROLD BINDLOSS

**Author of "The Impostor," "Hawtrey's Deputy,"
"The Pioneer," etc**

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Impostor
Beneath Her Station
The Liberationist
League of the Leopard
A Damaged Reputation

The Dust of Conflict
Hawtrey's Deputy
The Protector
The Pioneer
The Trustee
The Wastrel
The Allinson Honour
Blake's Burden
The Secret of the Reef
The Intruder
A Risky Game
The Borderer

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CHAPTER I

THE BLAKE AFFAIR

It was a fine morning and Mrs. Keith sat with a companion, enjoying the sunshine, near the end of Dufferin Avenue, which skirts the elevated ground above the city of Quebec. Behind her

rose the Heights of Abraham where the dying Wolfe wrested Canada from France; in front, churches, banks, offices and dwellings, curiously combining the old and the very new, rose tier on tier to the great red *Frontenac* hotel, at which she was staying. It is a picturesque city that climbs back from its noble river; supreme, perhaps, in its situation among Canadian towns, and still retaining something of the exotic stamp set upon it by its first builders whose art was learned in the France of long ago.

From where she sat Mrs. Keith could not see the ugly wooden wharves. Her glance rested on the flood that flowed towards her, still and deep, through a gorge lined with crags and woods, and then, widening rapidly, washed the shores of a low, green island. Opposite her white houses shone on the Levis ridge, and beyond this a vast sweep of country, steeped in gradations of colour that ended in ethereal blue, rolled away towards the hills of Maine. Quebec was then filled with distinguished guests. British royalty had visited it, with many who belonged to the great world in London and some who aspired to do so. Canada had become fashionable, and in addition to English folk of station, Westerners and Americans of note had gathered in the ancient city. The ceremonies were over, but the company had not all dispersed.

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

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

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

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

Age had touched Mrs. Keith lightly, though she had long been a childless widow and had silvery hair. Tall and finely made, with prominent nose and piercing eyes, she was marked by a certain stateliness and a decided manner. She was blunt without rudeness, and though often forceful was seldom arrogant. Careless of her dress, as she generally was, Margaret Keith bore the stamp of refinement and breeding.

"Ah!" she said; "I begin to feel I'm old. But will you come to Montreal with me to-night?"

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

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

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

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

Mrs. Keith took the letters and gave Mrs. Ashborne an English newspaper, but the girl went on: "The bobcat has torn a hole in the basket and I'm afraid it's trying to get at the mink."

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

The girl withdrew and Mrs. Ashborne looked up. "Did I hear aright? She said a bob-cat."

"You did. I am making a collection of the smaller American animals, and a bob-cat is something like a big English ferret. It has high hindquarters and walks with a curious jump, which I suppose is why it got its name. I'm not sure it lives in Canada, and an American got this one for me. I find natural history interesting."

Margaret Keith was known to be eccentric, and her companion laughed. "I should imagine you found it expensive, and aren't some of the creatures savage?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She broke off, and glanced down at the big liner with cream-coloured funnel that was slowly swinging across the stream as she resumed: "I must send Millicent to buy our tickets for Montreal. The hotel will be crowded before long with that steamer's noisy passengers."

"Do you know anything about Captain Sedgwick, who brought you your letters?" her companion asked.

"Not much. Distinguished himself somewhere and holds a Government post in a West African colony. Came home on furlough, and seems to have had some part in the state functions here. I'm inclined to think he's a soldier of fortune; a man with a humble beginning, determined to get on."

"Isn't that Mrs. Chudleigh he's now talking to?"

Mrs. Ashborne was short-sighted, but Margaret Keith's eyes were better, and she noticed the stylish woman whom Sedgwick had joined.

"Yes," she said. "A widow, I believe, though one would not suspect it from her clothes. She seems to know some of my friends, but I met her here for the first time a few days ago."

"She married very young and her husband, who died in a few years, left her a good deal of money; he was a merchant in Calcutta. She's too smart and advanced for my taste, but her people have some standing. It looks as if she were attracted by Sedgwick; she's undoubtedly gracious to him."

"Then it's an opportunity he won't miss. The man's an adventurer."

Sedgwick and his companion passed out of sight, and Mrs. Ashborne opened the *Morning Post*, from which she presently looked up.

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

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

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

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

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

"After Blake broke his neck when hunting, the Colonel brought Dick up and, as a matter of course, sent him into the army. He became a sapper, and, entering the Indian service, met his cousin, Bertram, who was in the line, somewhere on the frontier. They were both sent with an

expedition into the hills, and there was a night attack. It was important that an advanced post should be defended, and Dick had laid out the trenches. In the middle of the fight an officer lost his nerve, the position was stormed, and the expedition terribly cut up. Owing to the darkness and confusion there was a doubt about who had led the retreat, but Dick was blamed and made no defence. In spite of this, he was acquitted at the inquiry, perhaps because he was a favourite and Colonel Challoner was well known upon the frontier, but the opinion of the mess was against him. He left the service and the Challoners never speak of him."

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

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

"I met him once," said Mrs. Ashborne. "There was a man in the hotel yesterday who strongly reminded me of him, but I think he must have left last night."

"I have forgotten my letters, but I know from whom they come, and they'll no doubt give me some news of the wedding," Mrs. Keith remarked, and while she opened them Millicent sat looking down on the glistening river with her thoughts far away.

She was reconstructing a scene from the past, and she could picture with vivid distinctness the small, untidy drawing-room of a London flat, in which she sat, alone and half-dismayed, one evening soon after she had joined her father. A few beautiful objects of art were scattered amongst the shabby furniture; there were stains of wine on the fine Eastern rug, an inlaid table was scraped and damaged, and one chair had a broken leg. All she saw spoke of neglect and vanished prosperity. Hoarse voices and loud laughter came from an adjoining room and a smell of cigar smoke accompanied them. Sitting at the piano, she restlessly turned over some music and now and then played a few bars to divert her troubled thoughts. Until a few weeks before she had led a peaceful life in the country, and the finding her father of such doubtful character and habits had been a painful surprise.

She was interrupted by the violent opening of the door and a group of excited men burst into the room. They were shouting with laughter at a joke which made her blush, and one dragged a companion in by the arm. Another, breaking off from rude horse-play, came towards her with a drunken leer. She shrank from his hot face and wine-laden breath as she drew back, wondering how she could reach her father, who stood in the doorway trying to restrain his guests. Then a young man sprang forward, with disgust and anger in his brown face, and she felt that she was safe. He looked clean and wholesome by contrast with the rest and his movements were swift and athletic.

Millicent could remember him very well, for she had often thought of Lieutenant Blake with gratitude. Just as the tipsy gallant stretched out his hand to seize her, the electric light went out; there was a brief scuffle in the darkness, the door banged, and when the light flashed up again only Blake and her father were in the room. Afterwards her father told her with a look of shame in his handsome, dissipated face, that he had been afraid of something of the kind happening and she must leave him. Millicent refused, for worn as he was by many excesses, his health was breaking down and when he fell ill she nursed him until he died. She had not seen Lieutenant Blake since.

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

She rose and they walked slowly back along the avenue.

CHAPTER II

MILLICENT RENEWS AN ACQUAINTANCE

Dusk was falling on the broad river, and the bold ridge behind the city stood out sharp and black against a fading gleam in the western sky, when Richard Blake hurried along the wharf. Close at hand a big, sidewheel steamer, spotlessly white, with tiers of decks that towered above the sheds and blazed with light, was receiving the last of her passengers, and on reaching the gangway Blake stood aside to let an elderly lady pass. She was followed by her maid and a girl whose face he could not see. It was a few minutes after the sailing time, and as the lady stepped on board a rope fell with a splash. There was a shout of warning as the bows, caught by the

current, began to swing out into the stream, and the end of the gangway slipped along the edge of the wharf. It threatened to fall into the river, the girl was not on board yet, and Blake leaped upon the plank. Seizing her shoulder, he drove her forward until a seaman, reaching out, drew her safe on deck. Then the paddles splashed and as the boat forged out into the stream, the girl turned and thanked Blake. He could not see her clearly, because an over-arching deck cast a shadow upon her face.

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

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

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

A few passengers were strolling about, but the English newspaper had made him restless and to wish to be alone, so, descending to a quieter deck, he was surprised to see the girl he had assisted sitting in a canvas chair near the rail. Close by stood several large baskets from which there rose an angry snarling.

"What is this?" he asked with the careless abruptness which usually characterized him. "With your permission." He raised a lid, while the girl watched him with amusement.

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

"No," she answered; "they belong to Mrs. Keith."

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

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

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

He did not follow this lead, but asked: "Are you supposed to sit up all night and watch the animals for her?"

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

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

He left her without waiting for a reply and, returning with a rug, placed her chair in a sheltered spot, after which he leaned against the rails.

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

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

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

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

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

"She does; I have been with her. Once she took me to your old home." Then the colour crept into Millicent's face. "You don't seem to remember me, Lieutenant Blake."

Blake, who had learned self-control, did not start, though he came near doing so as he recalled a scene he had taken part in some years earlier. He had just risen from a dining-table, where the talk had been of favourite dancers and the turf, and the wine had circulated too freely, and entered a small drawing-room with several men whom his host was assisting in a career of dissipation. As they came in a girl rose from the piano and on seeing her Blake felt a sense of awkwardness and shame. She looked very fresh and pretty, untainted, he thought, by her surroundings, and the annoyance in her father's face suggested that he had not expected to find her there. Blake saw that she shrank from his noisy companions in alarm. One of them, who had drunk too deep, not noticing that she was startled and imagining that she was a fit subject for rough gallantry, pursued her as she tried to escape, but Blake with a quick movement reached a switch and cut off the light. Next moment he seized the offender and hustled him out of the room. He had saved an awkward situation and was afterwards thanked by the man he had roughly handled.

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

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

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

Blake made a sudden movement, and then leaned back against the rails. "I'm afraid that an acquaintance which lasted three or four minutes could hardly enable you to judge; first impressions are often wrong, you know. Anyhow, I don't complain of the opinion of gentlemen who knew more about me."

Millicent saw that the subject must be dropped and resuming, said: "At our first meeting I had no opportunity of thanking you, and you gave me none to-night. It's curious that while I've only met you twice, on both occasions you turned up just when you were needed. Is it a habit of yours?"

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

"It's not quite what I meant," she answered, laughing. "What struck me most was that you don't seem to like gratitude."

"One ought to like it. It's supposed to be rare, but, on the whole, I haven't found that so."

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

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

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

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

Blake was stirred to compassion. Graham had, no doubt, suffered nothing he had not deserved, but the man had once been a social favourite, and it was painful to think of his dying alone in poverty. His extravagance and the shifts by which he evaded his creditors were known, and Blake could imagine how hard he would be pressed when he lay sick and helpless. It must have been a harrowing experience for a young girl to nurse him and at the same time to grapple with financial difficulties.

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

"I forced myself upon him," Millicent answered, with a grateful glance. "My mother died long ago and her unmarried sisters took care of me. They lived very simply in a small secluded country

house; two old-fashioned Evangelicals, gentle but austere, studying small economies, giving all they could away. In winter we embroidered for missionary bazaars; in summer we spent the days in a quiet, walled garden. It was all very peaceful, but I grew restless, and when I heard that my father's health was failing I felt I must go to him. My aunts were grieved and alarmed, but they said they dare not hinder me if I thought it my duty."

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

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

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

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

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

Millicent felt dubious, though she was sleepy and tired. "If anything happened to her pets, Mrs. Keith would not forgive me."

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

"Stand here until the watch is changed."

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

"That's all right," said the man, and Blake held out his hand to Millicent as she rose.

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

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

Blake stayed on deck some time, thinking about her, but presently decided that this was an unprofitable occupation. He was a marked man, with a lonely road to travel, and, though he found some amusement by the way it led him apart from the society of women of the kind he most cared for.

CHAPTER III

THE COUSINS

Dinner was over at the *Windsor* in Montreal, and Mrs. Keith, who found the big hotel rather noisy and uncomfortably warm, was sitting with Mrs. Ashborne in the square between it and St. Catharine's Street. A cool air blew uphill from the river and the patch of grass with its fringe of small, dusty trees had a certain picturesqueness in the twilight. Above it the wooded crest of the mountain rose darkly against the evening sky; lights glittered behind the network of thin branches and fluttering leaves along the sidewalk, and the dome of the cathedral bulked huge and shadowy across the square. Down hill, towards St. James's, rose towering buildings, with the rough-hewn front of the Canadian Pacific depot prominent among them, and the air was filled with the clanging of street cars and the tolling of locomotive bells. Once or twice, however, when the throb of the traffic momentarily subsided, music rose faint and sweet from the cathedral, and Mrs. Keith, who heard the uplifted voices and knew what they sang, turned to listen. She had

heard them before, through her open window in the early morning when the city was silent and its busy toilers slept, and now it seemed to her appropriate that the voices could not be wholly drowned by its hoarse commercial clamour.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A few minutes later Mrs. Chudleigh came out of the hotel with Sedgwick and stopped to speak to Mrs. Keith.

"I came up by the last train and heard that you were here. Captain Sedgwick travelled with me, but he's going on to Toronto to-morrow. I suppose you have seen the Challoners? Such a number of English people in the town! But isn't this a curious place to spend the evening?"

"It's cool," said Mrs. Keith. "I like fresh air."

Mrs. Chudleigh, glanced towards Millicent, who was distributing a basket of peaches among a group of untidy, emigrant children.

"That's a charming picture, isn't it? Miss Graham fits the part very well, but I suppose you're responsible."

There was a sneer in her tone and Sedgwick broke in: "Miss Graham's a very nice girl; you

can see that she's sorry for the dirty little beggars. They don't look as if they'd had a happy time, and a liner's crowded steerage isn't a luxurious place."

"Since you feel so pitiful, it would be more to the purpose if you gave them something," Mrs. Chudleigh rejoined.

"A good idea!" said Sedgwick coolly. "I'll carry it out."

He crossed the grass and scattered a few small coins among the children, who clustered round him, after which he stood talking to Millicent, while Mrs. Chudleigh watched him with an impatience she did not try to hide.

"It's a new role for Sedgwick," she remarked. "When he has finished, we are going into the cathedral to hear the music. I'm fond of churches, and we spent the afternoon in Notre Dame."

Mrs. Ashborne said it was worth seeing and conversation languished for the next three or four minutes, after which Mrs. Chudleigh moved forward imperiously and took Sedgwick away. Mrs. Keith turned to her companion with an amused expression.

"I daresay you noticed that he didn't mind keeping her waiting."

"I thought he meant to flout her when he acted on her suggestion, and I half expected something of a scene," said Mrs. Ashborne. "The woman has a temper."

Mrs. Keith smiled. "The man is a fortune hunter, but he's taking the right way. She's used to admiration, and her other suitors have, no doubt, deferred to her. It's a change to be defied instead of courted, and though it makes her angry I imagine it strengthens his hold. If he shows his is the firmer hand, she'll give in."

"You're taking it for granted that she's in love with him."

"It looks like it," Mrs. Keith replied. "He has his attractions and has done one or two dashing things of the kind that catches the public eye. However, I have some English letters to write, and I think we'll go in."

Next evening, about an hour before sunset, Challoner and his wife leaned upon the rails of a wooden gallery built out from the rock on the summit of the green mountain that rises close behind Montreal. It is a view-point that visitors frequent, and they gazed with appreciation at the wide landscape. Wooded slopes led steeply down to the stately colleges of McGill and the rows of picturesque houses along Sherbrook Avenue; lower yet, the city, shining in the clear evening light, spread across the plain, dominated by its cathedral dome and the towers of Notre Dame. Green squares with trees in them checkered the blocks of buildings; along its skirts, where a haze of smoke hung about the wharves, the great river gleamed in a broad silver band. On the farther bank the plain ran on again, fading from green to grey and purple until it melted into the distance and the hills on the Vermont frontier cut, faintly blue, against the sky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I think it was from a want of moral courage; you have seen that determination is not among my virtues," Challoner replied. "It's as much to the purpose that you don't know my father very well. Though he's fond of pictures, he looks upon artists and poets as a rather effeminate and irresponsible set, and I must own that he has met one or two unfavourable specimens. Then he couldn't imagine the possibility of a son of his not being anxious to follow the family profession, and, knowing how my defection would grieve him, I let him have his way. There has always been

a Challoner fighting or ruling in India since John Company's time."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a sincerity and a hint of affection in his tone which touched Blanche. She had been prepared to suspend her judgment and be charitable, but she found that she pitied the man. He had failed in his duty in time of stress, but he had suffered for it and it must be hard to be an outcast. Blake saw her compassion and was moved by it.

"But how did you come here?" Bertram asked. "Where have you been since——"

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

"But how did you manage?" Bertram inquired with some diffidence. "It raises a point you wouldn't let me talk about at Peshawur, but I've often felt guilty because I didn't insist. Travelling about as you have done is expensive."

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

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

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

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

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

Blanche, who had been watching him, thought it cost her husband an effort to fall in with his

cousin's casual mood. Blake, however, seemed quite at ease, and she was growing interested in him. He reminded her of the Challoner portraits in the dark oak gallery at Sandymere, but she thought him lighter, more brilliant, and, in a sense, more human than those stern soldiers. Then she remembered his Irish father, which explained something. They talked a while about English friends and relatives; and then Blake said rather abruptly—

"And the Colonel?"

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

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

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

"Whatever he may think of me, Colonel Challoner is a man I have a sincere respect for, and I owe him more than I can ever repay. He brought me up after my father's death and started me, like a son, in an honourable career." Then his tone grew lighter. "It's one of my few virtues that I don't forget my debts."

He made as if he would leave them. "And now I've kept you some time. My American friend hasn't turned up yet and I may be here a few days. Where are you staying? I'll look you up before I leave."

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

CHAPTER IV

CHALLONER RESUMES HIS JOURNEY

Blake, who had known hardship, enjoyed an excellent dinner and the society of his cousin's wife, whose good opinion he rapidly gained. He would not have blamed her had she treated him with cold politeness, but instead of this she was gentle and quietly cordial. She had seen his affection for her husband, and made him feel that he had her sympathy, without being openly pitiful. He was quick to appreciate her tact, and it had its effect on him. After dinner Mrs. Keith took Blanche away, and the men found a quiet corner in the rotunda, where they sat talking for a time. At length Blake glanced at his watch.

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

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

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

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

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

"Dick," he said, "I wish you would let me give you a lift in the only way I can. You know you had never any idea of economy, and I'm afraid you must find it hard to get along."

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

I've a plan for adding to my means."

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

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

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

"I'll always be glad to do so," Challoner said with feeling. "Be sure I won't forget you, Dick."

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

The Challoners left by the Pacific Express next morning, and during the evening Captain Sedgwick stood talking to Millicent, who had stopped a few moments in passing, near a pillar in the entrance hall of the hotel. It was characteristic of him that he wore evening dress, though a number of the other guests did not, but it displayed his fine, symmetrical figure. He was a handsome, soldierly man, with a boldness of manner which sometimes passed for dash and sometimes prejudiced fastidious people against him. Now he was watching Millicent, whom he admired, with a smile.

"I didn't know you and Mrs. Keith were leaving the *Frontenac* until you had gone," he said, and his tone suggested that he wished to explain why he had not accompanied them. "You didn't give me an opportunity of speaking to you until just now, but I noticed that you looked disturbed at dinner."

"I daresay I did," Millicent answered ruefully.

"I should be distressed to think there was any serious cause for it."

Millicent laughed. "Mrs. Keith believes it's serious enough, and I'm in disgrace. One of the animals bit the bob-cat, and now the creature's missing."

"A catastrophe! But does the absurd old woman hold you responsible for her ferocious pets?"

"I was told to see that her maid took the unfortunate animal to a veterinary surgeon. Judkins was frankly mutinous, the hotel porters were busy with some baggage, and there was not a cab on the rank. I told her to put the basket down while she looked for a hack near the station; and then crossed the street as I saw one coming. When I got back the basket had gone, but a boy gave me a note on a scrap of torn paper. It said, 'Don't worry; the beast is in safe hands. You'll get it back to-night.'"

"Most mysterious!" Sedgwick remarked. "But it's unpleasant to think you should have to suffer from the foibles of the creature's owner."

Millicent felt that he was too intimate for their brief acquaintance, and that in keeping her behind the pillar, where the semi-privacy of their position suggested confidential relations, he was hardly showing good taste. Indeed, she realized that there was often something lacking in his manners, though he had a certain charm and was much sought after at the hotel.

"I must go," she said. "Mrs. Keith wants me."

Sedgwick moved aside with a bow which Millicent thought need not have been made, and afterwards crossed the floor to the lounge where Mrs. Chudleigh was waiting. She was a rather striking, high-coloured woman, with eyes that had a hard sparkle, and, when her face was in repose, unusually firm lips. She wore the latest and most pronounced type of dinner dress with a few jewels of value, but they gave her no air of ostentation.

"I thought you were never coming," she said impatiently. "Why did you stay talking to that girl so long?"

"Miss Graham? She's amusing and hasn't many acquaintances in the hotel. I'm inclined to think her employer keeps a tight hand on her."

"She's pretty in an unformed way, which is more to the purpose," Mrs. Chudleigh rejoined. "I heard the old woman abusing the manager because one of her ridiculous pets is missing. But this is of no consequence. You were going to tell me about your African plans."

"There are good reasons why I should do so. I haven't forgotten that my advancement is largely due to you."

Mrs. Chudleigh laughed. "If you hint as much in public, it may come to a sudden end. You ought to know that promotion is now made on merit."

"I'm modest. My merit's an uncertain quantity, but there's no doubt about your influence. I'd sooner trust to it."

The remark was justified. He had shown courage and ability in controlling rebellious tribes and settling disputes with French officials on the frontier of the African colony, but Mrs. Chudleigh had worked well for him. She had many friends, men of importance in political and military circles were to be met in her London drawing-room, but she was clever and those she obtained favours from did not always realize how far they had yielded to her powers of persuasion.

"Never mind that," she said. "Give me an opportunity and I'll exert my powers; I'm fond of using them. Moving other people's hands and making up their minds for them is a fascinating game, but I must have something to act upon."

"I understand; we're both ambitious. Well, I'm in charge of a strip of frontier territory, but so far I've had the veto of a cautious and vacillating superior to contend with. The climate, however, is breaking down his health, and he can't keep his post much longer; I want full control. Now to the north of my malaria-haunted district there's a belt of dry and valuable country, inhabited by industrious Mohammedans. The French have their eye upon it, but our people know its worth. Though our respective spheres of influence are badly defined, neither side has found an excuse for occupying the coveted region."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Chudleigh. "You intend to make an excuse."

"If I can, but it will have to be a good one. That is, we must give the French no reasonable grounds for objecting; but when we enter the country in question we stay there."

"It's risky. If you get into difficulties or the French are clever enough to spoil your game, you'll be disgraced."

"That's a hazard I recognize. If I fail, our authorities will disown me, but it can't be allowed to count."

Mrs. Chudleigh admired his daring, which was what had first attracted her. His shortcomings were not hidden, he now and then offended her more cultivated taste, but he could boldly seize an opportunity and she thought he would go a long way. There was force in him.

"But the excuse?" she asked.

"I can't tell you exactly what it will be, but there's an unruly tribe between us and the territory we want, and they're inclined to give trouble." He paused with a meaning smile. "It may be necessary to subjugate them, and, if we enter their country, we'll no doubt find ourselves compelled to move farther north. Something, however, must be left to chance. When one is ready to act, an occasion often presents itself."

"And the benefit to England?"

"Can't be doubted. We'll have pushed the frontier back and opened up trade. It's a region that's rich in useful products, and as soon as it is ours new factories will spring up wherever there's a suitable spot along the rivers. I've already thought out a route for a light railway."

Mrs. Chudleigh was satisfied. She believed in Colonial expansion, but her views were honest in a sense. Where her country stood to gain, the rights of small native races did not count, and she argued, with some reason, that they were better off under civilized rule; but she would have intrigued for no scheme that did not further British interests.

"I daresay," she answered thoughtfully, "something can be done."

"I'm content with that, and perhaps we have said enough. Those rubies of yours are very fine, but they owe a good deal to their background. How they gleam on the satiny whiteness they rest upon!"

This was a transgression, but it was one that she could pardon. The man's taste was defective, but he had charm and she let him lead her into intimate personal talk.

In the meanwhile, a group of men were engaged in conversation at the opposite end of the hall. One was a sawmill owner; another served the Hudson's Bay Company in the northern wilds; the third was a young, keen-eyed American, quick in his movements and concise in speech.

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

"Cedar, sawn from a good log."

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

"I ought to, considering how much of it I've cut." The lumber man held up his right hand, from which the two middle fingers were missing. "Lost those twenty years ago when I worked in my first, one-horse mill, and I could show you a number of other scars."

"Very well," the American took out another strip. "The same stuff, sir. How would you say it had been treated?"

The sawmiller carefully examined the piece of wood. "It's not French polish, but I haven't seen varnish as good as this. Except that it's clear and shows the grain, it's more like some rare old Japanese lacquer."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There's something in that," the sawmiller agreed.

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER V

MRS. KEITH GETS A SURPRISE

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

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

"I can't stop," the other answered with a grin. "Open that door for me, quick."

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

"Hold on; I want a talk with you. I've been waiting all day."

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

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

Harding looked at him critically. "You seem sober. What made you get yourself up like an Italian opera villain and go round the town with a wild beast under your arm?"

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

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

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

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

"The cat is safe," he said. "The man I gave it to will put it with the other animals. If he holds it firmly, I don't think it can bite him."

"As I'm told you dropped it in the vestibule, I feel I'm entitled to an explanation," Mrs. Keith replied in a formal tone, looking hard at him. "I gave the cat to my maid this morning, sending Miss Graham to see it delivered to a man in the town, and it disappeared. How did it come into your possession?"

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

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

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

"To a taxidermist! Why?"

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

Mrs. Keith looked at him thoughtfully. "You seem to have a curious way of reasoning. But what did the man say?"

"His first remark was, 'Nom d'une pipe!' and he added something more which I couldn't catch, but when we became friends he promised to engage the services of a dog-fancier friend of his."

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

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

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

"So it seems. You considered it necessary to make friends with the French-Canadian taxidermist?"

"Not necessary, perhaps." Blake appeared to reflect. "Still, it's a way of mine, and the fellow interested me by the tragic manner in which he broke his pipe when I first showed him the cat. His indignation was superb."

Mrs. Keith gave him a look of rather grim amusement. "I see, but you haven't told me what became of my hamper."

"The hamper was unfortunately smashed. The car was not allowed to stop where I wished to get off and I had to jump. I miscalculated the speed and fell down, after which, as there was a good deal of traffic, a transfer wagon ran over the hamper, luckily without hurting the animal inside. I left it at a basket shop and that explains the cloak. My friend the taxidermist insisted on lending it and his winter gloves to me. One looks rather conspicuous walking through the streets with a bob-cat on one's arm."

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

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

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

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

"I'll confess that I knew you. You have changed much less than I have, but I wasn't sure you would be willing to acknowledge me."

"Then you were very wrong. One may be forgiven a first offence and I never quite agreed with the popular opinion about what you were supposed to have done. It wasn't like you; there must have been something that did not come out."

"Thank you," Blake said quietly.

She gave him a searching glance. "Can't you say something for yourself?"

"I think not," he answered. "The least said, the soonest mended."

"But for the sake of others."

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

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

Blake mused for a few moments, and Mrs. Keith could not read his thoughts. Then he said, "Bertram is a very good fellow and has brains. Why should his people think less of him because he likes to paint? But I've been sorry for the Colonel; more sorry than I've felt for myself."

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

"Well," she said, "you have, I trust, a long life before you, and if you have been at fault, you must make amends. There are people who would be glad to see you reinstated."

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

"What business have you gone into?"

Blake's eyes gleamed humorously. "At present I'm in the paint line."

"Paint!" Mrs. Keith exclaimed.

"Yes, but not common paint. We use the highest grade of lead and the purest linseed oil. Varnish also of unapproachable quality, guaranteed to stand exposure to any climate. There's

nothing to equal our products in North America."

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

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

Mrs. Keith laughed. "Dick, you're a marvel and I'm glad adversity hasn't soured you; but you won't make enough to keep you in neckties at any business you take up. It's ludicrous to think of your running about with paint samples, but there's something pathetic in it that spoils my amusement." Her face softened and she changed her tone. "I'm a rather rich old woman, Dick, and your mother was a very dear friend of mine. You must let me help you to something better."

"Thank you," he answered with a flush. "But you can't give me money. It's curious that several of my friends have wanted to do so—first the Colonel, then Bertram, and now you. Not flattering, is it? Suggests that you doubt my talents, or that I look like a deserving object of charity."

"You're incorrigible. It was the Blakes' misfortune that they could never be serious, but I admire your pluck."

"We have our failings, but I'm boring you and I'll come back by and by if you'll allow me. My American partner has been waiting for a word with me since this morning."

"And you kept him waiting? That was a true Blake. But go to the man and then tell the hotel people to give you places at my table. I want to see your friend."

"He'll feel as honoured as I do," Blake said, and left her.

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

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

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

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

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

Harding made a gesture of resignation. "Guess you must be humoured; I'll wait until you're through. That's a nice girl you stole the bob-cat from, but if she were a sister of mine, I'd choke off that army man who's been trotting round after her most of the day."

"What's the matter with Captain Sedgwick?"

"He has a greedy eye. He'll play any game he goes into for his own hand. Not an unusual plan, but there's generally a code of rules and if it's going to pay him, Sedgwick will break them. Anyhow, as it looks as if Mrs. Chudleigh had him earmarked, why can't he let the girl alone?"

Blake, who had taken a protective interest in Millicent, was somewhat disturbed, but would not admit it.

"Oh!" he said, "our army men aren't ascetics, but I dare say the fellow's a harmless philanderer, and you're a bit of a Puritan."

"I'm married and don't forget it," snapped Harding. "Marianna—that's Mrs. Harding—is living in a two-room tenement, making her own dresses and cooking on a gasoline stove, so's to give me my chance of finding the gum. And I'm here in an expensive hotel, where I've made about five dollars commission in three days and written our people several folios about the iniquities of the Canadian tariff, which is all I've done. We have got to pull out as soon as possible. Did you get any information from the Hudson's Bay man?"

"I learned something about our route through the timber-belt and the kind of camp outfit we'll want; the temperature's often fifty below in winter. Then I was in Revillons', looking at their cheaper furs, and in a store where they supply especially light hand-sledges, snowshoes, and patent cooking cans. We must have these things good, and I estimate they'll cost six hundred dollars."

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

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

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

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

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

"Does it matter?"

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

As he spoke the Hudson's Bay agent came in with the sawmiller, who said to the man whom Harding suspected of listening, "That was good stuff you gave me a dose of. It fixed my ague, though I had the shakes bad last night."

Clarke rose and strolled with them to a seat nearer where Blake and Harding sat. "It's a powerful drug and must be used with discretion. If you feel you need it, I'll give you another dose. It's an Indian remedy and I learned the secret up in the timber-belt, but I spent some time experimenting before I was satisfied about its properties."

Sedgwick, who was passing, stopped and lighted a cigar. "Then you get on with Indians?"

"I do," Clarke said shortly. "It isn't difficult when you grasp their point of view."

"Then your experience doesn't tally with mine and I know something about the primitive races. Their point of view is generally elusive."

"I can credit it." Clarke's tone was sneering. "You people don't try to understand them; you can't come down to it. Standing firm on your colour prejudice and official traditions, you expect the others to agree with you. It's an indefensible policy." He turned to the Hudson's Bay agent. "You ought to know something about the matter. On the whole, the Hudson's Bay treat the Indians well; there was a starving lad you picked up suffering from snow-blindness near Jack-pine river and sent back safely to his tribe."

"That's so, but I can't tell how you knew. I don't remember having talked about the thing; and my clerk has never left the factory. There wasn't another white man within a week's journey."

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

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

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

There was something significant in Clarke's tone which Blake remarked, while Sedgwick, feeling that he was being left out, strolled on.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Just so. He stepped through into the darkness and never came out again. There was an instance I could mention."

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

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

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

"I imagine that cleverer people are now and then deceived," said Clarke, who moved away.

"That's a man I want to keep clear of," Harding remarked to Blake. "There's something wrong about him; he's not wholesome." He rose. "It's a fine night; let's walk up the mountain."

CHAPTER VI

HARDING GROWS CONFIDENTIAL

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

Reaching the level summit, they dismissed the hacks and found a seat near the edge of a steep, wooded slope. The strip of tableland is not remarkably picturesque, but it is thickly covered with trees, and one can look out across a vast stretch of country traversed by the great river. By and by the party scattered and Mrs. Keith was left with Harding. They were, in many ways, strangely assorted companions, the elderly English lady accustomed to the smoother side of life, and the young American who had struggled hard from boyhood, but they were sensible of a mutual lilting. Mrs. Keith had a trace of the grand manner, which had its effect on Harding; he showed a naive frankness she found attractive. Besides, his talk and conduct were marked by a laboured correctness which amused and pleased her. She thought he had taken some trouble to acquire it.

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

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

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

"Your interest is a compliment, ma'am, and what you say is true. We had two hundred dollars when we were married. You wouldn't consider that much to begin on."

"No," said Mrs. Keith, whose marriage settlement had made over to her valuable property. "Still, of course, it depends upon what one expects. After all; I think my poorest friends have been happiest."

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

"She will smile more brightly when you come back, and courage to face a hard task is a great gift. So you consider this trip to the North-West your opportunity? You must expect to sell a good deal of paint."

Harding looked up with a sudden twinkle. "I'll own to you, ma'am, that I've another object. The company will pay my commission on any orders I get at the settlements, but this is my venture, not theirs. I'm going up into the wilds to look for a valuable raw material."

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

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

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

Harding gave her a direct glance. "Do you?"

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

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

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

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

"I thought so, but I know him better than you do," Mrs. Keith said gravely. "What made you jump to the conclusion?"

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

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

"No," said Harding. "I'd been near knocked out with the sandbag and could hardly keep my feet. Besides, I'd my employers' money in the valise, and it was my business to take care of it."

Mrs. Keith made a sign of agreement. "I beg your pardon. You were right."

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

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

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

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

"Though my opinion of Blake is not generally held, I believe you are right," she said. "And now tell me something about your journey."

While they talked, Millicent and Blake sat in the sunshine on the slope of the hill. Beneath them a wide landscape stretched away towards the Ottawa valley, the road to the lonely North, and the girl, who had never left the confines of civilization, felt a longing to see the trackless wilds. The distance drew her.

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

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

"Which doesn't seem to daunt you."

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

"It's undoubtedly easier," the girl rejoined. "But while I like Mr. Harding I shouldn't consider

him a type of the romantic adventurer."

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

What Blake said about his comrade's devotion to his wife appealed to the girl. Marriage had apparently not lessened his tender thought for her, and Millicent wondered whether she was capable of inspiring such a feeling. She had found life hard, and so far had shrunk from the few men who had cultivated her acquaintance. Indeed, she felt contaminated as she remembered the advances made by one.

"On the face of it, looking for openings in the paint business doesn't seem to be a very risky matter," she suggested.

"It depends a good deal on how it's done," Blake answered with a laugh. "With Harding, a business opening is a comprehensive term."

Millicent mused for a moment or two. She liked Blake and he improved upon acquaintance. He had a whimsical humour and a dash of reckless gallantry. It was not to his credit that he had frequented her father's house, and he was supposed to be in disgrace, but she had cause to know that he was compassionate and chivalrous.

"Though you have not been with us long, we shall be duller when you have gone," she told him.

"Well," he said, "in a sense that's nice to hear, but it's with mixed feelings one leaves friends behind." His tone grew serious. "I've lost some good ones."

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

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

Millicent did not answer, and he watched her as she sat looking out into the distance with grave brown eyes. Her face was gentle; he thought there was pity for him in it and felt strongly drawn to her, but he remembered that he was a man with a tainted name and must travel a lonely road. She was conscious of his scrutiny, but took no offence at it.

"Perhaps we had better change our place," she said by and by. "The sun is rather strong now the wind has gone."

Some of the others joined them, and soon afterwards they walked down the winding road to the city; when they sat outside the hotel after dinner Blake asked Harding if he had enjoyed the afternoon.

"I did," said Harding with earnestness. "I'd only one regret; that Mrs. Harding wasn't here to share it with me. Your friends are charming ladies of a stamp Marianna and I so far haven't had much chance to meet." Then his face grew very resolute as he added: "But she shall have her opportunity. If things go right with us she'll get her share of all that's best in life—and, with that at stake, we have to make things right."

Two days later Harding got some letters he had been waiting for, and as there was now nothing to keep them in Montreal, Blake said good-bye to Mrs. Keith next morning. Though she was gracious to him he felt a strong sense of disappointment at finding her alone, but when he was going out he met Millicent in the hall. She wore her hat and the flush of colour in her face indicated that she had been walking fast.

"I'm glad I didn't miss you, but I had an errand to do," she said. "You are going now; by the Vancouver express?"

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

"Mrs. Keith will mind," said Millicent. "I'm sure she was very friendly and gave you her good wishes."

Blake looked at her with a smile. "Somehow they didn't seem enough. I think I wanted yours."

She coloured, but met his glance. "Then," she said, "you have them. I haven't forgotten what happened one evening in London, and I wish you a safe journey and success."

"Thank you," he answered with feeling. "It will be something to remember that you have

wished me well." Then as his eyes rested upon her he forgot that he was a marked man. She looked very fresh and desirable; there was a hint of regret and pity in her face and a trace of shyness in her manner. "I suppose I can't ask you to think of me now and then; it would be too much," he went on. "But won't you give me something of yours, some trifle to keep as a memento."

Millicent hesitated and then took a tiny bunch of flowers from the lace at the neck of her white dress. "Will these do?" she asked, and added with a smile: "They won't last very long."

"They will last a long time, well taken care of, but what you said had a sting. Did you mean that you wouldn't give me anything more enduring?"

"No," she said shyly, "not that altogether. I think I meant that they would last as long as you might care to remember our acquaintance."

Blake bowed. "My memory's good. When I come back I will show you your gift as a token."

"But I shall be in England then."

"I bore that in mind. It is not very far off, and I'm a wanderer."

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

He took the hand she gave him and held it a moment. "I wonder whether your last wish will ever be realized, If so, I shall come to thank you, even in England."

Then he turned and went out with hurried steps, wondering what had led him to break through the reserve he had prudently determined to maintain. What he had said might mean nothing, but it might mean much. He had seen Millicent Graham for a few minutes in her father's house, and afterwards met her every day during the week spent in Montreal, but brief as their friendship had been, he had yielded to her charm. Had he been free to seek her love he would eagerly have done so, but he was not free. He was an outcast, engaged in a desperate attempt to repair his fortune. Miss Graham knew this, and had probably taken his remarks for what they were worth as a piece of sentimental gallantry, but something in her manner suggested a doubt and the trouble was that he did not wish her to regard them in this light. It looked as if he had made a fool of himself, but he had promised to show her the flowers again some day, and he carefully placed them in his pocket book.

The train was ready to start when he found Harding impatiently waiting him on the platform and a few moments later the long cars were swiftly rolling west.

CHAPTER VII

MRS. CHUDLEIGH GATHERS INFORMATION

It was a fine morning when Mrs. Keith sat on the saloon deck of a river boat steaming with the ebb tide down the St. Lawrence. The terraced heights of Quebec had faded astern; ahead a blaze of sunshine rested on the river, up which a big liner with crowded decks and her smoke-trail staining the clear blue sky moved majestically. To starboard dark pinewoods, with here and there a sawmill stack, were faintly marked upon the lofty bank; to port rose rugged hills with wooden villages at their feet. The light wind that rippled the blue water was pleasantly cool, and Mrs. Keith, laying down the book she had been reading, looked about with languid enjoyment.

"I suppose I'm neglecting my opportunities, but this is very delightful and I don't think they have anything finer than the river in Canada," she said. "Its width impresses one; the French villages with their church spires are so picturesque—I wonder how many churches there are in this part of the country. One sees them everywhere."

"You were urged to see the Ontario forests and the prairie," Millicent remarked.

"One cannot do everything, and I'm not insatiable. I'm getting too old to stand the shaking in the hot and dusty cars, and I can't accustom myself to going to bed in public, without undressing. No doubt, it's a matter of prejudice, but I've been used to more room for taking my clothes off than they give you behind the flapping curtain."

Millicent laughed as she remembered their experiences during a journey on a crowded express.

"Getting up is worse," she said. "However, they told us it was very pretty and generally cool at Saguenay. Then you'll have somebody to talk to, as Mrs. Chudleigh is coming. But didn't she

make up her mind rather suddenly?"

"I thought so, since she didn't speak of going until I sent you for the tickets. Still, Sedgwick was sent to Ottawa, where she doesn't know anybody, which may have had something to do with it."

Millicent, who looked very pretty in her light summer dress as she leaned back in a deckchair, did not reply. Sun and wind had brought a fine warm colour into her face, but her brown eyes were grave, for there was a point upon which she must try to form a correct judgment and she distrusted her inexperience. She was young and had a natural love of pleasure, as well as a certain longing for excitement and a willingness to take a risk which she had inherited from her gambling father. Mrs. Keith had prevented her indulging these tendencies, and the girl, thrust for the most part into the society of older people, suffered at times from a feeling of depressing monotony.

Then she had met Captain Sedgwick, who paid her rather marked attention, at Quebec, and at first had been attracted by the handsome soldier and flattered by his singling her out among women of higher station and maturer beauty; but the attraction did not last long. There was a vein of sound sense in Millicent, and when she tested Sedgwick by it, he did not ring true, and when Mrs. Chudleigh openly claimed him as her property she acquiesced. Afterwards she met Blake on board the steamer and the gratitude and admiration which a chivalrous act of his had roused suddenly revived. Moreover she was sorry for him and felt that he had been unjustly blamed, while, though it was generally hidden by his careless manner, she thought she saw in him a strong sincerity. Now she wondered whether she was foolish in letting her thoughts dwell on him, and if he would soon forget her. Recalling his words when he said good-bye she knew he had been stirred, but before this she had been conscious of a certain restraint in his manner which had only broken down at the last moment. By and by Mrs. Keith disturbed her reflections.

"It looks as if we were to be favoured with Mrs. Chudleigh's society," she remarked with ironical amusement. "Mine appears to have become more valuable during the last few days."

Millicent saw Mrs. Chudleigh moving towards them, followed by a steward carrying a folding chair and a maid who brought a book, a bunch of flowers, an ornamental leather bag, and several other odds and ends. Mrs. Chudleigh was elaborately attired, but the large plumed hat and dress cut in the extreme of the current fashion became her. She made a stately progress along the deck with her burdened attendants in her train, and it took a few minutes to arrange her belongings to her satisfaction. Then she sank into the big chair with marked grace of movement and smiled at Mrs. Keith.

"A delightful morning. I ought to have been writing letters, but the sunshine brought me out."

Mrs. Keith agreed and Mrs. Chudleigh went on: "I have enjoyed this visit greatly and find Canada a most interesting country. In fact, I wish I could stay another month or two, but, of course, when one has duties."

As Mrs. Chudleigh had neither husband nor children, Margaret Keith wondered what her duties were, unless she considered the taking a part in a round of social amusements as such.

"After all," she remarked, "I imagine that one doesn't see very much of the real Canada from the *Frontenac* or a big hotel in Montreal."

"True," said Mrs. Chudleigh. "I must confess that I didn't come out to study the country, though I'm charmed with all I've seen. I'm afraid I belong to a frivolous set and find a change refreshing. Then several old friends of mine were going to take a part in the celebrations at Quebec—Captain Sedgwick among others."

"Is Captain Sedgwick a very old friend?" Mrs. Keith asked, willing to give the other the lead she seemed to wish for.

"Oh, yes; I met him first as a subaltern in India, when he was very raw and troubled by a seriousness he has since grown out of, but I thought he would make his mark."

Mrs. Keith pondered the explanation. She could not imagine her companion's patronizing a callow young lieutenant, but this was not important. Admitting that a hint might have been intended for Millicent's benefit, Mrs. Chudleigh's boldness in laying claim to the man by suggesting that she had come out for his sake was puzzling. It was not in good taste, but although Mrs. Chudleigh's position was assured, there was something of the audacity of the adventuress about her. Margaret Keith, however, had no admiration for Sedgwick, whom she thought of as second-rate, and she was glad to believe that Millicent did not wish to dispute the woman's right to him.

"Are you going home soon?" she asked.

"Before long, I think. There is a round of visits I have promised to make and I may stay some time with the Fosters in Shropshire near Colonel Challoner's place. I believe he is a friend of yours."

"He is. Have you met him?"

"Once; I found him charming. A very fine, old-fashioned gentleman, and I understand a famous soldier. Somebody told me he never quite got over his nephew's disgrace and seemed to think it reflected upon the whole family. Very foolish, of course, but one can admire his sense of honour."

Mrs. Keith began to understand why her companion had sought her. She wished to speak about Richard Blake and Mrs. Keith was forced to acquiesce, since he had been seen in her company.

"I suppose you know the nephew was in Montreal," she said.

"To tell the truth, I do. I saw him talking to Bertram Challoner, whom I met in London, and the family likeness struck me. Then I saw his name in the hotel register."

"No doubt you studied him after that. What opinion did you form?"

Mrs. Chudleigh gave her a look of thoughtful candour. "I was puzzled and interested. I don't know him, but he did not look the man to run away."

"He is not," Mrs. Keith declared. "I knew him as a boy, and even then he was marked by reckless daring. What's more, I noticed very little change in him."

"It's strange." Mrs. Chudleigh's tone was sympathetically grave. "I feel much as you do. After all, it may have been one of the affairs about which the truth never quite comes out."

"What do you wish to suggest by that?"

"Nothing in particular; I've no means of forming an accurate conclusion. But the regimental honour was threatened and a scapegoat needed. A mistake may have been made by somebody of greater importance. One hears of some curious things."

"That's true," Mrs. Keith drily agreed. "I believe in Dick Blake, but it must be admitted that he made no defence."

Mrs. Chudleigh pondered this. "One meets men capable of making a great sacrifice, though they're by no means numerous. I suppose Colonel Challoner really felt it a heavy blow?"

"Those who know him can't doubt it, though he never speaks of the matter."

"It must have been a shock. Apart from whatever affection he had for his nephew, there was, in a sense, the stigma reflected upon himself—an old man who has bravely won distinction and retains some influence! I'm told he has friends in administrative circles and that his opinion on Indian subjects still carries weight."

"I believe so," said Mrs. Keith. "He certainly holds his opinions firmly, and was once looked upon as an authority on frontier defence. Indeed, he gave up his command because he could not get some drastic change which events subsequently proved needful adopted. His honesty is remembered by men who hold him in esteem."

"All you have said bears out my impression of him. I must renew our acquaintance when I am in Shropshire. Are you staying here long?"

Mrs. Keith was glad to change the subject, but while they talked a steward appeared with a letter for Millicent, which he explained had been sent on board the steamer at Quebec. As the girl laid down the opened envelope Mrs. Chudleigh recognized Sedgwick's writing and her face grew contemptuously hard. Then she laughed and started a different topic, which she continued for a time. When she went away, Mrs. Keith turned to Millicent.

"I wonder whether I have told her too much, though it's hard to see what use she can make of it. Innocent or not, Dick Blake is a favourite of mine and when I speak of him I'm apt to be unguarded. Of course, it's obvious that she joined us on purpose to talk about him."

"One would have imagined it was Captain Sedgwick. She dragged him in rather pointedly."

"Oh! no. That was by the way, and perhaps intended to put me off the scent. She's a scheming woman."

"But she has not learned much from you."

"She has learned two things," Mrs. Keith answered thoughtfully. "First, that I don't believe Dick Blake failed in his duty; and, secondly, that Colonel Challoner has some influence. I think she was particularly interested in the latter point. I've been incautious and let my tongue run away with me."

Then she took up her book while Millicent read her letter. Though young and to some extent inexperienced, her judgment was generally sound, and she had come to see how Sedgwick really

regarded her. She had pleased his eye, and he was a man who would boldly grasp at what delighted him, but love would not be permitted to interfere with his ambitions. He wrote in a tone of forced and insincere sentiment, and his words brought a blush into Millicent's face as well as a rather bitter smile into her eyes. By and by she tore the sheet into pieces and dropped them over the steamer's rail. That affair was ended.

As the fragments of paper fluttered astern Mrs. Keith looked up. "You are treating somebody's letter very unceremoniously."

"Perhaps I am," said Millicent. "It's from Captain Sedgwick."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mrs. Keith. "Has he anything of interest to say?"

"He mentions that he is going back to Africa sooner than he expected because the officer above him has suffered so much from the climate that he has asked to be relieved of his post. Captain Sedgwick believes this will give him a chance of advancement."

"Then I've no doubt he'll make the most of it. I suppose he doesn't waste much pity on his unfortunate chief? The man's personal interest stands first with him."

"Isn't that the usual thing with men?"

"There are exceptions. Colonel Challoner, for instance, threw up his career when he found he was forced to act against his convictions, and I've a suspicion that another man I know made as great a sacrifice. However, Sedgwick will make every effort to get the vacant post, and I wonder whether he told Mrs. Chudleigh how matters stood. She may have had a letter before you did."

Millicent knew her employer's penetration, but did not understand the drift of her remarks.

"I dare say he wrote to her. She told us they were old friends. But why should it interest you?"

"It does," Mrs. Keith rejoined. "I have a habit of putting things together and drawing my conclusions, though, of course, I'm now and then mistaken. Whether I'm right or not in the present instance time will show, but I must try to watch the woman when we go home." Then she added sharply: "As you have torn it up, you don't mean to answer Sedgwick's letter?"

"No," said Millicent, with a trace of colour; "I don't think it needs a reply."

Mrs. Keith made a sign of agreement. "On the whole," she said pointedly, "I should imagine that to be a wise decision."

On reaching Saguenay, Mrs. Keith spent the first morning sitting outside her hotel. Rugged mountains with dark belts of pines straggling up their sides were spread about her, but she gave the wild grandeur of the landscape scanty attention as she consulted the engagement book in her hand. It contained a list of the friends she wished to entertain and the visits she had thought of making in England during the winter, and she wondered which could be shortened and whom she could put off, because it might be desirable to spend some time in Shropshire.

Margaret Keith was a strong-willed woman who had led a busy life, but now, when she had resolved to retire into the background and rest, it looked as if she might again be forced to take an active part in affairs. She had enjoyed her Canadian trip, but during the last week or two it had begun to lose its interest, and she was conscious of a call to be up and doing. She suspected Mrs. Chudleigh, she doubted Sedgwick, and she was disturbed by the way the unfortunate affair on the Indian frontier had cropped up again. Somehow, she felt Colonel Challoner's peace was threatened, which could not be permitted. For many years she had cherished a warm liking for him, and long ago, when he was a young lieutenant, she could have made him hers. Family arrangements, complicated by the interests of landed property, had, however, stood in the way. Challoner was not free to marry as he pleased; he had been taught that the desire of the individual must be subordinated to the welfare of the line, and when he first met Margaret Keith, who was beautiful then, it was too late for him to rebel. She let him go, but he had always had a place in her heart, and now they were firm and trusted friends.

During her stay at Saguenay, Mrs. Chudleigh made two or three attempts to extract some further information about the Challoners but without success, and one day, soon after she had left, Mrs. Keith sent Millicent for a list of steamer sailings.

"This place is very pretty, but we have been here some time and I'm beginning to think of home," she said.

"One of the Empresses sails next week," said Millicent, returning with the card. "Mr. Gordon told me this morning that Mrs. Chudleigh went in the *Salmatian* the day before he left Quebec."

"Did she?" Mrs. Keith rejoined. "Well, perhaps you had better write to the Montreal office about our berths." Then, for the call had grown clearer, she smiled as the girl went away, and added: "It might be wiser to keep the woman in sight."

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRAIRIE

A strong breeze swept the wide plain, blowing fine sand about, when Blake plodded beside the jaded Indian pony that drew his Red-river cart. It was loaded with preserved provisions, camp stores, and winter clothes, and he had bought it and the pony because that seemed cheaper than paying for transport. The settlement for which he was bound stands near the northern edge of the great sweep of grass which stretches across central Canada, and means of communication between it and the outer world were scarce. Harding, accordingly, had agreed to the purchase of the animal with the idea of selling it afterwards to one of the settlers.

Since leaving the railroad they had spent four days upon the trail, which sometimes ran plain before them, marked by dints of wheels among the wiry grass, and sometimes died away, leaving them at a loss in a wilderness of sand and short poplar scrub, through which Blake steered by compass. Now it was late in the afternoon and the men were tired of battling with the wind which buffeted their sunburned faces with sharp sand. They were crossing one of the high steppes of the middle prairie towards the belt of pines and muskegs which divides it from the barrens of the North. The broad stretch of fertile loam, where prosperous wooden towns are rising fast among the wheatfields, lay to the south of them, and the arid tract they journeyed through had so far no attraction for even the adventurous homestead pre-emptor.

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

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

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

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

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

"It's a matter of opinion; you haven't limped forty miles on a bad foot, but I'm not complaining," Harding rejoined, "In fact, I've most been happy since we left the depot. It's something to feel that you have started; doing nothing takes the sand out of me."

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

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

Pushing the cart through the softer places, dragging the jaded pony by the head, they hurried on and at length plunged through a creek with the trees close in front. A few minutes later they tethered the pony to lee of the cart and set up their tent. Then, while Blake was rummaging out provisions and Harding searching the bluff for dry sticks, they heard a beat of hoofs and a man rode up, leading a second horse. He got down and throwing a bundle off his saddle hobbled the beasts before he turned to Blake.

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

Blake told him he had guessed correctly, and asked how far they had still to go.

"You ought to make it in a day and a half," said the other. "I'll ride in with you; run a store

and hotel there, but feel I want to get out on the prairie now and then, and as a horse was missing I went after him. A looker, isn't he?"

Blake admired the animal, and suggested that the stranger had better join them instead of cooking a separate supper. The fellow, who told them that his name was Gardner, had a good-humoured, sunburned face and an honest look. The prairie was now wrapped in inky gloom, and there was an impressive stillness except for the occasional rustle of a leaf, but when Harding came out of the bluff with a load of wood a puff of icy wind suddenly stirred the grass. The harsh rustle it made was followed by a deafening crash, and a jagged streak of lightning fell from the leaden clouds; then the air was filled with the roar of driving hail. It swept the wood, rending leaves and smashing twigs, while the men crouched inside the straining tent and a constant blaze of lightning flickered about the grass. By and by the thunder died away and the hail gave place to torrential rain, while the slender trees rocked in the blast and small branches drove past the tent. This lasted some minutes, after which the rain ceased suddenly and a fierce red light streamed along the saturated grass from the huge sinking sun. Harding, who had brought the wood into the tent, took it out and with the stranger's help soon made a fire.

It was getting dark, though a band of transcendental green still burned upon the prairie's western edge when they finished supper and, sitting round the fire, took out their pipes. The hobbled horses were quietly grazing near them.

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

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

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

"It fits him," said the other. "Guess he's Clarke's, hide and bones, and that's all there'll be when the doctor has done with him. He's a sucker the doctor taught farming and then sold land to."

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

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

"We met a fellow called Clarke at the *Windsor* not long since. What's he like?"

Gardner described him and Harding said, "That's the man."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Starting early next morning, they reached Sweetwater after an uneventful journey and found it by no means an attractive place. South of it rolling prairie ran back, greyish white with withered grass, to the skyline; to the north straggling poplar bluffs and scattered Jack-pines crowned the summits of the ridges. A lake gleamed in a hollow, a slow creek wound across the

foreground in a deep ravine, and here and there in the distance one could see an outlying farm. A row of houses followed the crest of the ravine, the side of which formed a dumping ground for domestic refuse. Some were built of small logs, and some of shiplap lumber which had cracked with exposure to the sun, but all had a neglected and poverty-stricken air. The land was poor and the settlement located too far from a market. With leaden thunderclouds hanging over it, the place looked as desolate as the sad-coloured waste.

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

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

"It isn't cheap," said Blake; "I've seen the tariff, but on the whole I like the fellow who keeps it."

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

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

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

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

"And there isn't another."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You go to bed," said Gardner sternly.

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

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

The other disappeared and a few moments afterwards reeled out of the door and held himself upright by one of the verandah posts.

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

Warned by a sign from Gardner, the others ignored him, and Harding remarked to the farmer, "You hadn't finished what you were saying when he disturbed you."

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

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

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

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

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

"It's a mutual surprise, Benson," Blake replied, and the other, holding on by a chair back, smiled at him genially.

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

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

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

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

"Leave him to me," said Gardner, who seized the fallen man and with some difficulty lifted him to his feet. After he pushed him through the door there were sounds of a scuffle and two or three minutes later Gardner came back with a bruise upon his face.

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

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

"Have you got Benson here?" he asked.

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

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

He turned and nodded to Blake. "So you have come up here! I may see you to-morrow, but if Benson's all right I'm going home now."

He went into the hotel and soon afterwards they heard him leave by another door.

CHAPTER IX

CLARKE MAKES A SUGGESTION

At breakfast next morning Blake and Harding found the farmer, who had spent the night at the hotel, at their table and afterwards sat for a time on the verandah talking to him. When they mentioned their first objective point and asked if he could give them any directions for reaching it he looked thoughtful.

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

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

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

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

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

"But what's Clarke's object?"

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

He went away and Blake sat silent for a time. Though they had not been intimate friends, he had known Benson when the latter was a wild young subaltern, and it did not seem fitting to leave him in the clutches of a man who was ruining him in health and fortune. He would sooner not have met the man at all, but since they had met, there was, so far as he could see, only one thing to be done.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tilting his chair back, Benson looked heavily about. "When I was new to the country I often wished to go north. There are caribou and moose up yonder; great sights when the rivers break up in spring, and a sledge trip across the snow must be a thing to remember. The wilds draw you, but I'm afraid my nerve's not good enough. A man must be fit in every way to cross the timber belt."

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

"You hit hard, but I expect I deserve it, and I'll try to explain." Benson indicated the desolate settlement with a gesture of weariness.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"He couldn't count on that; to do the fellow justice, he'd hardly go so far, but there's some truth in what you say." Benson looked disturbed and irresolute, but after a few moments he abruptly threw his cigar away and leaned forward with a decided air. "If you'll have me, I'll go with you."

"You're wise," Harding said quietly.

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

Borrowing a saddle, Blake rode over to Clarke's homestead, which had a well-kept, prosperous look, and found its owner in a small room furnished as an office. Files of papers and a large map of the Western Provinces hung upon one wall; the floor was uncovered and a rusty stove stood in the middle of it, but Clarke was seated at a handsome American desk. He wore old overalls and the soil upon his boots suggested that he had been engaged in fall ploughing. As Benson came in he looked up and the light fell upon his face. It was deeply lined and of a curious dead colour, but while it bore a sensual stamp and something in it hinted at cruelty, it was, Blake felt, the face of a clever and determined man.

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

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

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

It took Blake some time, but he had been taught such work and did it carefully. When he had finished, Clarke resumed: "I'll give you a few directions, and you had better take them down, but you'll want a canoe and one or two Indians. I daresay I could enable you to get them, but I think the service is worth fifty dollars."

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

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

"I am, but I can't see what connexion this has——"

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't admit an injustice. Besides, I don't see what you can know about the matter."

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

Blake's face set sternly. "It's hard to understand how you arrived at that flattering conclusion."

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

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

He would have left the house only that he was curious to learn where the other's suggestions led and how much he knew. There was a moment's silence, and then Clarke went on—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Believing that the information might be of service, Blake did as he was told, and then took his leave. When he had gone, Clarke sat still for a time with a curious smile. Blake had firmly declined to be influenced by his hints, but Clarke had half expected this, and what he had learned about the young man's character cleared the ground.

CHAPTER X

BENSON GIVES TROUBLE

It was nearly dark when Blake and Harding led two packhorses through a thin spruce wood, with Benson lagging a short distance behind. They had spent some time crossing a wide stretch of rolling country, dotted with clumps of poplar and birch, which was still sparsely inhabited, and now they had reached the edge of the timber belt that cuts off the prairie from the desolate barrens. The spruces were gnarled and twisted by the wind, a number of them were dead, and many of the rest leaned unsymmetrically athwart each other. The straggling wood had no beauty and in the fading light wore a dreary, forbidding look. Fortunately, however, it was thin enough for the travellers to pick their way among the fallen branches and patches of muskeg, for the ground was marsh and their feet sank among the withered needles.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's so; it's my point. Suppose the fellow goes to work without you? It looks as if he'd learned enough to make him dangerous."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Benson regarded him with a mocking smile. "I'm inclined to think the jag you so feelingly allude to will last a week; that is, if I can raise dollars enough from Clarke to keep it up. You mayn't understand that I'm willing to barter all my future for it."

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

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

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

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

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

As he spoke a haughty ring crept into his voice and Blake was moved to compassion because he recognized it and found it ludicrous. Benson, who would not have used that tone in his normal state, belonged by right of birth to a ruling caste, and no doubt felt that he had been treated with indignity by a man of lower station. Harding, however, answered quietly—

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

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

"Very well. You were right in claiming that there was no engagement of any kind. So far, we have found you in grub, but we're not bound to do so, and if you leave us, you must shift for yourself." Harding addressed Blake, who sat nearest the provisions. "You'll see that your friend doesn't touch those stores."

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

"It looks as if I were beaten. I may as well go to sleep."

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

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

"You had better look if the horses are there," he suggested.

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

where he found Harding looking grave.

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

It was a strip of paper, apparently torn from a pocket-book, with a few lines written on it. Benson said he regretted having to leave them in such an unceremonious fashion, but they had given him no choice, and added that he would leave the horse, hobbled, at a spot about two days' ride away.

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

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

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

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

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

He felt tired when evening came, but he must find water before he camped, and he pressed on. Benson was a weak fool, who would, no doubt, give them further trouble, but they had taken him in hand, and Blake had made up his mind to save him from the rogue who preyed upon his failings. It was getting late when he saw a faint trail of smoke curl up against the sky from a distant bluff, and on approaching it he checked the jaded pony. Later he dismounted and picketing the animal moved cautiously round the edge of the wood. Passing a projecting tongue of smaller brush, he saw, as he had expected, Benson sitting beside a fire, and stopped a moment to watch him. The man's face was weary, his pose was slack, and it was obvious that the life he had led had unfitted him for a long, hard ride. He looked forlorn and dejected, but he started as Blake moved forward and his eyes had an angry gleam.

"So you have overtaken me; I thought myself safe from you," he said.

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

"It's a long drink I want," said Benson, looking steadily at him.

Blake, who let this pass, prepared his supper and offered the other a portion.

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

Benson thrust the food aside, and Blake finished it before he took out his pipe. "Now," he said, "you can go to sleep when you wish. I expect you're tired, and it's a long ride back to camp."

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

"I do; don't you mean to come?"

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

Blake laid down his pipe and looked hard at the man. "You force me to take a line I'm not cut out for. Think a moment! You have land and stock worth a good deal of money which my partner believes can be saved from the rogue who's stealing it from you. You are a young man, and if you pull yourself together and pay off his claims, you can sell out and look for another opening wherever you like, but you know what will happen if you go on as you are doing a year or two longer. Have you no friends and relatives in England you owe something to? Is your life worth nothing, that you're willing to throw it away?"

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

"Try," said Blake. "It's very well worth while."

Benson was silent for a few moments, and then looked up with a curious expression. "You're wasting time, Dick. I've sunk too far. Go back in the morning and leave me to my fate."

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

Benson's nerves were on edge and his self-control broke down. "Confound you!" he cried; "let me alone! You have reached the limit; once for all, I'll stand no more meddling."

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

"What's that?"

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

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

"Try me and see."

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

"This is insufferable!" he cried.

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

He tried to talk about other matters and found it hard, for Benson, tormented by his craving, made no response. Darkness crept in about them and the prairie grew shadowy. The leaves in the bluff rustled in a faint, cold wind, and the smoke of the fire drifted round the men. For a while Benson sat moodily watching his companion, and then, wrapping his blanket round him, lay down and turned away his head. It was now very dark outside the flickering light of the fire, and by and by Blake, who felt the strain of the situation, strolled towards the horses and chose a resting-place beside their pickets.

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

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

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

CHAPTER XI

HARDING GROWS SUSPICIOUS

Benson gave Blake no further trouble, and when they rode up to the camp, apparently on good terms with one another, Harding made no reference to what had occurred. He greeted them pleasantly and soon afterwards they sat down to a meal he had been cooking. When they had finished and lighted their pipes Benson said, "A remark was made the other night which struck me as quite warranted. It was pointed out that I had contributed nothing to the cost of this trip."

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

"They did. You might have put it more harshly with truth. But I want to suggest that you let me take a share in your venture."

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

Benson sat smoking in silence for the next minute or two. Then he said, "I think I understand and can't blame you. You haven't much cause for trusting me."

"I didn't mean——" Harding began, but Benson stopped him.

"I know. It's my weakness you're afraid of. However, you must let me pay my share of the

provisions and any transport we may be able to get. That's all I insist on now; if you feel more confidence in me later, I may reopen the other question." He paused and added: "You are two very good fellows. I think I can promise not to play the fool again."

"Perhaps we'd better talk about something else," Blake suggested.

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

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

Blake was glad to come to terms, and afterwards another of the men said, "We've been out two months on a general prospecting trip. It's the toughest country to get through I ever struck."

His worn and ragged appearance bore this out, and Harding asked: "Are there minerals up yonder? We're not in that line; it's a forest product we're looking for."

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

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

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

"Have you done much prospecting?" Harding asked.

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

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

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

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

He told Blake roughly where the Indian encampment lay, and after talking for a while they went to sleep. Next morning the prospectors, who took the horses, started for the south, while Blake's party pushed on north with loads that severely tried their strength. After a few days' laborious march they reached a stream and found a few Indians who were willing to take them some distance down it. It was a relief to get rid of the heavy packs and rest while the canoe glided smoothly through the straggling forest, and the labour of hauling her across the numerous portages was light compared with the toil of the march. Blake, however, had misgivings; they were making swift progress northwards, but it would be different when they came back. Rivers and lakes would be frozen then, which might make travelling easier, if they could pick up the hand sledges they had cached, but there was a limit to the provisions they could transport, and unless fresh supplies could be obtained they would have a long distance to traverse on scanty rations in the rigours of the Arctic winter.

After a day or two the Indians, who were going no farther, landed them and they entered a belt of very broken country across which they must push to reach a larger stream. The ground was rocky, pierced by ravines, and covered with clumps of small trees. There were stony tracts they painfully picked their way across, steep ridges to be clambered over, and belts of quaggy muskeg they must skirt, and the day's march grew rapidly shorter. Benson, however, gave them no trouble; the man was getting hard and was generally cheerful, while when he had an

occasional fit of moroseness as he fought with the longing that tormented him they left him alone. Still at times they were daunted by the rugged sternness of the region they were steadily pushing through, and the thought of the long return journey troubled them.

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

"What was that?" he asked.

The others could hear nothing but the sound of running water and the wail of the wind. Since leaving the Indians they had seen no sign of life and believed they were crossing uninhabited wilds. Blake could not tell what had suddenly roused his attention, but in former days he had developed his perceptive faculties by close night watching on the Indian frontier, where any relaxing of his vigilance might have cost his life. Something, he thought, was moving in the bush and he felt uneasy. Then he rose as a stick cracked, and Harding called out as a shadowy figure appeared on the edge of the light. Blake laughed, but his uneasiness did not desert him when he recognized Clarke. The fellow was not to be trusted and had come upon them in a startling manner. Moving coolly forward, he sat down by the fire.

"I suppose you were surprised to see me," he remarked.

"That's so," Harding answered and added nothing further, while Benson, whose face wore a curious strained expression, did not speak.

"Well," said Clarke, who filled his pipe, "I daresay I made a rather dramatic entrance, falling upon you, so to speak, out of the dark."

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

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

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

"What are you doing up here?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I was pretty well known in London."

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

"If you haven't heard, I may as well tell you, because the thing isn't a secret at the settlement." Clarke turned and his eyes rested on Blake. "I'm by no means the only man who has come to Canada under a cloud. There was a famous police-court affair I figured in, and though nothing was proved against me my practice afterwards fell to bits. As a matter of fact, I was absolutely innocent of the offence I was charged with. I had acted without much caution out of

pity and laid myself open to an attack that was meant to cover the escape of the real criminal."

Blake, who thought he spoke the truth, felt some sympathy, but Clarke went on: "In a few weeks I was without patients or friends; driven out from the profession I loved and in which I was beginning to make my mark. It was a blow I never altogether recovered from, and the generous impulse which got me into trouble was the last I yielded to."

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

Nobody made any comment, and there was silence for a few minutes while the smoke whirled about the group and the drips from the dark boughs above fell upon the brands. Then Clarke asked Benson a question or two and afterwards talked casually with the others until he rose to go.

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

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

"That's a man I have no use for," the American remarked. "I suppose it struck you that he made no attempt to get your friend back?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well," said Harding gravely, "I'm troubled about his leaving Benson alone, when one could have understood his trying to take him away. The fellow had some good reason—I wish I knew."

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

CHAPTER XII

THE MUSKEG

It was a fortnight later when the party entered a hollow between two low ranges. The hills receded as they progressed, the basin widened and grew more difficult to traverse, for the

ground was boggy and thickly covered with small, rotting pines. Every here and there some had fallen and lay in horrible tangles among pools of mire. A sluggish creek wound through the hollow and the men had often to cross it, while as they plodded through the morass they found their loads intolerably heavy. Still Clarke's directions had plainly indicated this valley as their road, and they stubbornly pushed on, camping where they could find a dry spot.

They were generally wet to the waist and their temper began to give way under the strain, while Blake was annoyed to find his sleep disturbed when he lay down in damp clothes beside the fire at nights. Sometimes he was too hot and sometimes he lay awake shivering, for hours. He had, however, suffered from malarial fever in India without having it badly, and supposed that it had again attacked him now that he was feeling the hardships of the march. Saying nothing to his companions, he patiently trudged on, though his head throbbed and he was conscious of a depressing weakness; and the ground grew softer as they proceeded. The creek no longer kept within its banks but spread in shallow pools, the rotting trees were giving place to tall grass and reeds. The valley had turned into a very wet muskeg, but, after making one or two attempts, they failed to find a better road among the hills that shut it in. The rocky sides of the knolls were seamed by ravines and covered with banks of stones and short brush, through which it was very difficult to force a passage. Then one day, Blake, who felt his head reel, staggered and sat down heavily.

"I'm sorry I can't keep on my feet," he said. "Think it's malaria I've got."

For a moment or two his companions gazed at him in dismay. His face was flushed, his eyes glittered, and moving feebly he sank further down with his back against a stone. He looked seriously ill, but Harding, realizing that the situation must be grappled with, resolutely pulled himself together.

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

When Blake had shakily risen they unstrapped his pack and afterwards with much trouble helped him to reach a small, stony knoll, where they made a fire and spread their blankets on a bundle of reeds for him to lie on.

"Thanks," he said in a listless voice. "I found it hard to keep my eyes open all morning and now I think I'll go to sleep. I'll no doubt feel better to-morrow."

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

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

Next morning Blake, who made an attempt to get up, was obviously worse, and though he insisted irritably that he would be all right again in a day or two the others felt dubious.

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

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

"It's located in half a dozen different places," Blake rejoined. "You overdo the thing, and the way Benson grins at your threadbare jokes would worry me if I were well. Do you suppose I'm a fool and don't know what you think?" He raised himself on his elbow, speaking angrily. "Try to understand that this is merely common malaria; I've had it several times, and it seldom bothers you much when you're out of the tropics. Why, Bertram—you've seen my cousin—was down with it a week at Sandymere; temperature very high, old fool of a family doctor looking serious and fussing. Then he got up all right one morning and rode to hounds next day. Very good fellow, Bertram; so's his father. If anybody speaks against my cousin, let him look out for me."

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

Lying down, he turned away from them and they exchanged glances, for it looked as if their comrade's brain were getting clouded. Blake, who dozed part of the time, said nothing during the

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

Harding looked interested when he heard this and made Benson ask exactly where the Stony village lay; and when he had been told he lighted his pipe and said nothing for the next half hour. Rain had begun to fall, and though they had built a rude shelter of earth and stones to keep off the wind in place of the tent, which had been abandoned to save weight, the raw damp seemed to reach their bones. It was not the place to nurse a fever patient in and Harding was getting anxious. He had led his comrade into the adventure and felt responsible for him; moreover, he had a strong affection for the helpless man. Blake was very ill and something must be done to save him, but for a time Harding could not see how help could be obtained. Then an idea crept into his mind, and he got Benson to ask the Indian a few more questions about the locality. When they were answered he began to see his way, but he waited until supper was over before he spoke of his plan.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"If that's true, it has an ugly look," Benson answered thoughtfully.

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

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

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

Benson started. "I believe he would stick at nothing; you may be right. But I'm only one of the party; what would he gain if you and Blake came to grief?"

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

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

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

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

us out. The fellow is a doctor."

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

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

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

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

"I'd hate to stay," Benson protested, and added with feeling: "You know how I'm indebted to Blake."

"It's your place," said Harding. "Now you had better try to arrange the thing with the Indian."

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

"That's fixed; we start at daybreak," said Harding. "I'll lie down now; it's your watch."

Five minutes later he was sound asleep and awoke, quietly determined and ready for the march, in the cold of dawn. He was a man of the cities, bred to civilized life and had a just appreciation of the risks he ran, since he meant to abduct the doctor, who was dangerous to meddle with, from an Indian village where he was apparently held in some esteem. The Stonies, living far remote, had, so Harding understood, escaped the chastening influence of an occasional visit from the patrols of the North-West Police. Moreover there was a possibility that Clarke might prove too clever for him. It was certainly a strange adventure for a business man, but he believed that Blake would perish unless help was obtained. He shook hands with Benson, who wished him a sincere "Good-luck!" and then, with the Indian leading, struck out through the muskeg towards the shadowy hills.

CHAPTER XIII

CLARKE'S SUMMONS

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

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

In the afternoon they reached a tableland where travelling was slightly easier, but when they camped without a fire among the rocks one of Harding's feet was bleeding and he was very weary. Walking was painful for the first hour after they started again at dawn, but by and by his galled foot troubled him less, and he doggedly followed the Indian up and down deep ravines and over rough stony slopes. Then they reached stunted timber; thickly-massed, tangled pines, with many dead trees among them and a number which had fallen, barring the way. The Indian seemed tireless; Harding could imagine his muscles having been toughened into something

different from ordinary flesh and blood. He was feeling distress, but for the present there was only one thing for him to do, and that was to march. He saw it clearly with his shrewd sense, and though his worn-out body revolted his resolution did not flinch.

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

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

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

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

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

Harding could not tell whether he noted all this at once, or if it afterwards impressed itself upon him by degrees, because as he entered Clarke, who sat beside the case, looked up. It was, Harding thought, a good test of his nerve, but his face was imperturbable and he showed no surprise. There was silence for a moment or two while the Indian stood motionless with his axe shining as it caught the light, and Harding's lips grew firmly set. Then Clarke spoke—

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

Harding, who was worn out, crossed the floor to the heap of reeds and sat down facing Clarke.

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

"You're presuming on my consent."

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

"I don't agree with you. A shout or a shot would bring in my friends, and you'd find yourself in

a very unpleasant position. You had better understand that the North-West Police have never visited this place and nobody troubles about what goes on up here, while I believe I'm a person of some influence." He indicated Harding's guide. "Then, though I don't know what he's doing in this neighbourhood, this fellow belongs to a tribe the Stonies have a grudge against. On the whole, I think you have been very rash."

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

Clarke regarded him with a mocking smile. "It's a matter of indifference to me whether Blake dies or not."

"No," said Harding, "I allow it isn't quite so. On the whole, you would sooner he did die. He's in the way."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Understand this," he said curtly. "I mean to save my partner; I staked my life on doing so, and since I guess you're not ready to go so far as that, I've a pretty strong pull on you. But I've said enough. You're coming with me—now—and if you make any attempt to rouse your friends, you'll have a chance of learning something about the other world at first hand a few seconds afterwards."

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

"I'm ready."

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

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

He set his teeth as they passed a tepee at a few yards distance. He could see the dark gap of the doorway and had a nervous fancy that eyes were following his movements, for now he had succeeded in the more difficult part of his errand he was conscious of strain. Indeed, he feared he was getting shaky and the danger was not yet over. They were not clear of the village and a noisy stumble would bring the Indians out. Unless they reached camp in the next few days he thought Blake would die, and the journey was a long and arduous one. Still, he was determined that if disaster overtook him, the plotter who had betrayed them should not escape. Harding was a respecter of law and social conventions, but now he had suddenly become primitive under heavy stress.

They passed the tepee unnoticed, but the tension he felt did not slacken, because there was another they could not avoid. Nobody, however, called to them, and he felt easier as they drew away from the row of shadowy tents. Then, moving very cautiously, they reached the thick willow bluff, where they were comparatively safe, and Harding, who found it hard to hold himself in hand, feared that he might grow limp with the reaction. Difficult as his task had looked, it had been successfully carried out.

"Get on," he said to Clarke and, walking faster, they plunged into the open waste.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CURE

It was noon when Harding returned to camp, ragged and exhausted, with Clarke limping after him in an even more pitiable state. The latter had suffered badly from the hurried march, but his conductor would brook no delay and the grim hints he had been given encouraged him to the utmost exertion he was capable of. Blake was alive, but when Harding bent over him he feared that help had come too late. His skin looked harsh and dry, his face had grown hollow, and his thick strong hair had turned lank and was falling out. His eyes were vacant and unrecognizing when he turned them upon Harding.

"Here's your patient," the American said to Clarke. "We expect you to cure him, and you had better get to work at once." Then his face grew troubled as he asked Benson: "How long has he been like that?"

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

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

"Had you much trouble?" Benson asked as he laid out a meal.

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

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

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

"You mean your life?" said Benson. "I've no doubt you were in some danger, but was it so serious?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And the remedy?"

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

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

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

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

"You had better mention the other."

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

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

"I must leave you to decide, but if the result's unfortunate I'll hold you responsible," he said.

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

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

After giving him a curious glance Clarke got up. "I'll try the draught, and it had better be done now. There is no time to lose."

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

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

Harding lighted his pipe and though he found it strangely hard to sit still smoked steadily. His mouth grew dry with the strain he was bearing, but he refilled the pipe as it emptied and bit savagely on its stem, crushing the wood between his teeth. There was, so far as he could see, no change in Blake, and he was stirred by a deep pity and a daunting sense of loneliness. He knew now that he had grown to love the man; Blake's quick resourcefulness had overcome many of the obstacles they had met with, his whimsical humour had lightened the toilsome march, and often when they were wet and worn out he had banished their dejection by a jest. Now it looked as if they would hear his cheerful laugh no more, and Harding felt that if the worst came, he would, in a sense, be accountable for his partner's death. It was his sanguine expectations that had drawn Blake into the wilds.

Benson, who seemed to find the suspense equally trying, made no remark, and there was nothing to be learned from Clarke's impassive face. Harding could only wait with all the fortitude he could muster, but he long remembered that momentous hour. They were all perfectly still; there was no wind, a heavy grey sky overhung them, and the smoke of the fire went straight up. The gurgle of running water came softly through the silence. At length, when Harding felt the tension becoming unendurable, Clarke, who glanced at his watch, reopened the small bottle.

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

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

At length Clarke, moving silently but quickly, bent over his patient, felt his pulse, and listened to his breathing; and Harding leaned eagerly forward. Blake seemed less restless, his face, which had been furrowed, was relaxing; there was a faint damp on it. He moved and sighed, but the sigh was somehow reassuring, and then turning his head weakly, closed his eyes. A few moments later Clarke stood up, stretching out his arms with a gesture of deep weariness.

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

Harding crept away, conscious of a relief so overpowering that he was afraid he might do something foolish and disturb his comrade if he remained. Scarcely noticing where he was going, he plunged into the swamp and ploughed through it, smashing down the reeds and splashing in the pools. Quick movement was balm to his raw-edged nerves, for the suspense of the last two hours had tried him very hard. When he returned to camp, rather wet and muddy, Clarke, who made him a sign demanding silence, was sitting by his patient's side, and Harding saw that Blake

was sound asleep. Then with a sense of thankfulness too deep for expression he set about preparing the evening meal. Now he could eat with appetite.

Before he and Benson had finished their repast Clarke joined them and, answering a question, said, "I believe the worst danger's over, though there's a possibility of a relapse. He'll need careful attention for several days."

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

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

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

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

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

"I can't fix the date, but it's some time. However, I understand he was afterwards in an unhealthy part of Africa, which may account for the thing. I don't think he's been in this country more than a year or two."

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

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

Seeing that he could extract no useful information from him, Clarke abandoned the attempt and discussed the case from a medical point of view. Then he said, "As we're not out of the wood yet, and I don't expect I'll be needed for a while, I'd better get some sleep. You must waken me if there's any sign of a change."

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

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

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

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

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

"Your suspicions die hard," Clarke rejoined with a mocking laugh.

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

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

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

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

"We're going ahead; you can do what you like about it. And now, while I admire the way you

pulled my partner through, there's not much more to say. I wish you a safe journey and good-morning."

He waved his hand and turned back towards the fire, while Clarke, following the Indian, moved forward across the muskeg. A week later they broke camp and, finding a somewhat better path along the hillside, went on by easy stages towards the north.

CHAPTER XV

MRS. CHUDLEIGH FINDS A CLUE

On a dark November morning when a blustering wind drove the rain against the windows Thomas Foster sat stripping the lock of a favourite gun in the room he called his study at Hazlehurst in Shropshire. The shelves on the handsome panelled walls contained a few works on agriculture, horse-breeding, and British natural history, but two racks were filled with guns and fishing rods and the table Foster was seated at had a vice clamped to its edge. He had once had a commodious gunroom, but had given it up, under pressure from his wife, who thought she could make a better use of it, since Hazlehurst was small and she had numerous guests, but the study was his private retreat. A hacksaw, a few files, a wire brush, and a bottle of Rangoon oil were spread out in front of him, the latter standing, for the sake of cleanliness, on the cover of the *Field*.

Foster was a red-faced country gentleman who found his greatest interest in outdoor sports and was characterized by some native shrewdness and a genial but rather abrupt manner. He laid down his tools and looked up with an air of humorous resignation as his wife came in. Mrs. Foster was a slender, vivacious woman, fond of society.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"She hasn't mentioned it. In fact, I was wondering——"

"Whether she'd stop if you pressed her? Try it and see. Anyhow, she's not in my way and the place seems to meet with her approval. But what's she after? It can't be young Jimmy; he's hardly worth powder and shot from her point of view."

"You're rather coarse, but I agree," Mrs. Foster answered. "Jimmy's too young and hasn't

much beside his pay. His admiration's respectfully platonic, but it's largely on his account I thought of asking her to remain. I'm grateful to her for amusing the poor fellow, because, as he can't get about with the others, he'd have been left a good deal to himself if she hadn't taken him up. She's excellent company when she exerts herself, and she talks and reads to him with great good-nature."

"Do what you wish. Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken so freely about a friend of yours."

"I don't know whether I quite consider her a friend or not," Mrs. Foster thoughtfully replied. "She was staying at Mabel's when I was there, but we didn't become intimate. In fact, I think I asked her down because she made me feel she wanted to come."

"A delicate hint sometimes goes a long way. Still, there's no doubt she has brightened Jimmy up, and one feels sorry for him."

Mrs. Foster went out, and, finding her guest, asked her to stay on, which, after a few demurs, Mrs. Chudleigh agreed to do, and on being left alone smiled in a satisfied manner. She had played her cards cleverly in obtaining a footing at Hazlehurst, which was a pleasant house to stay at, and thought that with good luck she might win the game she had begun. She was a hard and somewhat unscrupulous woman, but a tender look crept into her eyes as she thought of the man whose prospects she meant to improve.

Left a widow at an early age by the death of an elderly Anglo-Indian whom she had married under pressure from her parents, she had spent some years in social enjoyments before she met Sedgwick, with whom she fell in love. She was clever enough to recognize his faults, but she liked his bold, ambitious nature. Though he had no private means and she was rich, she knew her money would not count for much against the prospects of a brilliant career. The man had real ability and meant to make his mark, and in this she was anxious to assist him. She was even willing to defer their marriage until he had had an opportunity of displaying his talents in the administration of the West African territory he had lately returned to, and her object was to secure his appointment to the post left vacant by the retirement of his superior.

During the evening she sat with Lieutenant Walters in the conservatory. There were other guests at Hazlehurst, and Mrs. Foster had asked some of her neighbours to join them in an informal dance. Coloured lamps hung among the plants, throwing a soft light upon clustering blossoms and forcing up delicate foliage in black silhouette. Here and there lay belts of shadow, out of which came voices and a smell of cigar smoke; but near where Mrs. Chudleigh sat screened by a palm a French window opened into the hall. The half-light that fell sideways upon her face suited her, for it failed to reveal the hardness of her lips and eyes, and made her look gentler. Walters, who was charmed with her, had no suspicion that she had cultivated his society merely because she thought he might prove useful. On hearing what regiment he belonged to, she had marked him down for study.

"I'm afraid I'm selfish in keeping you here, though I know how good-natured you are," he said by and by. "You might have been enjoying yourself instead of letting me bore you."

Mrs. Chudleigh gave him a gracious smile. "I've lost my enthusiasm for dancing and need a rest now and then. Besides, I like a talk with interesting people."

"That's a thing I'm seldom credited with being. You're making fun of me."

"Far from it," she assured him. "If you are very modest, I'll confess that your knowing places and people I've seen in past days enhances the interest. Were you long in India?"

"Three years. In some respects, I was sorry to leave, but the doctors decided it would be twelve months before I was fit for work again, and I felt very much at a loose end when I got home. I can't dance, I can't ride, and I mustn't walk far; in fact, there seems to be nothing that I am allowed to do. I'd have found my helplessness harder only that you have taken pity on me."

"But you are getting stronger; I've noticed a marked improvement, since I came. But we were speaking of India. You were on the North-West frontier, were you not?"

"Yes," he said and looked round as a man passed the window. "Who's that? I've seen most of Lucy's neighbours, but I don't know him."

The man moved into the light and stood gazing towards them absent-mindedly, as if thinking of something. Walters noticed his white hair and thin face, the keenness of his blue eyes, the firmness of his mouth, and the erectness of his figure.

"That is Colonel Challoner," Mrs. Chudleigh replied.

"Ah!" said Walters; "I thought I recognized the stamp. Foster told me he lived a few miles off, but I'll have to move on if he comes in here."

"Why?" Mrs. Chudleigh asked in well-simulated surprise, though she saw the opportunity she had been waiting for was now offered her.

"I knew his son and nephew; served with them in India for a time," Walters answered with some embarrassment. "That's why Foster warned me to keep out of Challoner's way. He seemed to think it would be considerate."

Challoner passed on, and Mrs. Chudleigh fixed her eyes on Walters. "I see. You must have taken part in a certain unfortunate affair on the frontier in which the hill men get the best of it."

The blood crept into Walters' face, but he answered simply: "I did. It is not a subject one talks about."

"That's natural; one can understand the feelings of the mess, but the thing isn't quite a secret, and I daresay you break through your reserve now and then. Surely you don't refuse your confidence to your friends?"

Her manner was reproachful, as though she felt hurt because he could not trust her, and he looked confused.

"I couldn't doubt that anything I said would be safe with you, but it's a painful subject. Besides, you obviously know something about the matter."

"I do, but not much. I knew Bertram Challoner and have met Richard Blake. Then at one time I heard a good deal about the frontier and that makes me curious." She paused, and gave him a look he could not resist. "I want to know what really happened; won't you tell me? You can rely upon my treating it in the strictest confidence."

Walters felt reluctant, but he was grateful to her, and flattered by her preference. She was a handsome woman and much sought after, but she had often devoted an hour to enlivening his forced idleness when there were more exciting occupations open to her.

"I couldn't refuse you anything after the way you have helped me through a rather trying time," he declared. "When one has been pretty active, it isn't easy to resign oneself to being laid upon the shelf, and you cheered me up when I most needed it. Well, I was with the expedition and we had shelled an old hill fort to bits and laid a heavy fire on two or three villages, with the object of keeping their inhabitants quiet, but it hadn't that effect. All their friends came down to help in cutting us off as we went home and I'm still surprised that they didn't succeed. They sniped our camp every night and had a number of brushes with the rearguard as we hurried back through the hills; but it wasn't until we were nearly clear that things got badly threatening and we had to make a stand. I believe the idea was that we must hold our ground until help arrived. But am I boring you?"

"Oh! no," said Mrs. Chudleigh. "Please don't stop."

"Well, we were awkwardly placed in the bottom of a pass, but there was a small steep hill that strengthened our position and Blake made the trenches. He did it well, in the daylight, because there was no time to lose, with marksmen we couldn't see firing at him from among the rocks. I must say that although they made very good shooting and got several of his men he never flinched."

"He was not a nervous man, was he?"

"One wouldn't have imagined so after seeing him coolly doing his work with the bullets flattening on the stones all round; but I'll confess I could never understand what happened afterwards. The orders were that the hill must be held at any cost, but as our line was long we couldn't send up many men. Blake stayed with his few sappers, we had a gun from the mule battery, and there was Challoner, myself, and two more officers with a handful of native infantry. It was about two in the morning when the fellows made their rush, a band of Ghazees leading it, and I'll own that we were all a little overstrung. Forced marches on half rations and lying awake night after night expecting an attack are wearing. For all that, it was a strong position, and though there were not many of them we felt we could trust the men. The hill was hard to climb except by a ravine the gun did not command and Blake had laid a mine there. Challoner held the ridge immediately above."

"What is your opinion of Bertram Challoner? Is he a good officer?"

"One of the best. He's what you could call conscientious; took his duties seriously and knew more about the scientific side of his business than any of us. In a way, that was curious, because I imagine that he hadn't much natural aptitude for soldiering and while he was cool in action one felt he had to work himself up to it. Nobody doubted his pluck, but I've seen him looking rather white after a hot brush."

"A nervous temperament, held well in hand," Mrs. Chudleigh suggested. "But go on; I'm sorry I interrupted you."

"There was a challenge, a yell from the stabbed sentry, and the beggars were upon us. No time to think; the face of the hill swarmed with them. The gunners only fired one round before they were cut down, and the mine did not explode. It was a thick, dark night, and we were horribly outnumbered, but the orders were to hold on—we could send for support if very hard

pressed, but we mustn't yield a yard of ground. It was hot work in front of the trench upon the ridge—they poured into it at one end, but for a time we stayed as well. Then——"

Walters broke off and looked at his companion with appeal. "I've been talking too freely; said more than I should have done, in fact. You had better admit that you don't find all this interesting."

"It wouldn't be true," Mrs. Chudleigh declared, determined not to be put off. "I'm extremely interested, and you must keep your promise. Tell me all you can."

He made a gesture of resignation. "Well, there was an order given—in a white man's voice—and the bugle called us off. Somebody had ventured to disobey instructions, and after that the fight was over; we got away as best we could. They rolled over us like a wave as we went downhill and there were not many of us when we reached the bottom. Then some Gurkhas came up and held them a bit with the steel, a gun opened, and somehow the main camp was saved, though our ranks were thin at the next muster."

"There was an inquiry, of course. Did you give evidence?"

"I had to," said Walters ruefully. "I confined my answers as much as possible to 'Yes, sir,' and 'No,' but one can make a good deal out of these if the questions are judiciously framed. The bugler was killed, so they could learn nothing from him, but Watson was forced to declare that the order came from near the ravine where Blake should have fired the mine. After some badgering from the Colonel I had to admit that that was my opinion. There were other points against Blake and he did not try to clear himself. It was a very bad business, and I remember that Challoner broke down after his examination."

"But Blake was not cashiered."

"No; to tell the truth, I think some influence was at work. Colonel Challoner was known and respected on the frontier and he had powerful friends, though, of course, that sort of thing is not supposed to count. Anyhow, the official verdict was, 'Not guilty,' but nobody had much confidence in it and Blake had to leave us. In spite of everything, I was sorry for the man and felt that he might have made things look better if he had tried."

"It was very sad," said Mrs. Chudleigh. "You have my thanks for the story. I can understand that it was painful to tell."

Then she changed the subject and soon afterwards a man came in and claimed her for a dance.

CHAPTER XVI

MRS. KEITH ENTERS THE FIELD

A day or two after the dance Mrs. Chudleigh was sitting with Lieutenant Walters in a recess of the big hall when she heard a car coming up the drive. It stopped, a voice she thought familiar rose from the vestibule, and her face hardened as Foster came in with Mrs. Keith and Millicent Graham. Then Mrs. Foster, who did not notice that there was anybody else about, moved forward to meet the newcomers and led them through the hall.

"You looked surprised," Walters remarked when the others had disappeared. "Didn't you know these people were coming?"

"I think you meant displeased, and you were right," said Mrs. Chudleigh, who was capable of boldly correcting a mistake. "We made such a pleasant friendly party here that I felt the presence of anybody else would be rather a nuisance." She laughed as she went on: "Of course it was a very selfish view to take, especially as I know Mrs. Keith, and, now I recollect, Mrs. Foster did say some friends were coming down, though she didn't tell me who they were."

Walters left her by and by, but she sat still to think. It was most likely by chance that Mrs. Keith had decided to visit Hazlehurst just then, but there was a possibility that it was due to design. During their conversation on the Canadian river boat she had incautiously mentioned that she was going to Shropshire, and Mrs. Keith was an intimate friend of the Challoners. Mrs. Chudleigh had no wish to be subjected to the keen old woman's observation, but after all Mrs. Keith had no knowledge of her plans and would accordingly find it difficult to interfere with them. Still, she must be careful and avoid any cause for suspicion.

Tea was being brought in when Mrs. Keith and Millicent returned to the hall and for a few moments Mrs. Chudleigh sat watching the girl. The house was old and the dark panelling formed a good background for Millicent's delicate beauty, which was of the blonde type. Mrs. Chudleigh

had to admit that she was pretty, and though she tried to think of her as unformed, there was something in her face that hinted at strength of character. Foster, who was as a rule indifferent to women's society, obviously found her interesting, for he was talking to her with animation, and Mrs. Chudleigh realized that the girl was capable of exciting the admiration of well-matured men. For all that, she did not consider her a dangerous rival, because she knew there was a cold, calculating vein in Sedgwick which would prevent his indulging unduly in romantic weaknesses. Self-interest bound him to her and she tried to overlook his occasional sentimental vagaries. Indeed, the indifference he now and then displayed strengthened his hold on her. Then she rose to meet Mrs. Keith, who was coming her way.

"We shall have an opportunity of renewing a pleasant acquaintance," she said. "You are looking well, and Miss Graham is as fresh and pretty as when I last saw her."

Mrs. Keith glanced at Millicent. "Yes," she said, "I think so, and she is really a very nice girl." Then her eyes twinkled with dry amusement. "I'm not sure that you expected to see me."

It was obvious to Mrs. Chudleigh that she had betrayed her feelings on her companion's arrival. Nothing seemed to escape Mrs. Keith's attention.

"I did not," she admitted. "Indeed, I'll confess that I was somewhat startled when you came in. You see, I imagined that you were still in Canada."

"I didn't stay very long after you. One or two things turned up that brought me back."

"But you have no family ties, have you?"

"I have some old friends. Now and then I'm vain enough to believe that one of them needs me."

As they spoke Mrs. Foster joined them.

"Colonel Challoner is eager to see you, Margaret," she interposed. "He excused himself for not coming this evening because Greythorpe is staying with him for a day or two, but he made me promise to bring you over to-morrow." She turned to Mrs. Chudleigh. "You must join us. Have you met Greythorpe? He's down here now and then."

It seemed to Mrs. Chudleigh that fortune was favouring her. After a long parliamentary career during which he had been distinguished by his sound sense and the moderation of his views, Greythorpe had been entrusted with an office in connexion with the administration of Colonial affairs. What was more to the purpose, he seemed to be a friend of Colonel Challoner's, whose assistance Mrs. Chudleigh thought she had means of securing in the plan she was working out.

"I should be delighted," she declared. "I don't know Mr. Greythorpe except by reputation and, as it happened, I hadn't an opportunity of speaking to Colonel Challoner on the evening when he was here, though I once met him."

Seeing that Mrs. Keith was watching her, she was glad of the chance of explaining that she had not renewed her acquaintance with the Colonel. As she had now spent a fortnight with Mrs. Foster, who knew him well, this should disarm any suspicion that Mrs. Keith might entertain.

"I don't know why we're standing when there's room for all of us in the recess," said their hostess, who led the way towards it, and they dropped into casual conversation when tea was brought them.

The evening passed pleasantly, for Mrs. Chudleigh who possessed some charm of manner, exerted herself to be agreeable to the newcomers. Nevertheless she was looking forward to the next day's visit with eagerness and wondering how she could best make use of the opportunity.

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

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

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

"Never directly," Challoner replied. "On the whole, it is better so, though I regret it now and

then. A weakness on my part, perhaps, but I was fond of Dick and expected much from him. However, it seems that Bertram and Margaret Keith met him in Montreal, and she is coming here to-morrow."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks; I know," said Challoner. "It looks as if he meant to cut loose from all of us, and while I'm sorry for this I can't say that he's wrong or that it's not a proper feeling. And now I think we'll let the subject drop." He lighted a cigar before he resumed: "You look rather jaded, and I understand that your responsibilities have been added to. What have you done about the African appointment you mentioned when last here? To be candid, I never thought the man lately invalided home was in his right place."

"He was hardly decided enough," Greythorpe answered thoughtfully. "So far, we haven't filled the post, though two or three names have been suggested. We have a man out there now who has shown some enterprise and ability, and are inclined to leave him informally in charge while we consider things."

"In view of our friendly relations with the French, one would imagine that the appointment needs careful thought. It's easy for undesirable disputes to crop up, when you have turbulent native subjects to keep in hand along another power's frontier."

"That's true. Our territory adjoins theirs for some distance, but, as it happens, our respective fields of influence outside the recognized boundaries have not been very clearly defined. Now there's reason to believe that part of the unclaimed neutral belt would be valuable to us, and I needn't point out that the Imperial expansionists have made their influence felt."

"It's a pity the Government seems able to resist it," Challoner drily remarked.

Greythorpe smiled, for he and his host took different sides in party politics, though they often agreed on points that concerned their country's foreign policy.

"I think they're wise in their moderation, but I've had plain hints about the desirability of extending our influence in Africa, which is why we attach some importance to the appointment in question. Its holder must be a man of tact, able to keep on friendly terms with the French officials, and yet bold enough to secure us any advantage that may offer in the unoccupied belt. In fact, though the post is not highly paid, he must have exceptional talent."

"Men of that kind are hard to pick up."

"Very true. None of the candidates quite satisfies us, but when we have investigated their qualifications fully I may ask you what you think. It would be premature just now."

"Always glad to be of service," Challoner replied. "But the men you'll have to choose among have grown up since my day."

"That is not important. It's largely a question of personal character, and you're a judge of that when it must be coupled with military skill."

Challoner smiled in a sombre manner. "I used to think so, but I've come to doubt it. I made a grave mistake about my nephew. However, there's a matter you were speaking of this morning and a point has since occurred to me."

Greythorpe said he would be glad to hear it, and they talked over the subject until they went to bed.

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

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

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

He looked rather stern and worn, and his soft grey tweed showed the leanness of his figure, but his expression and bearing indicated force of will. In his conversation with women he was marked by an air of old-fashioned gallantry, and though his wit was now and then ironical his companion found him attractive. She had cleverly appropriated and separated him from the rest soon after they entered the garden, but she was too clever to approach too soon the object she had in view. First of all, she must ingratiate herself with him, and she saw that he liked her society, though she made one or two mistakes about the shrubs in which she professed a keen interest.

"I'm afraid you don't quite grasp my meaning," he said with a smile. "It's a difference between varieties, not between species. They are not the same thing."

"I should have remembered," Mrs. Challoner [Transcriber's note: Chudleigh?] replied. "I must own that I'm not a botanist, but one can appreciate the beauty of plants without knowing all about them. Perhaps the same applies to beauty in any form."

"No doubt. Harmonies of outline, and concords of colour make an unconscious appeal, but in Nature's products knowledge adds to admiration. The deeper you probe, the more you reveal, until you come to mysteries beyond our solving." He added with some dryness: "It's often otherwise with man's work; knowledge means disillusion. You see how the trick is done."

"Must it always be a trick?"

"Oh! no; not necessarily. There is a sincerity of effort that leads to lasting and beautiful work, but perhaps it's not common."

"I'm afraid you're a pessimist."

"I wouldn't like to think so, but I have lived a long time and insisted on using my eyes, even when clearsightedness may not have been a benefit. There's a penalty attached to the habit of close observation; one sees things that hurt."

He spoke with dry humour, but his words had their effect on his companion, who was by no means philosophical. When she studied human weaknesses it was with the object of turning them to her advantage, but the shrewd, upright soldier saw them as things to avoid or recognize with scorn. He, however, plucked a bunch of crimson berries which he gave her.

"This," he said, "is in my opinion an exceptionally beautiful bush. Mrs. Keith sent it me from the Tyrol some years ago."

"You are old friends then?"

"Our friendship is of forty years standing, which I should imagine is a severe test, but in many ways we are alike, and Margaret Keith knows enough about me to make allowances. We are both well-seasoned and strong-willed, and sometimes we differ, but I must confess that whenever the point has been one of importance time has proved her right."

Mrs. Chudleigh looked up at him, smiling. "That is a handsome admission, because I shouldn't imagine you easily changed your mind."

"No; as one grows older one's ideas are apt to fall into a groove. It requires an effort to force them out of it."

She said nothing for a few minutes, though his confession had its significance, since she must sooner or later persuade him to abandon one fixed idea.

"After all, none of us find that easy," she remarked.

He glanced across the lawn, where Millicent was talking to Greythorpe. "That girl has a very attractive face. I don't merely mean that it's pretty."

"What do you call it then?"

He seemed to ponder. "I think I could best say it looks untainted, though that is rather vague. There's purity in it, by which I don't mean the guilelessness of inexperience."

"That could hardly be, considering who Miss Graham's father was, and that she has earned her living for some years."

There was a hint of surprise in the look Challoner gave her and she saw that she had made a mistake.

"A few people have natures which can't be spoiled," he said. "To them knowledge brings pity or shrinking instead of temptation. I think Miss Graham is to be numbered among these, and she is in good hands with my old friend."

Two or three minutes afterwards, Mrs. Keith resolutely crossed the lawn towards them, but her determined expression softened as she approached Challoner.

"Do you know that I feel neglected?" she said. "Where are those American azaleas you promised to show me?"

Challoner made her an apologetic bow. "Have I been remiss? I saw you with Greythorpe, and understood you found him interesting."

"I've nothing against the man, and he never bores one, but he's a friend of yesterday by comparison; it's only six years since I first met him."

"Ah!" said Challoner; "the old ties are strongest."

Mrs. Keith insisted on examining the azaleas, though they were dry and leafless, and Mrs. Chudleigh, seeing no further opportunity of a quiet talk with Challoner, left them. When she had gone, Mrs. Keith looked at her companion with a twinkle.

"Well," she said, "what do you think of Mrs. Chudleigh?"

"You'll allow me to say that I find her charming? It's a comprehensive word."

"And means anything or nothing. But I understand. You're often only conventional when you think yourself gallant."

"It's possible, but what would you have me say? She's attractive, a pleasant talker, and I think intelligent."

"Highly intelligent," Mrs. Keith remarked pointedly "Do you think she's to be trusted?"

"It doesn't enter into the question. I don't see that either of us is required to trust her."

"I'm inclined to think that's fortunate," Mrs. Keith rejoined.

For the next half hour she kept Challoner at her side and then left him with Mrs. Foster. It was hard to resist Margaret Keith when she had made up her mind, and Challoner had no wish to do so. Moreover he was glad to talk to Mrs. Foster, whom he liked, but he had other guests to whom he owed some attention and he felt as if he were being gently but firmly kept away from them. Mrs. Chudleigh and Millicent, however, seemed to be content with Greythorpe's society, and finding it difficult to leave Mrs. Foster he acquiesced.

Presently she suggested that he should show her friends his pictures, but he said that as it was near sunset and the gallery was badly lighted it would be better if she brought her party back in a day or two. Having promised to do so she summoned the others, and they were driven home.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PICTURE GALLERY

Mrs. Foster brought her guests back to Sandymere, and when Challoner had shown them the best bits of the old carved oak with which the house was decorated and some curious works of art he had picked up in India, he took them to the picture gallery which ran round the big square hall. A lantern dome admitted a cold light, but a few sunrays struck through a window looking to the south-west and fell in long bright bars on polished floor and sombre panelling. On entering the gallery, Challoner took out a case of miniatures and placing it on a small table brought a chair for Mrs. Keith.

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

Mrs. Keith sat down. She was fond of miniatures, and though she would have preferred to accompany her host she had kept him away from Mrs. Chudleigh since their arrival and thought she must be content with that. She seldom overdid anything and had no wish to make her object too plain; Geoffrey Challoner was by no means a fool. As she expected, Mrs. Chudleigh found an opportunity of joining him after a time and diverted his attention from Mrs. Foster, who left him to talk to his sister. Mrs. Keith watched the manoeuvre, which was cleverly carried out, with ironical amusement, though she was troubled by a faint uneasiness. She felt that her old friend was threatened, but she could not see where the danger lay, and, sitting with the miniatures before her, she tried to formulate her suspicions.

In the first place, she had unwisely given Mrs. Chudleigh to understand that it was doubtful whether Richard Blake had merited his disgrace. Then the former had met Lieutenant Walters, who had fought in the frontier action, and had gained his confidence. It was possible that she had led him on to talk about the affair with injudicious freedom, and now she had met Greythorpe and seemed desirous of cultivating his acquaintance. All this had an ominous look, because the woman was ambitious and scheming, besides being in love with Sedgwick, who was something of an adventurer. She would no doubt seize upon any opportunity of securing his promotion.

Margaret's Keith's suspicions were justified, for Mrs. Chudleigh was then cleverly clearing the ground for future action. She had some knowledge of art and the row of family portraits, hung between suits of armour and trophies of Eastern weapons, interested her, while Challoner was gratified by the way she listened as he spoke of them. One or two were by well-known artists, and the faces of the old Challoners, some of whom wore wigs and rich court dress, and some obsolete uniforms, fixed her attention. The resemblance between them all was recognizable, and she thought the family strain must be unusually strong. They had obviously been stern, masterful men, practical rather than imaginative and not likely to be troubled by any emotional weaknesses. Then she glanced at the picture of a young woman with a face of singularly delicate beauty. Its expression was gentle and pensive.

"My wife; she died in Simla twenty years ago," said Challoner gravely, and passing on, stopped before a water-colour drawing of his son.

It had been painted when Bertram was young, and he had his mother's dreamy look. Mrs. Chudleigh missed the hardness of expression that marked the Challoners.

"A sketch rather than a finished study, but there's talent in it," she remarked. "The subject's temperament has been cleverly seized; I have met Captain Challoner."

"My wife's work," said the Colonel. "Although I value it, I have thought she was mistaken in this drawing. My son is a man of action, and this is the face of a sentimentalist."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Chudleigh; "his mother should know him best."

"Undoubtedly," agreed Challoner, who looked disturbed at the suggestion. "Still, perhaps, in painting a portrait the artist may be misled into unduly emphasizing some single, passing phase of the sitter's character. A lad's moods are variable; his nature has not had time to harden into its mould. I imagine this is what has happened, because if the likeness is faithful, my son has changed since then."

"One does not change much in essentials," Mrs. Chudleigh answered thoughtfully. "But what would you have different? It is a good and very likeable face."

"There is a hint of weakness; something that suggests a too sensitive disposition." The Colonel pointed to an officer in the old East India Company's uniform whose expression was grim and arrogant. "A crude piece of work, but he has the Challoner look."

"It may sound presumptuous, but I think you are scarcely doing the family justice. One can see the salient characteristics of the male line in this example, but they're too strongly marked. Good qualities, such as resolution and courage, may degenerate through being developed to exaggeration at the expense of others, and after all Captain Challoner strikes me as a much finer type. I'm afraid you undervalue the gift of imagination."

"These others," said Challoner, indicating the portraits generally, "had imagination enough to do their duty, often in difficult situations. I don't know that one needs much more."

"A stern doctrine; it seems to bar out a good deal of the beauty and joy of life. But I see some

landscapes yonder."

She led him up to several small impressionist sketches in water-colour of Indian subjects, and stopped in admiration.

"These are very good. I know the country, and they make you realise what it is like. There is genius here."

"My son did them," said Challoner with dry amusement. "I can see their cleverness, but I'll admit that I think them rather a waste of time."

"A shocking view. Would you sooner have had him study his drill book or attend a kit inspection?"

"On the whole, I believe so. It would be more in line with his profession."

Mrs. Chudleigh gave him a direct, reproachful glance. "I know your son and that he is a good soldier, but I feel you were wrong when you sent him into the army. With training, he might have made a great artist."

Challoner regarded her with frank astonishment. "But, my dear lady, would you prefer the latter; a coverer of canvases, a mere portrayer of action instead of a doer? Is it better to paint human passions and emotions than to control and direct your own and those of others?"

"Painting is his work," Mrs. Chudleigh persisted. "He has the temperament; you can see it triumphing over circumstances. In spite of his duties, the amusements he must be expected to take part in, and, no doubt, the banter of the mess, he finds time to make these sketches. Then they exhibit more than mere skill with the brush; they show clear understanding and the power of feeling."

"The latter is a dangerous gift. A man of action is better without it."

"Your son has it, and it cannot be got rid of; but in a sense, you're right. Sensibility must be a handicap to a soldier now and then, making him realize dangers and cruelties he had better have been blind to." Mrs. Chudleigh paused and added with a thoughtful air: "Captain Challoner's courage and coolness are known, but I think they must cost him more than is required of his comrades. I mean that his having something to overcome before he can practise them, and yet always doing so, shows a fine moral fibre."

Challoner looked grave. He had suspected what he thought were symptoms of weakness in his son, though Bertram had never given way to it. His companion's talk disturbed him because it seemed to prove the correctness of his suppositions, but he was shortly relieved of her.

Margaret Keith, who had watched closely, decided that Mrs. Chudleigh had been alone with her host long enough, but for a time she could see no suitable means of separating them. By and by, however, Millicent came towards her and she beckoned the girl.

"Isn't Arrowdale near your aunts' place in the North?" she said. "There's a picture of the hills round it that I think you would like. Ask Colonel Challoner to show it you."

Millicent joined the others, and when she spoke about the picture Mrs. Chudleigh went away. She thought she had said enough, for her object had been to plant a seed of doubt about his son's character in Challoner's; mind. If he considered sensitiveness, artistic talent, and imagination failings in a Challoner, she had given him food for thought, which was as far as she wished to go just then, and on the whole she thought she had reason to be satisfied. When she had moved away, Challoner showed Millicent a picture of grey hills and a sullen tarn, half revealed between folds of rolling vapour, and the girl was stirred to keen appreciation.

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

"My son," said the Colonel, and added with a curious smile: "You are the second person who has lately tried to persuade me that he should have been an artist."

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

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

"Very much sooner."'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Soon afterwards Mrs. Foster said that she must go, and when she and her friends had left, Challoner sat alone for a time while the pictures faded as dusk crept into the gallery. A man of practical abilities with a stern perception of his duty, he was inclined to distrust all that made its strongest appeal to the senses. Art and music he thought were vocations for women; in his opinion it was hardly fitting that a man should exploit his emotions by expressing them for public exhibition. Indeed, he regarded sentimentality of any kind as a failing, and it had been suggested that his son possessed the dangerous gift. One of his guests had gone further and hinted that Bertram should never have been a soldier. Challoner could not agree with this conclusion, but he thought there was, perhaps, a grain of truth in it. Then he banished his disturbing thoughts and went out in search of Greythorpe.

During the next week Mrs. Chudleigh met Challoner twice and skilfully led the conversation to his son. Then she heard from Sedgwick, who said that if he could obtain the vacant appointment it would give him an opportunity of making his mark. The time was ripe for a bold stroke which would lead to the acquisition of valuable territory, but he could not carry out his plans unless he had full command. They were, he felt, bound to succeed, but he frankly owned that he meant to force the hand of the Colonial authorities and could not act while he held a subordinate position. Accordingly he begged Mrs. Chudleigh to exert all her influence to secure his promotion, adding that his name had been mentioned in connexion with the post, but that there were other candidates with stronger claims on those who had the power to make the appointment.

Mrs. Chudleigh had already been at work in different quarters, but she thought Colonel Challoner the most likely man to help her, though he might be difficult to persuade and she could not hurry him. She had moreover had several confidential talks with Lieutenant Walters and had extracted a good deal of information. This enabled her to form a plausible theory of what had happened during the night attack, and she was inclined to think that even an experienced soldier could not find much fault with the conclusions she had arrived at, but she did not wish to make use of it unless compelled.

When it was getting dark one evening Foster, who was crossing a meadow with two young men carrying guns dropped behind to speak to a keeper as Mrs. Chudleigh and Millicent came forward to meet the party. Soon afterwards he joined his wife, who had waited for him, and they walked to the house behind the others.

"How did you get on at the Seymours' this afternoon?" he asked. "Did Ada air her views for the benefit of your friends?"

Mrs. Foster laughed, for Ada Seymour was a lady with strong opinions which she was fond of proclaiming.

"Yes," she said; "in fact, she went farther than usual and rather forgot her manners. After a while Mrs. Chudleigh took exception to something she said and Miss Graham was drawn into the argument. Somewhat to my surprise, she supported Ada and spoke really well, but Ada was getting angry and I was so busy trying to smooth things down that I hardly know what it was all about."

"The degeneracy of the age and the insidious influence of luxury no doubt. Ada can't keep off these topics and she makes some surprising statements when she warms up, but I'm not surprised that Mrs. Chudleigh and Miss Graham took opposite sides."

"Why?"

"They're very different types; about as different as a moonlight night and a spring morning."

Mrs. Foster looked at him sharply and he chuckled.

"Not often so poetical, am I? But I prefer the bright morning; moonlight's a tricky, elusive thing, apt to dazzle and mislead one. However, does Mrs. Chudleigh intend to remain long? She looks like a fixture."

"She doesn't inconvenience you."

"Not at all. She's amusing and that and moderate good looks are all you expect from a woman, so long as you don't mean to marry her. I'm interested in your friend; very much so, although I can't see her game."

"What do you mean by her game?"

"If you don't know, it isn't often you're so dull. She's up to something and Meg Keith sees it; she keeps a close watch on the woman and when she's forced to take her eyes off her sets Miss Graham on guard."

"Do you mean that Miss Graham informs her of what Mrs. Chudleigh says or does?"

"Nothing farther from my thoughts. Meg Keith has lots of pluck, but she'd be shy of suggesting such a course to that girl. What she does is not to trust the woman alone when she can help it; when you see Mrs. Chudleigh you'll generally find Meg or her companion in the neighbourhood. The plot's interesting and the Colonel's in it. I've an idea that Meg's somehow defending him. He's an old friend and she's as staunch as they're made."

"If there is more in the situation than appears on the surface, you had better leave it alone. You won't improve matters by interfering."

"Seen that all along," Foster agreed. "I'll stick to my shooting, but provided that I keep my hands off, there's no harm in looking on. But you mark me; there'll be developments."

He broke off with a chuckle and Mrs. Foster walked on in thoughtful silence. Her husband occasionally showed shrewd observation, and she believed that he was right in the present instance. Something was undoubtedly going on, but she could not determine what it was. As she entered the hall she saw Millicent talking to one of her sporting guests who had shown a preference for her society and Mrs. Chudleigh watching. The latter liked admiration but her expression indicated critical scrutiny rather than jealousy. Mrs. Foster imagined that she was trying to analyse the girl's charm. Then as she came forward with her husband the others joined them and shortly afterwards tea was brought in.

CHAPTER XVIII

COLONEL CHALLONER PROVES OBDURATE

A week after Mrs. Foster's visit Challoner drove over to Hazlehurst in the afternoon and on reaching the lodge found her setting out with several of her guests to meet Foster and his friends on their return from shooting. Refusing to allow her to turn back with him, he accompanied the party, and some time later Mrs. Keith, who had remained at home, went out on the terrace. Following it to the end of the house near which the stables stood, she saw a man leading in a horse which she thought she knew.

"Isn't that bay Colonel Challoner's?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," said the groom. "The gardener brought it up from the lodge. The Colonel went on with Mrs. Foster to the long wood."

Mrs. Keith turned away and sat down on a terrace seat feeling disturbed. Mrs. Chudleigh was with the others and would no doubt detach Challoner from them, as she generally succeeded in doing when Mrs. Keith was unable to prevent her. Now there was nobody to come to his rescue, he would be at the woman's mercy, and though she admitted that this was perhaps an exaggerated view to take, Mrs. Keith felt that he was threatened. It was, however, a long walk to the wood and she was old enough to shrink from it; besides there was a possibility that she was after all suspecting Mrs. Chudleigh without much cause, but she made up her mind to follow. By walking fast she might overtake the party before much harm was done. Entering the house, she put on thick boots and then set out with all the speed she was capable of.

In the meanwhile Mrs. Foster's party had split up, and Mrs. Chudleigh and Challoner were left together. The Colonel did not regret this, because he had found her an entertaining companion. Though it was a winter day, the weather was mild and the road almost dry, and after a time they reached a birch wood which skirted its eastern side. The rays of the low sun struck in among the trees, forcing up the silvery trunks and fragile twigs which looked like lacework against a background of blue shadow. Thick hollies and rhododendrons planted near the wayside

kept off the light wind, and dead leaves and withered fern made patches of glowing colour. When they came to a gate leading to a drive through the wood Mrs. Chudleigh stopped.

"The others have vanished; I can't even hear them," she said. "I wonder which way they have gone."

Challoner listened, but could only distinguish the murmur of the wind among the birches and the rustle of fallen leaves. The rest of the party were obviously some distance ahead.

"The road's the longer, but as the field-path's often wet I can't tell which they've taken," he said.

"The field-path for me," Mrs. Chudleigh replied.

"I'm afraid I'm not very fond of walking."

They entered the wood and presently reached a stile, on the other side of which a boggy patch cut off the path from a strip of sticky ploughing. Mrs. Chudleigh regarded it with disapproval.

"I don't know if Mrs. Foster could jump over that, but I can't," she said.

She sat down upon the stile and Challoner leaned against the fence.

"There'll be time to meet them coming back before they reach the spot where the path rejoins the road. After all, I see no reason to complain of being left behind."

Mrs. Chudleigh smiled at him. "That's very nice of you, and while the sunshine lasts it's pleasant here. I often think an English wood, with the varied colours of the trunks and mosses showing, is most beautiful on a bright winter day. Besides, I wanted to talk to you. There's a favour I must ask."

"You can consider it granted if it's in my power."

"Don't be rash," she warned him. "You may be surprised when you hear what it is, but I want you to see the matter in its proper light and not to be actuated merely by a wish to please me."

"It's a wish I should like to gratify," Challoner assured her. "But please go on."

Mrs. Chudleigh hesitated. Beneath his formal, old-fashioned courtesy which she had found attractive she recognized a stern conscientiousness. He must, if possible, be convinced that the course she meant to urge was the best, though she had the means of putting pressure on him if this proved needful.

"Well," she said, "there is a rather important post vacant in a West African colony and you have influence. Mr. Greythorpe is an intimate friend of yours and may consult you about the matter. He will, no doubt, have a part in making the selection."

"I have heard about it," Challoner admitted guardedly.

Instead of answering, Mrs. Chudleigh started and clenched her hand, for she was looking towards the road and could see a woman's figure through an opening between the trees. She recognized the dress, which was behind the current fashion, and the new-comer's carriage, which somehow suggested determination, further indicated Mrs. Keith. Mrs. Chudleigh was glad that Challoner stood where he could not see the road, but she watched in keen suspense when Mrs. Keith reached the gate and stopped as if undecided which way to go. If she chose the field-path, Mrs. Chudleigh's opportunity would be gone, and it might be some time before she found another, while her business brooked no delay. It was, however, fortunate that she and her companion could not be plainly seen from the road because there were some bushes in the way and a tall thicket close by formed a background against which their figures would not show. After a few moments Mrs. Keith moved on and Mrs. Chudleigh, who was conscious of deep relief, saw that Challoner was waiting for her to speak.

"It is essential that the right man should be chosen," she resumed. "Our political and commercial interests demand this. There is a chance of acquiring a strip of territory which would open a way to the trade of the interior, but it must be done with tact as well as boldness. We need a man with firmness and judgment who can secure us this opening without giving the French definite ground for offence, and he must be experienced in West African affairs. The post could not be entrusted safely to a newcomer."

"Ah!" said Challoner; "as you seem so well informed, I presume you have somebody to suggest."

She could learn nothing from his manner, which had changed and grown formal.

"I know a man who has all the necessary qualifications. He is resolute and enterprising; a soldier who has distinguished himself in action and a clever administrator. What is more, the direction of affairs has been largely left in his hands for some time."

"You mean Captain Sedgwick?" Challoner's tone was discouragingly reserved. "May I ask what leads you to plead his cause?"

"First of all because I think he is the best man."

"A good reason," said the Colonel. "Still I'm inclined to think you have a better one."

Mrs. Chudleigh hesitated while the colour crept into her face; then she said simply, "I love him."

Challoner bowed. "I am honoured by your confidence, but if he were chosen, it would separate you. You could not stand the climate of Western Africa."

"I know," she said eagerly. "These appointments, however, are not for long and we are willing to defer our marriage if it will give him an opportunity of showing what he can do."

There was silence for the next minute. Challoner was somewhat touched by her frank appeal, and though he saw that she was sufficiently ambitious to subordinate her affection to her desire for her lover's advancement, it was an ambition he could sympathize with. The woman was willing to make a sacrifice. For all that, he felt that he could not conscientiously help her.

"I wish you had asked for something else," he said. "I'm sorry this favour is not in my power."

"You can know nothing against Captain Sedgwick," the answered sharply.

"Certainly not; the trouble is that personally I know nothing in his favour."

"But I have assured you that there is nobody so suitable."

"That is a different matter. Your opinion is very natural and does you credit; I will not suggest that your affection for him may lead you to rate Captain Sedgwick's qualifications too highly. No doubt, he is an excellent officer, but these appointments are not made on a lady's recommendation."

"Are they not?" Mrs. Chudleigh asked with a touch of irony. "Remember that I have lived at Simla and know that influence often goes a long way I have seen it at work."

Challoner frowned. "So have I, but it is a thing I have always set my face against. The man for a post of this kind must be chosen on his merits."

"How are they to be ascertained, unless you take the opinion of those who know him best?"

"It is often difficult, but the safest test is his work as it is known to his official superiors. Unless he is judged by this, there is a risk of partiality and unfairness. Social influence is a dangerous thing and deplorable mistakes have been made when it has been allowed to have effect."

"Then you will do nothing?"

Her tone was harsh and Challoner looked at her in surprise.

"It is possible that Greythorpe may consult me, though I do not know what weight my opinion would have with him. If the information he lays before me seems to indicate that Captain Sedgwick is the best man, I should suggest his appointment."

Mrs. Chudleigh appeared to acquiesce and said nothing for some minutes. She was sorry that Challoner had not proved more amenable, since his stubbornness forced her into a distasteful line of action, but she could not spare him when her lover's future was at stake.

"After all," she said, "a soldier's official record is sometimes as little to be trusted as you think his friends' estimate of him ought to be. I have an instance in view; two men I know took part in an action on the Indian frontier, and one gained a reputation for courage, and the other obloquy. As it happened, neither was deserved."

"On the Indian frontier?" Challoner glanced at her sharply.

"Yes; some time since. A night attack was made upon a hill which formed the key to the position of a small British force. An order to retreat was wrongly given."

"Ah!" said Challoner; "I have good reason to remember that affair. May I ask what you know about it?"

"I'm convinced I know the truth, which has been concealed."

Challoner started and his face grew eager. "Then your knowledge is of great importance and I must beg you to share it with me. It may clear a man I have a strong affection for."

"At the cost of involving another."

"I suppose that follows."

"Then you do not believe it wiser to let a painful matter which is already almost forgotten rest? You would rake it up, even if it brought trouble upon innocent people?"

"Justice must be done," said Challoner. "I have always hated jobbery. If a wrong has been committed, it must be put right."

"You no doubt know that the order to retreat could only have been given by one of two officers?"

There were signs of tension in Challoner's face and Mrs. Chudleigh pitied him, but she was forced to be merciless.

"That seems to have been taken for granted. What then?"

"It was a dark night and nobody saw who gave the order, but Blake was stationed with his electric apparatus in the ravine and the bugler some distance behind him. Besides, the latter was attached to Captain Challoner's company."

"But Blake did not fire the mine." Challoner's voice was strained.

"That is true. The conclusion was that he had deserted his post, but I believe it must be wrong because he was seen busy with the wires."

"Who saw him?"

"One of his comrades, after the attack began, and it seems impossible that Blake could have reached the bugler when the retreat was sounded. There were one or two other points which might have been raised, only that he made no defence. I will mention them."

She had after a long and careful consideration arranged her evidence in a skilful manner. Facts which had appeared of minor importance to the men who had noticed them had now, as she handled them, a telling effect and Challoner grew troubled.

"If needful, I believe I could prove all this, though it would require strong pressure to make my informant speak," she concluded. "You must see what it implies?"

"That my son is a coward and gave the shameful order?" Challoner's eyes glittered, though his face was colourless. "It's unthinkable!"

"Nevertheless it's true. Why did he, without permission and abusing his authority over the guard, spend two hours late at night with Blake who was under arrest? What had they to say that took so long, when there was a risk of Captain Challoner's being discovered? Why did Blake make no defence, unless it was because he knew that to clear himself would throw the blame upon his friend?"

"You press me hard," said Challoner in a hoarse voice. "But that my son should so have failed in his duty to his country and his cousin is impossible."

"Yet you were willing to believe your nephew guilty. Had you any cause to doubt his courage?"

"No," said Challoner. "I used to think he loved a risk."

He felt beaten by her remorseless reasoning; there was scarcely a point he could contest and his heart grew very heavy. A conviction that humbled him to the dust was being forced on him.

"There is only one conclusion," Mrs. Chudleigh resumed. "The order to retreat was given by the weaker man, Bertram Challoner."

He turned to her with a gesture that begged her to desist. "My dear lady, this is very painful. I must try to think it out calmly, and I am not able now."

For a time there was strained silence, and Mrs. Chudleigh waited until he roused himself.

"I must know if what you have told me has any bearing on your request that I should recommend Captain Sedgwick's appointment?"

She paused before she answered, for he was very stern and peremptory.

"Not a direct one. I have kept the secret out of consideration for you and your son, but since I have done so, I ventured to believe you would not refuse me a favour that would only cost you a few words to your friend."

"I'm relieved to hear it," Challoner grimly replied. "You wish to appeal to my gratitude and not my fears? Has it struck you that, if you are correct in your conclusions, by keeping silent you were wronging an innocent man?"

"Think!" she said impressively. "In a sense, Blake stands by himself, a man of no importance; your son is heir to a fine estate and is expected to carry on the traditions of the family. He has a young wife who adores him, and many friends. Is a career such as lies before him to be destroyed by one weak action which he has since well atoned for? I believe your nephew saw that his cousin's disgrace would be a disaster and felt that at any cost the situation must be saved."

Challoner regarded her with a stern smile. "One would imagine that you are trying to heighten the value of your silence."

"You misjudge me, but since you take this line, I have some claim on your gratitude. Can you deny it?"

"I had better answer frankly. If my opinion is desired, I will try to consider Captain Sedgwick's appointment on its merits. You must not count on more than this."

Mrs. Chudleigh rose and they turned back to the road in silence. It looked as if she had failed, but she would not give up the game yet. When Challoner had time to think he would, no doubt, realize the necessity of safeguarding his son's good name and even his austere uprightness might fail to stand the strain.

It was half an hour later when Mrs. Keith, who had walked as fast as she was able, met Foster and the others coming back. She stopped, hot and breathless, with keen disappointment, for neither Colonel Challoner nor Mrs. Chudleigh were among them. Then, rousing herself, with an effort, she asked where they were.

"I can't tell," Mrs. Foster replied. "They dropped behind us and may have gone home. Mrs. Chudleigh soon gets tired of walking."

Mrs. Keith's heart sank and Foster noticed her expression. "It's a good way from Hazlehurst, but you look as if you had been hurrying," he remarked. "Are you very much disappointed that you didn't meet us earlier?"

"I am disappointed that I missed Challoner," Mrs. Keith answered with a forced smile.

Foster, who gave her a keen glance, tactfully talked about his shooting as they went back together, and on reaching the house they found that Challoner had already driven home.

CHAPTER XIX

CHALLONER'S DECISION

The morning was mild and Challoner paced slowly up and down his shrubbery. Bright sunshine fell upon him, the massed evergreens cut off the wind, and in a sheltered border spear-like green points were pushing through the soil in promise of the spring. Challoner knew them all, the veined crocus blades, the tight-closed heads of the hyacinths, and the twin shoots of the daffodils, but, fond as he was of his garden, he gave them scanty attention, and by and by sat down in a sheltered nook lost in painful thought. He had a careworn look and had left the house in a restless mood with a wish to be alone in the open air.

Mrs. Chudleigh's revelation had been a shock. With his sense of duty and family pride, he had, when the news of the frontier disaster first reached him, found it almost impossible to believe that his nephew had been guilty of shameful cowardice; and now it looked as if the disgrace might be brought still closer home. Bertram would presently take his place and, retiring from active service, rule the estate in accordance with Challoner traditions and perhaps exert some influence in politics; he remembered that Mrs. Chudleigh had laid some stress on this. She had, however, told him that Bertram, from whom so much was expected, had shown himself a poltroon and, what was even worse, had allowed an innocent man to suffer for his baseness. Challoner had spent the last few days pondering the evidence she had offered him and had seen one or two weak points in it. By making the most of these, it might, perhaps, be rebutted, but his honesty rendered such a course out of the question if she were right in her conclusions, and he was forced to admit that this was possible. Bertram had shown timidity in his younger days—Challoner remembered that they had had some trouble in teaching him to ride—and there was no doubt that his was a highly-strung and nervous temperament. He had not the calm which marked the Challoners in time of strain. Then Dick Blake was recklessly generous and loved his cousin; it would be consistent with his character if he were willing to suffer in Bertram's stead. Moreover there were reasons which might have had some effect in inducing Bertram to consent, because Challoner knew the affection his son bore him and that he would shrink from involving him in his disgrace. What Bertram would certainly not have done to secure his own escape he might have done for the sake of his father and the girl he was to marry.

Admitting all this, Challoner could not take his son's guilt for granted. There was room for doubt, and soon after leaving Mrs. Chudleigh he had cabled a friend in Montreal asking him to spare no effort to trace Blake. If the latter could be found, he must be summoned home and forced to declare the truth. By and by Challoner heard a footstep and looking up saw Foster approaching. He stopped and regarded the Colonel with surprise, for it was seldom Challoner was to be seen sitting moodily idle.

"I'm taking a short cut through your grounds to the fir spinney," he said. "As I was leaving home Mrs. Chudleigh asked me to give you this note, and when I looked in at the house Miss Challoner said she didn't know where you were and a telegram had just come in. Thinking I might find you, I brought it along." Handing the other two envelopes he added: "Sorry to see you're not looking as brisk as usual."

"There's not much the matter," Challoner replied, forcing a smile. "Still, I do feel a trifle slack, and I've had something to worry me."

Foster gave him a sympathetic nod. "Worry's bad; make a rule to avoid it when I can. But will you walk as far as the wood?"

He went on when Challoner said he would sooner remain, and the latter eagerly opened the telegram. It was in answer to his cable and read—

> "Blake and two others left Sweetwater settlement. Destination supposed far North."

This implied the impossibility of learning anything from his nephew for some time, and Challoner could not recall his son, who was then in Japan and must shortly rejoin his Indian regiment. Besides, if Bertram were blameless, it would be a cruel blow for him to find that his father had suspected him of a shameful deed, while if he were guilty, something must be done. This would probably lead to a disastrous change in their relations and compel Bertram to leave the army. Though the suspense was hard to bear, Challoner, as Mrs. Chudleigh had foreseen, was beginning to feel afraid to learn the truth and inclined to temporize.

Then he opened her note and read—

> "As I hear you expect Mr. Greythorpe, shortly, I venture to believe that now you have had time for reflection you will see that it would be better for everybody if you did as I suggested. This would be a great favour and you could count upon my gratitude and discretion."

Studying it carefully, Challoner saw a threat as well as a promise that she would keep his secret if he complied, but he tore the note up and trod the fragments into the soil. So far as the African appointment was concerned, he was not to be influenced. He would not offer a bribe for her silence, nor would he derive a personal advantage from a piece of jobbery. On that point his mind was made up.

A little later Mrs. Keith opened a neighbouring gate and came towards him.

"The fine morning tempted me out, and as Lucy Foster was passing with the car, I thought I'd look your sister up," she said. "But I'm afraid you're in trouble. The last time we met you had a downcast air and you don't look much brighter to-day."

"It's unpleasant to think I'm in the habit of showing my feelings so plainly," he answered.

"You don't, but your moody calm has its meaning. I've known you long enough to recognize it. You can't deny that something is disturbing you."

"No," said Challoner. "I'm not clever enough to hide it from your keen eyes."

"They're very friendly, as you know. I'll strain a friend's privilege far enough to guess that your perplexities began the last time you and Mrs. Chudleigh met."

He wondered how much she knew and longed to confide in her. She was very staunch, but his secret must be kept until he had learned the truth.

"I'm sorry, Margaret, but I can't tell you what is troubling me."

She made a sign of acquiescence. "You would if it were possible and I won't press you, but you know I can be trusted if you need me. I was afraid of that woman; I felt she threatened you."

Their glances met and lingered, and Challoner felt that the reason for his grief was but thinly veiled from her. Still, for his son's sake, he could not confirm her suspicions, and he broke into a dry smile.

"I believe you tried to protect me, and it certainly wasn't your fault that you failed. I appreciate it, Margaret, but after all there may be less cause for anxiety than I imagine, and we'll talk about something else. Will you come up to the house?"

They walked slowly across the lawn, and though his companion chatted about indifferent matters Challoner knew he had her sympathy. When they reached the door she stopped.

"I needn't bring you in, because I have something to ask Hilda. No doubt, it's unnecessary, but you won't mind my warning you not to be influenced by anything that woman said."

"I had already decided to disregard it."

A look of gratified confidence came into her eyes. "That is what I expected; you are not easily swayed, but I see signs of strain. There is some crisis you must face, and I think it is connected with Greythorpe's visit."

"You have guessed correctly."

"When one is in difficulties the easiest way out is not always the best. But you know that."

"I have learned it. One has often to chose between the right and the most prudent thing."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Keith, "I believe they are generally the same in the end; that is, if one has the courage to choose the former."

Challoner bowed. "You have never failed me, Margaret, and you give me good counsel now."

She went in, and he turned away, feeling encouraged; but a reaction followed, and he spent the rest of the day in troubled thought. A day or two later Greythorpe arrived and in the early evening sat with his host in the library. Though dusk was closing in, a window near them stood open and a single shaded candle burned upon a neighbouring table. Presently Greythorpe opened some papers.

"We have not settled the African appointment yet," he said. "The matter, of course, is not altogether in my hands, but my recommendation will have weight, and I should be glad of your opinion before making it. You will find the names and qualifications of the candidates here."

Challoner studied the papers, and then gazed out of the window without speaking. It was not quite dark, and he could see the great oaks in the park, and the sombre masses of the woods rolling back up the valley. In the foreground, a sheet of water shone with a pale gleam. It was a rich and beautiful countryside and much of it belonged to him. Though his wife had brought him money, Sandymere had long been the property of the Challoners, and the old house had a picturesque stateliness, while every field and farmstead had been well cared for.

In process of time it would all be his son's, and, in that sense, Bertram had more than an individual importance. He was one of a line of men who had served their country well in court and field, and any disgrace that fell upon him would taint a respected name and reflect upon his children, for the family honour was indivisible, a thing that stretched backwards to the past as well as forward. Now, however, it was threatened by an unprincipled woman who claimed the power to drag it in the mire; but Challoner recognized that he could not allow this to influence him. His private affairs must not count where the interests of his country were concerned.

"Well," he said at length, "the matter seems difficult to decide. You have two men of excellent character, whom I know something about, and a third who has shown ability in a subordinate post."

"Sedgwick? Your manner leads me to believe that you don't quite class him with the others."

"There is a difference. The first two are honest and reliable but not brilliant men. Sedgwick is obviously more capable than either, but I suspect that self-interest is his strongest motive. I knew a major in his regiment. He might use this appointment to force himself into prominence."

"It's possible, but that needn't prove a great drawback."

"Is the Cabinet ready to embark upon a bold course of Colonial expansion?"

"No," said Greythorpe with a smile, "not so far as I'm acquainted with their views, but we would like the strip of unoccupied territory, and Sedgwick seems alive to its importance."

"He'll probably get it for you if you give him a chance, but I imagine he won't stop there. In fact, he may take you much farther than you wish to go. Suppose he brings off some sensational coup in which you would have to support him at the expense of France?"

"There might be some risk of that, but he's undoubtedly an able man."

"I think so," Challoner agreed. "It's his disinterestedness I suspect."

"Then if the post were at your disposal, you would not offer it to him?"

Challoner was silent for a few moments. It looked as if Greythorpe were disposed to favour Sedgwick's claim and to concur might save a good deal of trouble. Even then, it did not follow that Sedgwick would be chosen, because there were higher authorities to be consulted. Challoner thought he would not be blamed if they refused the man the post, because he did Mrs. Chudleigh the justice to believe that she would not doubt his assurance that he had done his best and that she would afterwards put no further pressure on him. It was her lover's promotion she wished to secure. For all that, easy as it would be to humour her, he had been asked for his opinion by a man who trusted him, and he must give it honestly.

"No," he said with a resolute air, "I should prefer either of the others. On the whole, I believe I'd select the first on your list."

"You seem to have thought it well over."

"That's true. It's a rather grave matter," Challoner answered drily.

"Well," said Greythorpe, "my idea is that Sedgwick should be left in charge a month or two longer. Then if we send out another man, we'll try to find him something else."

He changed the subject and Challoner lighted a cigar and listened, sitting back in the shadow where his companion could not see him. He felt weary, because he had borne a heavy strain during the last few days, and the course he had taken had cost him a good deal. Now he knew that if Sedgwick were not appointed Mrs. Chudleigh would hold him responsible.

CHAPTER XX

MRS. CHUDLEIGH MAKES A FRESH ATTEMPT

Next evening Challoner and Greythorpe dined at Foster's with several other guests, and the Colonel was placed next to Mrs. Chudleigh, while Mrs. Keith sat opposite. He found his position uncomfortable, because when he looked up he saw that his old friend was watching him, and, though she chatted carelessly, there was now and then a hint of tension in his companion's manner. It was a relief when Mrs. Foster rose, but he afterwards felt that opposing influences were being brought to bear on him. When the party dispersed, as was usual at Hazlehurst, some to play billiards and some to the drawing-room, Mrs. Keith engaged him in casual talk and stuck to him determinedly for a time. He had no doubt that her intentions were good, since he noticed Mrs. Chudleigh hovering in the background, but he wished that she would leave him alone. By and by their hostess took Mrs. Keith away, but then Millicent, whom he suspected had been told to do so, came up and spoke to him. It looked as if he were to be saved from his persecutor, even against his will, for he was anxious to meet her and get the unpleasant business over, but he liked Millicent and courtesy demanded that he should listen. Presently she rather hesitatingly mentioned his nephew.

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

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

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

"I took some trouble to find out, but nothing came of it. I merely learned that he had left a small settlement on the Western prairie and started for the North." He gave her a sharp glance. "Are you interested in my nephew?"

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

"Then he's fortunate in gaining your good opinion. No doubt, you know something about his history?"

"I daresay my good opinion is not worth much, but I feel that he deserves it, in spite of what I've been told about him," she answered with a blush. "It is very sad that he should have to give up all he valued, and I thought there was something gallant in his cheerfulness; he was always ready with a jest."

"Have you met his companion? I understand that he is not a man of my nephew's stamp."

Millicent smiled. "Hardly so, from your point of view."

"Does that mean that yours is not the same as mine?"

"I have had to earn my living, which changes one's outlook; perhaps I'd better not say

enlarges it. However, you shall judge. Mr. Harding is a traveller for an American paint factory and had to begin work at an age when your nephew was at Eton, but I think him a very fine type. He's serious, courteous, and sanguine, and seems to have a strong confidence in his partner."

"Ah!" said Challoner; "that is not so strange. The Blakes have a way of inspiring trust and liking. It's a gift of theirs."

"Your nephew undoubtedly has it. He uses it unconsciously, but I think that those who trust him are not deceived."

Challoner regarded her with a curious expression. "After all," he said, "that may be true."

Then Greythorpe came up in search of Millicent, and when she went away with him Challoner saw Mrs. Chudleigh approaching. Obeying her sign he followed her to a seat in the recess in the hall.

"Mr. Greythorpe came down yesterday," she said. "I suppose you have already had a talk with him."

"Last night. As you anticipated, he asked my opinion about the African matter. Several names have been submitted; trustworthy men."

"Come to the point," she told him sharply. "What did you do about Captain Sedgwick?"

Challoner gravely met her insistent gaze. "I felt compelled to suggest that he was not the best man for the post."

Mrs. Chudleigh's eyes sparkled and the blood swept into her face. Her pose grew tense and she looked dangerous, but with an obvious effort she controlled her anger.

"Then if I were a revengeful person, I would warn you that you must take the consequences."

"I suppose that follows, but I would prefer to think you are fair enough to make allowances for a man who tried to do the right thing in a difficult situation."

She was silent for a moment, watching him with a curious, half-ashamed feeling. Then she made an abrupt movement.

"It's hard to do so. A word or two, which you would not speak, would have led to the appointment of the most talented man. I'm not a saint; you mustn't expect a higher standard from me than I'm capable of."

She dismissed him with an angry gesture and got up as Mrs. Foster came in with Greythorpe. When the latter left his hostess she beckoned him and led him to a seat near the hearth.

"How far does Colonel Challoner's opinion go with you?" she asked boldly.

"That depends," he answered, smiling. "On some matters it goes a long way."

"On the choosing of a West African officer, for instance?"

"Ah!" said Greythorpe, "now I begin to understand. If I am not indiscreet in mentioning it, I thought my old friend was rather in disgrace with you."

"You are keen," she told him. "I must warn you that Challoner is prejudiced."

"If that is so, there is probably a reason for it."

"There is," she said coolly. "I'm afraid it is my fault. I made a mistake in trying to force the Colonel to speak in favour of one of the candidates."

"It was unwise," Greythorpe agreed. "Our friend is by no means amenable to treatment of the kind."

"Still you would not let a good officer suffer because of my tactlessness?"

"Certainly not; the only thing that could count against any of the men we are considering is some shortcoming of their own."

"Then I must try to remove a wrong impression and my task is difficult because you know Challoner better than I do. We can, however, agree that he is honest."

"Eminently conscientious," Greythorpe remarked.

"Then you must allow for a reaction against the injudicious course I took. I urged him to speak for a friend of mine, which was, no doubt, very wrong, and it seems I went too far. Can you not imagine his resenting it and being so determined not to be influenced that he became hypercritical?"

Greythorpe thought this clever, since it was the best means of lessening the value of Challoner's opinion that she could use.

"I gather that you put too severe a strain upon his friendship."

"I'm afraid there's a breach between us now, but that is not the point."

"No," said Greythorpe. "In a general way, your reasoning is logical, but I hardly think it applicable to Challoner. He might resent your action; but it would not make him unjust. I presume the man you favour is Captain Sedgwick?"

"He's much the best of the three you have in view."

"Then you know something about the matter? We thought it was secret."

She laughed. "Secrets are not always well kept. I know the other men, and though there is nothing that can be urged against their character, they are plodders, men of routine, without much foresight or enterprise."

"Allowing that you are right, isn't there something to be said for the steady plodder?"

"I daresay he's useful," Mrs. Chudleigh agreed with a touch of scorn. "But for the vacant post you want a bold determined man who can see ahead."

"To some extent, I must agree. You believe Captain Sedgwick is such a man?"

He felt a certain tempered admiration for her. She made no secret of her aim, though he supposed she must find it embarrassing to plead for her lover, since he did not doubt that she loved Sedgwick. She had courage and cleverness and he listened with close attention while she spoke about the man's exploits and abilities. Then she looked up with an eagerness which somewhat moved him.

"Have I convinced you?" she asked.

Greythorpe smiled. "That Sedgwick is a dashing and intrepid soldier? Yes. But there are other points to take into account, and the matter does not entirely rest with me. Still, I think if he serves us well, we may find some use for him."

It was a guarded promise and by no means all that she desired, but she knew she must be content with it.

"Then I have accomplished something and will remember the consideration and patience you have shown," she said, and when some of the other guests came in moved away to join them.

In the meanwhile, Millicent had been sitting alone for a few minutes at the opposite end of the hall. Somebody was singing in the adjoining drawing-room, the door of which stood open, and she could see several people gathered about the piano, though she was herself partly secluded by a screen. By and by Lieutenant Walters came in, and as he made his way towards her after looking round she felt tempted to change her place, but could not do so without making her retreat too marked. Now and then he suffered from a relapse, and she felt compassionate as she noticed the heaviness of his movements and his pinched expression. Still his eyes had been eager as he searched the room, and this had caused her some alarm, because he had lately shown a noticeable preference for her society. When he stopped he laid his hand, as if for support, on the back of a chair and glanced towards a window that opened into the conservatory.

"I've been hanging about since dinner trying to get hold of you, but you were in too great demand," he said. "Shall we slip out to the seat among the palms yonder for a quiet talk?"

The conservatory looked inviting with the coloured lamps hanging among the flowers and screens of trailing plants throwing their shadows across warm, scented nooks. Walters, however, had framed his question injudiciously, because it implied a mutual desire to escape observation and confidential relations which did not exist.

"I think not," said Millicent. "I may be wanted."

"Mrs. Keith's talking to Challoner and won't ask for you," Walters objected. "Be good-natured; it's quiet yonder. That fellow in the drawing-room can't sing and the piano makes my head ache."

"It really oughtn't to. The girl who's accompanying him plays well, but I'm afraid you're not feeling very fit to-night."

"I'm not; I suppose it's weak, but when I seem to be going back instead of picking up, I get depressed. That's partly why I came for you; you know how to cheer one."

"I feel flattered," Millicent rejoined, smiling. "But you shouldn't be downcast. You're making excellent progress."

"Oh! well," he said irritably, "don't let us talk about my ailments; I'm tired of them. But this

light's glaring. Take pity on me and come in among the flowers, where it's quiet and dim."

Millicent was tempted to agree. She liked the man and felt sorry for him; he was frank, rather handsome, and generally a pleasant companion, but she thought their friendship was ripening too fast and was not prepared to see it change to something deeper Indeed, since it was pleasant to be sought after, she feared she had allowed herself to drift too far, and now the time to pull up had come.

"No," she said, "I must stay here."

He looked at her rather hard, for there was decision in her tone and he was not dull. She was very attractive; he liked her thoughtful expression and her gentle firmness. Half-consciously he compared her with the highly polished, clever woman, who had at first fascinated him, and his appreciation of the girl grew stronger. Mrs. Chudleigh, who did not improve upon close acquaintance, had been inclined to leave him alone of late, and though he could not resent this he had an unflattering suspicion that he had somehow been made use of and had served his turn. Miss Graham was different; she was genuine, which was the word that occurred to him, and he was growing fond of her.

"As you wish, of course," he said. "Am I allowed to remain?"

She indicated a place on the corner seat and when he took it began to talk, carefully avoiding any personal topic, but after a time he interrupted her—

"I heard Mrs. Keith say she was going to the Vivians in Durham later. I suppose she will take you?"

Millicent said she believed so, and he continued: "It's possible I may turn up there."

He watched her closely, but could see nothing that suggested satisfaction.

"Do you know the people?" she inquired.

"I used to know Herbert Vivian, though I haven't seen him for some time. No doubt, if he got a hint he'd ask me down."

"It's a high, bleak place," said Millicent. "We were nearly frozen on our last visit, and I'm afraid you wouldn't find the cold good for you. Were you not recommended to stay in Devonshire?"

Walters gave her a half-indignant glance. "When that brute of a hill man knocked me out I'd no suspicion how much his shot would cost me. Anyhow, I'm not going to Devonshire, and I ventured to think you might have been glad to see me at the Vivians'."

"Why should I wish you to do an unwise thing?" Millicent asked.

"That's an evasion," he answered bluntly. "I'll be candid. This place won't be the same after you have gone."

Millicent was silent a moment. She knew he wanted a tacit admission that their acquaintance need not end with her visit to Hazlehurst, but he would be right in attaching some significance to her action if she made it. The man, who had only known her a few weeks, could go no further yet, and he was eminently likeable, but she would not lead him on.

"That," she said, "was very nice of you, but you will soon get used to the change."

"You may," he replied with rather bitter humour.

"After all," said Millicent, "one meets pleasant people here and there, and though one regrets it has to part from them."

Looking at her fixedly, he understood. Her expression was quietly resolute, and he recognized that their friendship must shortly come to an end. The girl knew her mind and had obviously made it up.

"Well," he said in a resigned tone, "you won't be forgotten. I must get back to India as soon as I can."

By and by he went away and Mrs. Keith joined Millicent.

"What have you been saying to Walters?" she asked. "I met him going out, and he looked very crestfallen."

"He hinted that he might follow us to the Vivians' and I suggested that it was too cold a place for him," Millicent answered with a blush.

"I see," remarked Mrs. Keith, who was sometimes blunt. "Well, I daresay you were wise; though I'm told he'll be captain shortly, and he has his good points, Jimmy is no catch. You

certainly might do better."

Millicent turned her head, half-indignant, half-embarrassed, and Mrs. Keith laughed.

"My dear," she resumed gently, "I'm glad you have some sense. It's perhaps not impossible for the wife of a young Indian officer to live upon her husband's pay, but unless they're exceptional people it's apt to lead to disaster."

"It wasn't that," Millicent protested, unwilling to be suspected of a mercenary mind, and Mrs. Keith's eyes twinkled.

"Then what was it that influenced you?"

As the girl did not answer, she turned away and left her to face the question. It proved troublesome, for Millicent was not daunted by poverty and could find no fault with Walters; indeed, she was sensible of some esteem for him. Then, though she would not admit that this was her reason for checking his advances, her thoughts centred on another man. He was in disgrace, but she remembered how chivalrously and adroitly he had come to her rescue in London and had again been of assistance on the St. Lawrence steamer. He was prompt in action, pitiful and humorous. She remembered his gay buoyancy, she could imagine his facing his troubles with a laugh. It was characteristic of him that he had gone up into the wilds of the frozen North with an inexperienced companion on a rash search for fortune, which she gathered would probably elude him. Still, she knew that he would struggle gallantly against the perils and hardships he might have to face. Then she remembered that by sitting alone with an abstracted air she might excite curiosity, and rousing herself, went to look for her hostess.

CHAPTER XXI

A NEW PERSECUTOR

Soon after Greythorpe's visit Mrs. Chudleigh went away, leaving Challoner unpleasantly uncertain about the course she might take. He was still without news of Blake; he could not question his son, whose integrity he tried hard to believe in, and he spent a few anxious weeks. Then one evening when he came home from a neighbour's house he was told that a man who had called to see him some time earlier was in the library. Challoner glanced at the card his servant gave him.

"Clarke? I don't know anybody of that name," he said and then started as he saw the word Sweetwater in small type at the bottom of the card.

Taking off his coat he went up the staircase with some eagerness. The lamps had been lighted in the library and a good fire burned on the hearth, near which his visitor was comfortably seated in a big leather chair. He rose as Challoner entered, and the latter was not favourably impressed by him. There was a hint of grossness about the fellow which repelled the Colonel, who was of an ascetic type; besides, he was badly and carelessly dressed, and Challoner was fastidious in such matters. Also the man had an irritating air of assurance.

"Colonel Challoner, I presume?" he said.

Challoner bowed. "You have brought me some news of my nephew, Richard Blake?"

This disconcerted Clarke, who had not imagined that his object would be known and had counted upon Challoner's being surprised when he heard it and thrown off his guard. It, however, looked as if the Colonel had been making inquiries about Blake, and Clarke wished he could guess his reason, because it might affect the situation.

"That is correct," he said. "I have a good deal to tell you and it may take some time."

Signing him to be seated, Challoner rang a bell, and wine and cigars and hothouse fruit were brought in. These he offered his guest, who helped himself freely and then said, "Your nephew spent a week in the settlement where I live, preparing for a journey to the North. Though his object was secret, I believe he went in search of something to make varnish of, because he took a young American traveller for a colour factory with him, besides another man."

"I know this," Challoner replied. "I heard about his American companion; who was the other?"

"We will come to him presently. There is still something which I think you do not know."

"Then I should be glad to be informed. But, first of all, could you find Blake if it were necessary?"

"I'm doubtful; the thing would be difficult," Clarke answered in a significant tone. "He hadn't returned when I left, and the country he meant to cross is rugged and covered deep with snow all winter. Food is hard to get and the temperature varies from forty to fifty degrees below."

"I suppose it could be traversed by a properly equipped expedition?"

Though Challoner's face was calm, Clarke inferred some anxiety to find his nephew, and answered cautiously: "It would be possible, but whether a party sent up could strike the others' trail is a different matter."

"Very well," said Challoner; "we'll talk of it again. Go on with what you wished to say."

He was suspicious, for his visitor's looks were not in his favour, and the man gave him a keen glance.

"It concerns your nephew's earlier history."

"That is of most importance to himself and me. It can't interest you."

"It interests me very much," Clarke rejoined with an ironical smile. "I must ask you to let me tell you what I know."

Challoner, who thought he had better learn it, consented, and Clarke gave him what he admitted was a very accurate account of the action on the Indian frontier.

"Now," he concluded, "the question, Who gave the order to retreat? is of vital importance to you."

"In a sense, it has been answered."

"I think incorrectly."

"Then if you differ from the general opinion on the matter, you can let me have your theory of what occurred."

It took Clarke some minutes to give it and Challoner's heart sank, for the man carefully arranged his points and the damaging inference could hardly be shirked. On the whole, his account agreed with Mrs. Chudleigh's, although it was more cleverly worked out, but there was nothing to be learned from Challoner's expression. He was now not dealing with a woman who had the excuse that she was acting in her lover's interest.

"Your suggestions are plausible, but you can't seriously expect me to attach much weight to them," he remarked. "Besides, you seem to have overlooked the important fact that at the regimental inquiry the verdict was that nobody in particular was to blame.

"Oh! no," Clarke rejoined with a harsh laugh. "I merely question its validity. I imagine that reasons which would not be officially recognized led the court to take a lenient view; but what of that? Blake had to leave the army, a ruined man, and I've good reason for knowing what an acquittal like his is worth." He paused a moment. "I may as well tell you candidly, because it's probable that you'll make inquiries about me. Well, I'd won some reputation as a medical specialist when I became involved in a sensational police case—you may recollect it."

Challoner started. "Yes," he said. "So you are the man! I think nothing was actually proved against you."

"No," said Clarke drily; "there was only a fatal suspicion. As it happens, I was innocent, but I had to give up my profession and my life was spoiled. There's no reason why you should be interested in this, and I mentioned it merely because a similar misfortune has befallen Richard Blake. The point, of course, is that it has done so undeservedly. I think you must see who the real culprit is."

"I'll admit that you have told me a rather likely tale. As you don't speak of having been in India, who gave you the information?"

"Blake's companion, the man I've mentioned, a former Indian officer called Benson."

"His full name, please."

Clarke gave it him and Challoner, crossing the floor, took a book from a shelf and turned it over by a lamp.

"Yes; he's here. What led him to talk of the thing to an outsider?"

"Drink," said Clarke. "I'll own to having taken advantage of the condition he was often in."

Challoner, sitting down, coolly lighted a cigar. His position seemed a weak one, but he had no thought of surrender.

"Well, you have given me some interesting information; but there's one thing you haven't

mentioned, and that is your reason for doing so."

"Can't you guess?"

"I shouldn't have suspected you of being so diffident, but I daresay you thought this was a chance of earning some money easily."

"Yes," said Clarke. "For five thousand pounds I'll undertake that no word of what I've told you will ever pass my lips again."

"You're not flattering. Do you suppose I'd pay five thousand pounds to see my nephew wronged?"

"I believe you might do so to save your son."

Challoner, who wished to lead the man on and learn something about his plans, made a negative sign.

"Out of the question."

"Then I'll make you an alternative offer, and it's worth considering. Take, or get your friends to subscribe for, ten thousand pounds worth of shares in a commercial syndicate I'm getting up, and you'll never regret it. If you wish, I'll make you a director so you can satisfy yourself that the money will be wisely spent. You'll get it back several times over."

Challoner laughed. "This is to salve my feelings; to make the thing look like a business transaction?"

"No," said Clarke, leaning forward and speaking eagerly. "It's a genuine offer, and I'll ask your attention for a minute or two. Canada's an undeveloped country; we have scarcely begun to tap its natural resources, and there's wealth ready for exploitation all over it. We roughly know the extent of the farming land and the value of the timber, but the minerals still to a large extent await discovery, while perhaps the most readily and profitably handled product is oil. Now I know a belt of country where it's oozing from the soil and with ten thousand pounds I'll engage to bore wells that will give a remarkable yield."

His manner was impressive, and though Challoner had no cause to trust him he thought the man sincere.

"One understands that in Canada all natural commodities belong to the State and any person discovering them can work them on certain terms. It seems to follow that if your knowledge of the locality is worth anything, it must belong to you alone. How is it that nobody else suspects the belt contains oil?"

"A shrewd objection, but easily answered. The country in question is one of the most rugged tracts in Canada, difficult to get through in summer, while the man who enters it in winter runs a serious risk. Now I'll allow that what you know about me is not likely to prejudice you in my favour, but on your promise to keep it secret I'll give you information that must convince you."

"Why don't you make your offer to some company floater or stockjobber?"

Clarke smiled in a pointed manner. "Because I've a damaging record and no friends to vouch for me. I came here because I felt I had some claim on you."

"You were mistaken," said Challoner drily.

"Hear me out; try to consider my proposition on its merits. For a number of years I've known the existence of the oil and have tried to prospect the country. It was difficult; to transport enough food and tools meant a costly expedition and the attracting of undesirable attention. I went alone, living with primitive Russian settlers and afterwards with the Indians. To gain a hold on them I studied the occult sciences and learned tricks that impose upon the credulous. To the white men I'm a crank, to the Indians something of a magician, but my search for the oil has gone on, and now while I already know where boring would be commercially profitable, I'm on the brink of tapping a remarkable flow."

"What will you do if it comes up to your expectations?" Challoner asked, for he had grown interested.

"Turn it over to a company strong enough to exact good terms from the American producers or, failing that, to work the wells. Then I'd go back to London where with money and the standing it would buy me I'd take up my old profession. I believe I've kept abreast of medical progress and could still make my mark and reinstate myself. It has been my steadfast object ever since I became an outcast; I've schemed and cheated to gain it, besides risking my life often in desolate muskegs and the Arctic frost. Now I ask you to make it possible, and you cannot refuse."

Challoner was silent for a minute or two while Clarke smoked impassively. The former knew he had a determined man to deal with and believed moreover that he had spoken the truth. Still, the fellow, although in some respects to be pitied, was obviously a dangerous rascal, embittered

and robbed of all scruples by injustice. There was something malignant in his face that testified against him, and, worse than all, he had come there resolved to extort money as the price of his connivance in a wrong.

"Well?" Clarke said, breaking the pause.

"So far as I can judge, your ultimate object's creditable, but I can't say as much for the means you are ready to employ in raising the money. If you go on with the scheme, it must be without any help of mine."

Clarke's face grew hard, and there was something forbidding in the way he knitted his brows.

"Think! Have you gauged the consequences of your refusal?"

"It's more to the purpose that I've tried to estimate the importance of your version of what happened during the night attack. It has one fatal weakness which you seem to have overlooked."

"Ah!" said Clarke with ironical calm. "You will no doubt mention it."

"You suggest Blake's innocence, but you must be content with doing so. You cannot prove it in the face of his denial."

To Challoner's surprise, Clarke smiled.

"So you have seen that! The trouble is that your nephew may never have an opportunity of denying it. He left for the North very badly equipped, and he has not come back yet." Then he rose with an undisturbed air. "Well, as it seems we can't come to terms, I needn't waste my time, and it's a long walk to the station. I must try some other market, and while I think you have made a grave mistake that is your affair."

Challoner let him go and afterwards sat down to think. There had been nothing forcible or obviously threatening in the man's last few remarks, but their effect was somehow sinister. Challoner wondered whether he had done well in suggesting that Blake's denial would prove Clarke's greatest difficulty. After all, he had a strong affection for his nephew, who might be in danger, and knew that the wilds of Northern Canada might prove deadly to a weak party unprovided with proper sledges and stores. Still, something might, perhaps, be done, and by and by he wrote a letter to a friend who had once made an adventurous journey across the frozen land.

CHAPTER XXII

CLARKE MODIFIES HIS PLANS

A bitter wind swept the snowy prairie and the cold was Arctic when Clarke, shivering in his furs, came into sight of his homestead as he walked back from Sweetwater. He had gone there for his mail, which included an English newspaper, and had taken supper at the hotel. It was now about two hours after dark, but a full moon hung in the western sky and the cluster of wooden buildings formed a shadowy blur on the glittering plain. There was no fence, not a tree to break the white expanse that ran back to the skyline, and it struck Clarke, who had lately returned from England, that the place looked very dreary.

He walked on with the fine, dry snow the wind whipped up glistening on his furs, and on reaching the homestead went first to the stable. It was built of sod, which was cheaper and warmer than sawn lumber, and, lighting a lantern, he fed his teams. The heavy Clydesdales and lighter driving horses were all valuable, for Clarke was a successful farmer and had found that the purchase of the best animals and implements led to economy, though it was said he seldom paid the full market price for them. He had walked home because it was impossible to keep warm driving, and felt tired and morose. The man had passed his prime and was beginning to find the labour he had never shirked more irksome than it had been, while he dispensed with a hired hand in winter, when there was less to be done. Clarke neglected no opportunity of saving a dollar.

When he had finished in the stable, he crossed the snow to the house, which was dark and silent. After the bustle and stir of London where he had spent some time, it was depressing to come back to the empty dwelling, and he was glad that he had saved himself the task of getting supper. Shaking the snow from his furs, he lighted the lamp and filled up the stove before he sat down wearily. The small room was not a cheerful place in which to spend the winter nights alone, though he remembered that for a number of years he had not noticed this. Walls and floor were uncovered and roughly boarded with heat-cracked lumber; the stove was rusty and gave out a smell of warm iron, while a black distillate had dripped from its pipe. There were, however,

several well-filled bookcases and one or two comfortable chairs.

Clarke lighted his pipe and drawing his seat as near the stove as possible opened an English newspaper, which contained some news that interested him. A short paragraph stated that Captain Bertram Challoner, then stationed at Delhi, had received an appointment which would shortly necessitate his return from India. This, Clarke imagined, might be turned to good account, but the matter demanded thought, and for a time he sat motionless, deeply pondering. His farming had prospered, though the bare and laborious life had tried him hard, and he had made some money by more questionable means, lending to unfortunate neighbours at extortionate interest and foreclosing on their possessions. No defaulter got any mercy at his hands and shrewd sellers of seed and implements took precautions when they dealt with him.

His money, however, would not last him long if he returned to England and attempted to regain a footing in his profession, and he had daringly schemed to increase it. Glancing across the room, his eyes rested on a bookcase, with a curious smile. It contained works on hypnotism, telepathy, and psychological speculations in general, and he had studied some with ironical amusement and others with a quickening of his interest. Amidst much that he thought of as sterile chaff he saw germs of truth, and had once or twice been led to the brink of a startling discovery. There the elusive clue had failed him, though he felt that strange secrets might be revealed some day.

After all, the books had served his purpose, as well as kept him from brooding when he sat alone at nights while the icy wind howled round his dwelling. He passed for a sage and something of a prophet with the primitive Dubokars, his Indian friends regarded him as a medicine man, and both had unknowingly made his search for the petroleum easier. Then, contrary to his expectations, he had found speculators in London willing to venture a few hundred pounds on his scheme, but the amount was insufficient and the terms were exacting. It would pay him better to get rid of his associates. He was growing old; it would be too late to return to his former life unless he could do so soon, but he must make a fair start with ample means. The man had no scruples and no illusions; money well employed would buy him standing and friends. People were charitable to a man who had something to offer them, and the blot upon his name must be nearly forgotten.

First of all, however, the richest spot of the oil field must be found and money enough raised to place him in a strong position when the venture was put on the market. He had failed to extort any from Challoner, but he might be more successful with his son. The man who was weak enough to allow his cousin to suffer for his fault would no doubt yield to judicious pressure. It was fortunate that Bertram Challoner was coming to England, because he could be more easily reached. This led Clarke to think of Blake, since he realized that Challoner was right in pointing out that the man was his greatest difficulty. If Blake maintained that the fault was his, nothing could be done; it was therefore desirable that he should be kept out of the way. There was another person to whom the same applied; Clarke had preyed on Benson's weakness, but if the fellow had overcome it and returned to farm industriously, his exploitation would be no longer possible. On the other hand, if he failed to pay off his debts, Clarke saw how he could with much advantage seize his possessions. Thus both Blake and Benson were obstacles, and now they had ventured into the icy North it would be better if they did not reappear.

Clarke refilled his pipe and his face wore a sinister look as he took down a rather sketchy map of the wilds beyond the prairie belt. After studying it for a time he sank into an attitude of concentrated thought. The stove crackled, its pipe glowing red, driving snow lashed the shiplap walls, and the wind moaned drearily about the house. Its occupant was, however, oblivious to his surroundings and sat very still in his chair, with pouches under his fixed eyes and his lips set tight. He looked malignant and dangerous, and perhaps his mental attitude was not quite normal. Close study and severe physical toil, coupled with free indulgence, had weakened him; there were drugs he was addicted to which affected the brain, and he had long been possessed by one fixed idea. By degrees it had become a mania, and he would stick at nothing that might help him to carry his purpose out. When at length he got up with a shiver to throw wood into the stove as the room grew cold, he thought he saw how his object could be secured.

A month before Clarke spent the evening thinking about them, Blake and his comrades camped at sunset in a belt of small spruces near the edge of the open waste that runs back to the Polar Sea. They were worn and hungry, for the shortage of provisions had been a constant trouble and such supplies as they obtained from Indians, who had seldom much to spare, soon ran out. Once or twice they had feasted royally after shooting a big bull moose, but the frozen meat they were able to carry did not last long, and again they were threatened with starvation.

It was a calm evening with a coppery sunset flaring across the snow, but intensely cold, and though they had wood enough and sat close beside a fire with their ragged blankets wrapped round them they could not keep warm. Harding and Benson were openly dejected, but Blake had somehow preserved his cheerful serenity. As usual after finishing their scanty supper, they began to talk, for during the day conversation was limited by the toil of the march. By and by Harding took a few bits of resin out of a bag.

"No good," he said. "It's common fir gum, such as I could gather a carload of in the forests of Michigan. Guess there's something wrong with my theory about the effects of extreme cold." Then he took a larger lump from a neat leather case. "This is the genuine article, and it's

certainly the product of a coniferous tree, while the fellow I got it from said it was found in the coldest parts of North America. Seems to me we have tried all the varieties of the firs, but we're as far from finding what we want as when we started."

"Hard luck!" Benson remarked gloomily.

Harding broke off a fragment and lighted it. "Notice the smell. It's characteristic."

"The fellow may have been right on one point," said Blake. "When I was in India I once got some incense which was brought down in small quantities from the Himalayas, and, I understood, came from near the snow-line. The smell was the same, one doesn't forget a curious scent."

"That's so. Talking about it reminds me that I was puzzled by a smell I thought I ought to know when I brought Clarke out of the tepee. I remembered what it was not long since and the thing's significant. It was gasoline."

"They extract it from crude petroleum, don't they."

"Yes; it's called petrol on your side. Clarke's out for coal-oil, and I guess he's struck it."

"Then he's lucky, but his good fortune doesn't concern us and we have other things to think about. What are you going to do, now we don't seem able to find the gum?"

"It's a difficult question," Harding answered in a troubled voice. "I'd hate to go back, with nothing accomplished and all my dollars spent, and take to the road again. Marianna's paying for this journey in many ways, and I haven't the grit to tell her we're poorer than when I left. She wouldn't complain, but when you have to live on a small commission that's hard to make, it's the woman who meets the bill."

Blake made a sign of sympathy. He had never shared Harding's confidence in the success of his search and had joined in it from love of adventure and a warm liking for his comrade.

"Well," he said, "I've no means except a small allowance which is so tied up that it's difficult to borrow anything upon it, but it's at your disposal as far as it goes. Suppose we keep this prospecting up."

"If Clarke's mortgage doesn't stop me, I might raise a few dollars on my farm," Benson remarked. "I'll throw them in with pleasure, because I'm pretty deep in your debt."

"Thanks," said Harding. "I'm sorry I can't agree, but I wouldn't take your offer when you first made it, and I can't do so now my plan's a failure. Anyway, we're doing some useless talking, because I don't see how we're to go on prospecting or get south again when we have only three or four days' food in hand."

He stated an unpleasant truth which the others had characteristically shirked, for Blake was often careless and Benson had taken the risks of the journey with frank indifference, though they had the excuse that after nearly starving once or twice they had succeeded in getting fresh supplies. Now, however, their hearts sank as they thought of the expanse of frozen wilderness that lay between them and the settlements.

"Well," said Blake, "there's a Hudson's Bay factory somewhere to the east of us. I can't tell how far off it is, though it must be a long way, but if we could reach it, the agent might take us in."

"How are you going to find the place?"

"I don't know, but a Hudson's Bay post is generally fixed where there are furs to be got, and there will, no doubt, be Indians trapping in the neighbourhood. We must take our chances of hitting their tracks."

"But we can't make a long march without food," Benson objected.

"The trouble is that we can't stay here without it," Blake rejoined with a short laugh.

This was undeniable, and neither of his companions answered. They were unkempt, worn out, and ragged, and had travelled a long way through fresh snow on short rations in the past week. Ahead of them lay a vast and almost untrodden desolation; behind them a rugged wilderness which there seemed no probability of their being able to cross. Lured by the hope of finding what they sought they had pushed on from point to point, and now it was too late to return.

By and by Blake got up. "Our best chance is to kill a caribou, and this is the kind of country they generally haunt. Since the sooner we look for one the better, I may as well start at once. There'll be a moon to-night."

He threw off his blanket and picking up a Marlin rifle, which was their only weapon, strode out of camp, and as he was a good shot and tracker they let him go. It was getting dark when he left the shelter of the trees and the cold in the open struck through him like a knife. The moon had not risen yet and the waste stretched away before him, its whiteness changed to a soft blue-

grey. In the distance scattered bluffs rose in long dark smears, but there was nothing to indicate which way he should turn, and he had no reason to believe there was a caribou near the camp. As a matter of fact, they had found the larger deer remarkably scarce. He was tired after breaking the trail since sunrise, and the snow was loose beneath his big net shoes, but he plodded towards the farthest bluff, feeling that he was largely to blame for the party's difficulties.

Knowing something of the country, he should have insisted on turning back when he found they could obtain no dog-teams to transport their supplies. Occasionally the Hudson's Bay agents and patrols of the North-West Police made long journeys in Arctic weather, but they were provided with proper sledges and sufficient preserved food. Indeed, Blake was astonished that he and his comrades had got so far. He had, however, given way to Harding, who hardly knew the risks he ran, and now he supposed must take the consequences. This did not daunt him badly. After all, life had not much to offer an outcast, and though he had managed to extract some amusement from it he had nothing to look forward to. There was no prospect of his making money—his talents were not commercial—and the hardships he could bear with now would press on him more heavily as he grew older. These considerations, however, were too philosophical for him to continue. He was essentially a man of action and feeling unpleasantly hungry, and he quickened his pace, knowing that the chance of his getting a shot at a caribou in the open was small.

The moon had not risen when he reached the bluff, but the snow reflected a faint light and he noticed a row of small depressions on its surface. Kneeling down, he examined them, but there had been wind during the day and the marks were blurred. He felt for a match, but his fingers were too numbed to open the watertight case, and he proceeded to measure the distance between the footprints. This was an unreliable test because a big deer's stride varies with its pace, but he thought the tracks indicated a caribou. Then he stopped, without rising, and looked about.

Close in front the trees rose in a shadowy wall against the clear blue sky; there was no wind, and it was oppressively still. He could see about a quarter of a mile across the open, but the darkness of the wood was impenetrable and its silence daunting. The row of tracks was the only sign of life he had seen for days.

While he listened a faint howl came out of the distance and was followed by another. After the deep silence, the sound was startling and there was danger in it, for Blake recognized the cry of the timber wolves. The big grey brutes would make short work of a lonely man and his flesh crept as he wondered whether they were on his trail. On the whole, it did not seem likely, though they might get scent of him, and, rising to his feet, he felt that the rifle magazine was full before he set off at his highest speed.

The snow was loose, however, and his shoes packed and sank; his breath got shorter, and he began to feel distressed. There was no sound behind him, but that somehow increased his uneasiness and now and then he anxiously turned his head. Nothing moved on the sweep of blue-grey shadow and he pressed on, knowing how poor his speed was compared with that the wolves were capable of making. At length it was with keen satisfaction he saw a flicker of light break out from the dark mass of a bluff ahead and a few minutes later he came, breathing hard, into camp.

"You haven't stayed out long," Benson remarked. "I suppose you saw nothing."

"I heard wolves," Blake answered drily. "You had better gather wood enough to keep a big fire going, because I've no doubt they'll pick up my trail. However, it's a promising sign."

"I guess we could do without it," Harding broke in. "I've no use for wolves."

"They must live on something," Blake rejoined. "Since they're here, there are probably moose or caribou in the neighbourhood. I'll have another try to-morrow."

"But the wolves."

"They're not so bold in daylight. Anyhow, it seems to me we must take some risks."

This was obvious, and when they had heaped up a good supply of wood Harding and Blake went to sleep, leaving Benson to keep watch.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CARIBOU

When Blake was awakened by Harding, the cold was almost unendurable, and it cost him a determined effort to rise from the hollow he had scraped out of the snow and lined with spruce

twigs close beside the fire. He had not been warm there, and it was significant that the snow was dry, but sleep had brought him relief from discomfort and he had found getting up the greatest hardship of the trying journey. In answer to his drowsy questions, Harding said he had once or twice heard a wolf howl in the distance, but that was all, and then lay down, leaving Blake on guard. He sat with his back to a snowbank which afforded some shelter and imagined from his sensations that the temperature must be about fifty degrees below zero. The frost bit through him, stiffening his muscles until he felt that if vigorous movement were demanded of him he would be incapable of it, and dulling his brain. He could not reason clearly, though he had things to consider, and he looked about with heavy eyes, trying to forget his physical discomfort, while his mind wandered through a maze of confused thought.

There was a half-moon in the sky, which was pitilessly clear, for cloudiness might have made it warmer; when the firelight sank he could see the slender spruce trunks cutting against the silvery radiance and the hard glitter of the snow. Everything was tinted with blue and white, and the deathly cold colouring depressed him. Then he began to consider their position, which was serious. They were worn out and half-fed; their furs were ragged, and shortage of money and the difficulty of transport had forced them to cut down their camp equipment. Indeed, looking back on the long march, he was surprised that they had escaped crippling frostbite, although both Benson and Harding were somewhat lame from the strain which the use of snowshoes puts upon the muscles of the leg. There was, moreover, a risk of this becoming dangerous.

He imagined that it must be two hundred miles to the Hudson's Bay post and recognized that the chances were against their reaching it; but just then a howl rang, harsh and ominous, through the frosty air, and with a nervous start he reached for his rifle. The wolves had scented them, and, turning his back to the light, he spent some minutes gazing fixedly at the glistening white patches among the straggling trees, but could make out none of the stealthy, flitting shapes he had half expected to see. It was encouraging that the wolves had not overcome their timidity of the fire. Keen hunger might have driven them to an attack, and Blake had no illusions about the result of that. However, since the fierce brutes were not starving, they must have found something to eat, and what a wolf could eat would feed men who were by no means fastidious. Seeing nothing that alarmed him, Blake resumed his musing.

Their search for the gum had proved useless and he pitied Harding, who had staked his future upon its success. The man had not complained much, but Blake knew what he must feel and thought with compassion of the lonely woman who had bravely sent his comrade out and was now waiting for him in the mean discomfort of a cheap tenement. It was not difficult to imagine her anxiety and suspense.

Next he began to ponder his own affairs, which were not encouraging, though he did not think he really regretted the self-sacrificing course he had taken. His father had died involved in debt, and Blake suspected that it had cost Challoner something to redeem the share of his mother's property which brought him in a small income. That it had been carefully tied up was not, he thought, enough to guard it from the Blake extravagance and ingenuity in raising money. Afterwards the Colonel had brought him up and sent him into the army, doing so with a generous affection which was very different from cold charity, and demanded some return. Then Bertram had never been jealous of the favour shown his cousin, but had given him warm friendship, and Blake, who was much the stronger, had now and then stood between the lad and harm. He had done so again in Bertram's greatest need, and now he must not grumble at the consequences.

Of late they had seemed heavier than formerly, for in tempting him Clarke had made a telling suggestion—suppose he married? This appeared improbable; for one thing, no girl he was likely to be attracted by would look with favour on a man with his reputation, but he had thought a good deal about Millicent Graham during the weary march. He imagined that she had inherited enough of her father's reckless character to make her willing to take a risk. She would not have a man betray his friend for an advantage that he might gain; she had a courage that would help her, for love's sake, to tread a difficult path. Still, there was no reason to believe that she had any love for him, or indeed that she thought of him except as a stranger to whom she had, perhaps, some reason to be grateful. Resolutely breaking off this train of thought, he threw fresh wood upon the fire and sat shivering and making plans for the march to the factory, until Benson relieved him. When the grey dawn broke above the trees he got up stiff with cold and after eating his share of a very frugal breakfast carefully examined his rifle. Though he kept it clean of superfluous grease, there was some risk of the striker and magazine-slide freezing, and a missfire might prove disastrous. Then he glanced up between the branches and noticed the low, dingy sky, while he thought it was not quite so cold.

"I'm going to look for a caribou," he said. "I'll be back by dark."

"We'll have snow," said Harding. "If there's much, you'll find it hard to get home."

"I'd find it harder to do without breakfast and supper, which is what may happen very soon," Blake rejoined. "One can eat the *tripe de roche* which grows upon the stones, but I don't know where to look for it, and a North-West Police trooper who once tried it told me that it made him very ill."

"Anyway, you had better take one of us along."

"With the axe?" Blake said, laughing. "It's bad enough to reach a caribou with a rifle, and Benson's as poor a hand at stalking as I know, while a day's rest may save you from getting a snowshoe leg. As we haven't a sledge, it would be awkward to carry you to the factory."

They let him go, but when he reached the open his face hardened. The sky had a threatening look, the snow was soft, and there were wolves about, but he was comparatively safe while daylight lasted and food must be found. During the morning he saw wolf tracks, but no sign of a deer, and at noon sat down for a few minutes in a sheltered hollow and managed to light the half-frozen pipe he kept in an inner pocket. He had brought nothing to eat, since they had decided that it would be prudent to dispense with a midday meal, and getting stiffly on his feet by and by, he plodded from bluff to bluff throughout the afternoon. For the most part, they were thin and the trees very small, while so far as he could make out the country between them was covered with slabs of rocks and stones. It was utterly empty, with no sign of life in it, but he continued his search until the light began to fail, when he stopped to look about.

No snow had fallen, but the sky was very thick and a stinging wind had risen, while he would have trouble in reaching camp if his trail got drifted up. He knew he should have turned back earlier, but there was what seemed to be an extensive wood in front, and he could not face the thought of returning empty-handed to his scanty, unearned supper. The grey trees were not far away; he might reach them and make a mile or two on the back trail before dark, though he was weary and hunger had given him a pain in his left side.

Quickening his pace, he neared the bluff, which looked very black and shadowy against the snow, though the latter was fading to a curious, lifeless grey. The trees were stunted and scattered, which made it possible for him to get through, though there were half-covered, fallen branches which entangled his big shoes. He could see no tracks of any animal and hardly expected to do so, but in a savage mood he held on without much caution until he entered a belt of broken ground strewn with rocky hillocks. Here he could not see where he was going and it was almost dark in the hollows, but he had found that chance sometimes favours the hunter as much as careful stalking. Stopping for breath a moment, half way up a steep ascent, he started, for a shadowy object unexpectedly appeared upon the summit. It was barely distinguishable against the background of trees, but he saw the broad-tined horns in an opening and knew it for a caribou.

There was no time to lose, since the swift creature would take flight in an instant, and almost as he caught sight of it the rifle went up to his shoulder. For a moment the foresight wavered across the indistinct form, and then his numbed hands grew steady, and, trusting that nothing would check the frost-clogged action, he pressed the trigger. He felt the jar of the butt, a little smoke blew in his eyes, and he could make out nothing on the crest of the ridge. It, however, seemed impossible that he had missed and next moment he heard a heavy floundering in the snow among the rocks above. He went up the slope at a savage run and plunged down a precipitous hollow, on the farther side of which a half-seen object was moving through the gloom of the trees. Stopping a moment, he threw up the rifle and after the thin red flash the deer staggered and collapsed.

Running on in desperate haste, he fell upon it with his hunting knife; and then stopped, feeling strangely limp and breathless, with the long blade dripping in his hand. Now the caribou lay dead before him, the strain of the last few minutes made itself felt. Surprised when exhausted and weak from want of food by an opportunity he had not looked for, he had forced upon himself sufficient steadiness to shoot. It had cost him an effort; the short fierce chase had tried him hard, and now the reaction had set in. For all that, he was conscious of a savage, exultant excitement. Here was food, and food meant life.

His first impulse was to light a fire and feast, but as he grew calmer he began to think. He was a long way from camp and feared that if he rested he could not force himself to resume the march. Besides, there were the wolves to reckon with, and he could not escape if they followed him in the dark. Prudence suggested that he should cut off as much meat as possible, and after placing it out of reach in a tree set off for camp at his best speed without taking any of the raw flesh to scent the air; but this was more than he could bring himself to do. His comrades were very hungry, and some animal might climb to the frozen meat. It was unthinkable that he should run any risk of losing the precious food. He decided to take as much as he could carry and make a depot of the rest, and set to work with the hunting knife in anxious haste.

It was now quite dark; he could not see what he was cutting, and if he gashed his hand, which was numbed and almost useless, the wound would not heal. Then the haft of the knife grew slippery and tough skin and bone turned the wandering blade. It was an unpleasant business, but he was not fastidious and he tore the flesh off with his fingers, knowing that he was in danger while he worked. There were wolves in the neighbourhood, and their scent for blood was wonderfully keen; it was a question whether they would reach the spot before he had left it, and when he stopped to clean the knife in the snow he cast a swift glance about.

He could see nothing farther off than a fallen trunk about a dozen yards away; beyond that the trees had faded into a sombre mass. A biting wind wailed among them, and he could hear the harsh rustle of the needles, but except for this there was a daunting silence. He began to feel a horror of the lonely wood and a longing to escape into the open, though he would be no safer there. But to give way to this weakness would be dangerous and, pulling himself together, he

went to work more calmly.

It was difficult to reach the branches of the spruce he chose, and when he had placed the first load of meat in safety he was tempted to flight. Indeed, for some moments he stood irresolute, struggling to hold his fears in subjection; and then went back for another supply. He climbed the tree three times before he was satisfied that he had stored enough, and afterwards gathered up as much of the flesh as he could conveniently carry. It would soon freeze, but not before it had left a scent that any wolf which might happen to be near could follow.

He left the wood with a steady stride, refraining from attempting a faster pace than he could keep up, but when he had gone a mile he felt distressed.

His load, which included the rifle, was heavy, and he had been exerting himself since early morning. The wind was in his face, lashing it until the cold became intolerable, the dry snow was loose, and he could not find his outward trail. Still, he was thankful that no more had fallen and thought he knew the quarter he must make for. Now he was in the open, he could see some distance, for the snow threw up a dim light. It stretched away before him, a sweep of glimmering grey, and the squeaking crunch it made beneath his shoes emphasized the silence.

Skirting a bluff he did not remember, he stopped in alarm until a taller clump of trees which he thought he knew caught his searching eyes. If he were right, he must incline farther to the east to strike the shortest line to camp, and he set off, breathing heavily and longing to fling away his load. Cold flakes stung his face and a creeping haze obscured his view in the direction where he expected to find the next wood. He was within a hundred yards of the nearest trees when he saw them and as he left the last it was snowing hard. His heart sank as he launched out into the open, for he had now no guide, and having neither axe nor blanket he could not make a fire and camp in a bluff, even if he could find one. It looked as if he must perish should he fail to reach the camp. The thought of the wolves no longer troubled him, but when he had gone a mile or two he imagined he heard a howl behind him and quickened his speed.

After that he had only a hazy recollection of floundering on, passing a bluff he could not locate and here there and a white rock, while the snow fell thicker and its surface got worse. Then, when he felt he could go no farther, a faint glow of light broke out and he turned towards it with a hoarse cry. An answer reached him; the light grew brighter, and he was in among the trees. Benson met him, and in another minute or two he flung himself down, exhausted by the fire.

"I've brought you your supper, boys," he said. "We'll have a feast to-night."

They ate with keen appetite and afterwards went to sleep, but when they reached the wood next morning nothing was left of the caribou except the meat in the tree and a few clean-picked bones.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FACTORY

Light snow was driving across the waste before a savage wind when the party sat at breakfast one morning a fortnight after Blake had shot the caribou. They had spent the first two days enjoying a badly needed rest, but the rest of the time had been passed in forced marches which severely taxed their strength. Part of their way, however, had lain across open country, for they were near the northern edge of the timber belt, and the straggling trees, dwarfed and bent by the wind, ran east and west in a deeply indented line. In some places they boldly stretched out towards the Pole in long promontories; in others they fell back in wide bays which Blake, steering by compass, held straight across and afterwards again plunged into the scrub. Three days were spent in struggling through the broadest tongue, but as a rule, a few hours' arduous march brought them out into the open. Even there the ground was very rough and broken, and they were thankful for the numerous frozen creeks and lakes which provided an easier road.

Pushing on stubbornly, camping where they could find shelter and wood, since they could hardly have survived a night spent without a fire in the open, they had made, by calculation, two hundred miles, and Blake believed they might by a determined effort reach the Hudson's Bay post about nightfall. This was necessary since their strength was nearly exhausted, and provisions had run out, but an Indian trapper whom they had met two days before had given them directions and landmarks, some of which they recognized.

Day had broken, but there was little light and Blake, looking out from behind a slab of rock in the shelter of which a few junipers clung, thought that three or four miles would be the longest distance that he could see. This was peculiarly unfortunate, because he understood that their course led across a wide untimbered stretch, on the opposite side of which one or two isolated

bluffs would indicate the neighbourhood of the factory. Disastrous consequences might follow the missing of these woods.

A pannikin of weak tea made from leaves which had already been once or twice infused stood among the embers, and by and by Benson, who was dividing the last of the meat, held up a piece.

"I had thought of saving this, but it hardly seems worth while," he said. "If we make the factory, we'll get a good supper."

"You don't mention what will happen if we miss it," Harding remarked with grim humour. "Anyhow, that piece of meat won't make much difference. What do you think, Blake?"

Blake forced a cheerful laugh. "Put it all in; we're going to make the post; as a matter of fact, we have to. How's the leg this morning?"

"I don't think it's worse than it was last night," Harding answered. "If I'm careful how I go, it ought to stand another journey."

He made a grimace as he stretched out the limb, which was very sore, for during the last few days the strain the snowshoe threw on the muscles had nearly disabled him. Now he knew it would be difficult to hold out for another journey, but he had grown accustomed to pain and weariness and hunger. They were, he imagined, the lot of all who braved the rigours of winter in the northern wilds.

"Well," said Benson, "there's no use in carrying anything that's not strictly needful and the empty grub-bag may stay behind. Then here's a pair of worn out moccasins I was keeping as a stand by. I should be able to get new ones at the factory."

"It's still some distance off," Harding drily reminded him.

"If we don't make it, the chances are that I won't need the things. But what about your collection of gum?"

Nothing had been said on this point for some time, but Harding's face wore a curious look as he took up a bag which weighed three or four pounds.

"Some of the stuff might be used for low-grade varnish, but that's not what I'm out for. I've been trying to believe that a few of the specimens might prove better on analysis, but I guess it's a delusion."

With a quick resolute movement he threw the bag into the fire and when the resin flared up with a thick brown smoke the others regarded him with silent sympathy. This was the end of the project he had expected so much from, but it was obvious that he could meet failure with fortitude. Nothing that would serve any purpose could be said, and they quietly strapped on their blankets.

There was not much snow when they set off and fortunately the wind blew behind them, but the white haze narrowed in the prospect and Blake, who broke the trail, kept his eyes upon the compass. He was not quite sure of the right line, but he had the satisfaction of knowing that he was, at least, going straight. After a few minutes, Harding glanced behind. Their camping place had vanished, they were out in an open waste, and he knew that he had started on the last march he was capable of making. Where it would lead him he could not tell, though the answer to the question was of vital importance.

For a time he thought of his wife and wondered with keen anxiety what would become of her if his strength gave way before they reached the post, but he drove these cares out of his mind. It was dangerous to harbour them and served no purpose; his part was to struggle on, swinging the net shoes while he grappled with the pain each step caused him. He shrank from contemplating the distance yet to be covered; it seemed vast to him in his weakness, and he felt himself a feeble, crippled thing. Soft snow and Arctic cold opposed his advance with malignant force, but his worn-out body still obeyed the spur of his will, and he roused himself to fight for the life that had some value to another. He must march, dividing up the distance into short stages that had less effect upon the imagination; limping forward from the ice-glazed rock abreast of him to the white hillock which loomed up dimly where the snow blurred the horizon. Then he would again look ahead from some patch of scrub to the most prominent elevation that he could see.

The marks he chose and passed seemed innumerable, but the wilderness still ran on, pitilessly empty, in front of him. His leg was horribly painful, he knew he must break down soon, and they had seen nothing of a stony rise they were looking for. To find it would simplify matters, because the Indian had made them understand that the bluffs about the post lay nearly east of it.

Noon passed and they still pressed forward without a halt, for there was little more than three hours' daylight left, and it was unthinkable that they should spend the night without food or shelter. The horizon steadily narrowed as the snow thickened; there was a risk of their passing the guiding-marks or even the factory.

It was nearly three o'clock when Harding stumbled and falling into the snow found himself

unable to get up until Benson helped him. In his attempt to rise he further strained his weakened leg and for a moment or two he leaned on his companion, his face contorted with pain.

"The fall seems to have hurt you," Benson said sympathetically.

"I'll have to go on," Harding gasped and, setting his teeth, strode forward, made a few paces with horrible pain, and then sank down on his knees.

The others stopped in consternation and Blake said, "If I've kept the right line, we can't be far from the factory."

"I'm played out," said Harding. "You'll have to leave me here. If you make the post, you can come back with a sledge."

"No," Blake answered shortly. "How are we to find you with our trail drifting up? Besides, you'd be frozen in a few hours. If you can't walk, you'll have to be carried. Get hold of him, Benson."

Benson lifted him to his feet, Blake seized his arm, and, both supporting him, they resumed the march. Leaning on them heavily, Harding was dragged along, and they silenced the feeble protests he made now and then.

"Stop talking that rot! We see this out together," Blake told him roughly.

None of them had much doubt as to what the end would be, but they stubbornly held on. Nothing further was said; Blake and Benson's pinched faces were set and stern and Harding's drawn up in a ghastly fashion by suffering. Still, their overtaxed muscles somehow obeyed the relentless call on them.

At length, when the light had almost gone, Benson stepped into a slight depression that slanted across their path.

"Hold on!" he cried hoarsely. "Look at this!"

Blake stooped while Harding, swaying awkwardly with bent leg, held on to him. The hollow was small, a smooth groove of slightly lower level than the rest of the snow.

"A sledge trail!" he said in an exultant voice. "Drifted up a bit, but they've been hauling lumber over it and that means a good deal to us." He indicated a shallow furrow a foot or two outside the groove. "That's been made by the butt of a trailing log. The Indian said there were bluffs near the post and they wouldn't haul their cordwood farther than necessary."

Then they were silent for a few moments, overcome by relief. They had now a guide to shelter and safety, but when they had gathered breath Blake steadied Harding, who found standing difficult, with his arm.

"We must make a move and hustle all we can," he said. "It will be dark in half an hour and the snow won't take long in filling up the trail."

The risk of missing the factory, which might be close at hand, was not to be faced, and they pulled themselves together for a last effort; Blake and Benson breathing hard as they dragged Harding along. The light was rapidly going, now they had changed their course the snow lashed their faces, making it difficult to see, and they plodded forward with lowered heads and eyes fixed on the guiding-line. It grew faint in places and vanished altogether after a while. Then they stopped in dismay, and Blake went down upon his knees scraping with ragged mittens in the snow.

"I can't see which way it runs, but it certainly doesn't end here," he said. "Go ahead and look for it, Benson, but don't get out of call."

Benson moved forward and when he faded into the cloud of driving flakes those he left behind were conscious of a keen uneasiness. They could only see a few yards, it was blowing fresh and the wind might carry their voices away, while if this happened the chances were against their comrade's being able to rejoin them. By and by Blake shouted and the answer was reassuring. They waited for a time and then when they cried out a hail came back very faintly: "Nothing yet!"

"Keep closer!" Blake shouted, but it seemed that Benson did not hear him, for there was no reply.

"Hadn't you better go after him?" Harding suggested.

"No," said Blake shortly. "It would make things worse to scatter." He raised his voice. "Come back before your tracks fill up."

The silence that followed filled them with alarm, but while they listened in strained suspense a minute or two later a faint call came out of the snow. The words were indistinguishable, but the voice had an exultant note in it, and Blake said with deep relief, "He has found the trail."

It was difficult to see the print of Benson's shoes and Harding could not move a step alone, but they called out at intervals as Blake slowly helped him along, and at length a shadowy object loomed in front of them. As they came up Benson pointed to a slight depression.

"We can follow it if it gets no fainter, but there's no time to lose," he said. "It might be safer if I went first and kept my eye on the trail."

He shuffled forward with lowered head while Blake came behind, helping Harding as best he could, and all three long remembered the next half hour. Once or twice they lost the trail and were seized with despair, but searching anxiously they found it again. At length a pale, elusive light appeared amidst the snow ahead and they saw it grow clearer with keen satisfaction. When it had changed to a strong yellow glow they passed a broken white barrier which Blake supposed was a ruined stockade, and the hazy mass of a building showed against the snow. Then there was a loud barking of dogs, and while they sought for the door a stream of light suddenly shone out with a man's dark figure in the midst of it.

Next minute they entered the house and Harding lurching forward across the floor of a large room, clutched at a table and then fell with a crash into a chair. After the extreme cold outside, the air was suffocatingly hot and, overcome by the change and pain, he leaned back with flushed face and half closed eyes. His companions stood still, with the snow thick upon their ragged furs, and the other man shut the door before he turned to them.

"A rough night," he said calmly. "Ye might as weel sit down. Where do ye hail from?"

Blake laughed as he found a seat. He imagined that their appearance must have been somewhat startling, but he knew it takes a good deal to disturb the equanimity of a Hudson's Bay Scot.

"From Sweetwater, but we have been up in the timber belt since winter set in. Now we have run out of provisions and my partner's lamed by snowshoe trouble."

"Ay," said the other, "I suspected something o' the kind. But maybe ye'll be wanting supper?"

"I believe, if we were put to it, we could eat half a caribou," Benson told him with a grin.

"It's no to be had," the Scot answered in a matter-of-fact tone. "I can give ye a good thick bannock and some whitefish. Our stores are no so plentiful the now."

They took off their furs and glanced about the place while their host was busy at the stove. The room was large, its walls of narrow logs chinked with clay and moss. Guns and steel traps hung upon them, the floor was made of uneven boards which had obviously been split in the nearest bluff, and the furniture was of the simplest and rudest description. It had, however, an air of supreme comfort to the famishing newcomers, and after the first few minutes they found it delightfully warm. They ate the food given them ravenously and afterwards the agent brought Harding some warm water and examined his leg.

"Ye'll no walk far for a while I'm thinking," he remarked. "Rest it on the chair here and sit ye still."

Harding was glad to comply and lighting their pipes they began to talk. Their host, who told them his name was Robertson, was a rather hard-featured man of middle age.

"I'm all my lone; my clerk's away with the breeds at the Swan lake," he said. "Where are ye making for?"

"For the south," said Blake. "We came here for shelter, badly tired, and want to hire a dog team and a half-breed guide if possible, as soon as my partner's fit to travel. Then we want provisions."

"I'm afraid I cannot supply ye. Our stores are low—we got few fish and caribou the year, and we have not a team to spare."

"Well," said Benson, "I don't suppose you'll turn us out, and we'd be glad to pay for our accommodation. We have no wish to take the trail again without food or transport."

Robertson looked thoughtful. "Ye might wait a week or two; and then we'll maybe see better what can be done."

He asked them a few questions about their journey, and by and by Harding took the piece of gum from its case.

"I guess you have seen nothing like this round here?"

"No," said Robertson, who examined it carefully. "I have made it my business to study the natural products o' the district, and it's my opinion ye'll find no gum of this kind in the northern timber belt."

"I expect you're right. Leaving furs out, if the country's rich in anything, it's probably

minerals."

"There's copper and some silver, but I've seen no ore that would pay for working when ye consider the transport."

"I don't suppose you're anxious to encourage prospecting," Benson suggested.

Robertson smiled. "If there was a rich strike, we would no object. We're here to trade, and supplying miners is no quite so chancy as dealing in furs; but to have a crowd from the settlements disturbing our preserves and going away after finding nothing of value would not suit us. Still I'm thinking, it's no likely; the distance and the winter will keep them out."

"Did you ever see signs of oil?"

"No here; there's petroleum three hundred miles south, but no enough, in my opinion, to pay for driving wells. Onyway, the two prospecting parties that once came up didna come back again."

He left them presently, and when they heard him moving about an adjoining room, Harding said, "We'll stay here for a time and then look for that petroleum on our way to the settlements."

Blake, who agreed, thought this determination was characteristic of his comrade. Harding's project had failed, but instead of being crushed by disappointment, he was already considering another. While they talked about it Robertson returned, and shortly afterwards they went to sleep.

CHAFFER XXV

THE BACK TRAIL

Blake and his friends spent three weeks at the Hudson's Bay post, and throughout the first fortnight an icy wind hurled the snow against the quivering building. It was dangerous to venture as far as a neighbouring bluff where fuel had been cut, and one evening Benson and the agent, who were hauling cordwood home, narrowly escaped from death in the suddenly freshening storm. None of the half-breeds could reach the factory and Robertson confessed to some anxiety about them; there was little that could be done, and they spent the dreary days lounging about the red-hot stove, and listening to the roar of the gale. In the long evenings Robertson told them grim stories of the North.

Then there came a week of still, clear weather with intense frost, and when several of the trappers arrived Robertson suggested that his guests had better accompany a man who was going some distance south with a dog team. He could, however, only spare them a scanty supply of food, and they knew that a long forced march lay before them when they had left their guide.

Day was breaking when the dogs were harnessed to the sledge, and Harding and his companions, shivering in their furs, felt a strong reluctance to leave the factory. It was a rude place and very lonely, but they had enjoyed warmth and food there, and their physical nature shrank from the toil and bitter cold. None of them wished to linger in the North, and Harding least of all, but it was daunting to contemplate the distance that lay between them and the settlements. Strong effort and stern endurance would be required of them before they rested beside a hearth again.

There was no wind, the smoke went straight up and then, spreading out, hung above the roof in a motionless cloud; the snow had a strange ghostly glimmer in the creeping light, and the cold bit to the bone. It was with a pang they bade their host farewell, and followed the half-breed, who ran down the slope from the door after his team. Robertson was going back to sit, warm and well-fed, by his stove, but they could not tell what hardships awaited them.

Their depression, however, vanished after a time. The snow was good for travelling, the dogs trotted fast, and the half-breed grunted approval of their speed as he pointed to landmarks that proved it when they stopped at noon. After that they held on until dark, and made camp among a few junipers in the shelter of a rock. All had gone well the first day, Harding's leg no longer troubled him, and there was comfort in travelling light with their packs upon the sledge. The journey began to look less formidable, and gathering close round the fire they ate their supper cheerfully while the dogs fought over the scraps of frozen fish. Harding, however, had some misgivings about their ability to keep the pace up; he thought that in a day or two it would tell on the white men.

Nothing disturbed their sleep, which was sound, for the cold has less effect on the man who is fresh and properly fed. Breakfast was quickly dispatched, and after a short struggle with the

dogs they set out again. It was another good day, and they travelled fast, over a rolling tableland on which the snow smoothed out the inequalities among the rocks. Bright sunshine streamed down on them, the sledge ran easily up the slopes and down the hollows, and looking back when they nooned Harding noticed the straightness of their course. Picked out in delicate shades of blue against the unbroken white surface surrounding it, the sledge trail ran back with scarcely a waver to the crest of a rise two miles away. This was not how they had journeyed north, with the icy wind in their faces, laboriously struggling round broken ridges and through tangled woods. Harding was a sanguine man, but experience warned him to prepare for much less favourable conditions. It was not often the wilderness showed a smiling face.

Still, the fine weather held and they were deep in the timber when they parted from their guide on a frozen stream which he must follow while they pushed south across a rugged country. He was not a companionable person, and spoke only a few words of barbarous French, but they were sorry to see the last of him when he left them with a friendly farewell. He had brought them speedily a long distance on their way, but they must now trust to the compass and their own resources, while the loads they strapped on were unpleasantly heavy. Before this task was finished dogs and driver had vanished up the white riband of the stream, and they felt lonely as they stood in the bottom of the gorge with steep rocks and dark pines hemming them in. Blake glanced at the high bank with a rueful smile.

"There are advantages in having a good guide, and we hadn't to face a climb like that all the way," he said. "Anyhow, we had better get up."

It cost them some labour and, after reaching the summit they stopped to look for the easiest road. Ahead, as far as they could see, small, ragged pines grew among the rocks, and breaks in the uneven surface hinted at troublesome ravines.

"It looks rough," said Benson. "There's rather a high ridge yonder. It might save trouble to work round its end. What do you think?"

"When I'm not sure," said Harding, "I mean to go straight south."

Benson gave him a sympathetic nod. "One can understand that; you have better reasons for getting back than the rest of us, though I've no particular wish to loiter up here. Break the trail, Blake; due south by compass!"

They plunged deeper into the broken belt, clambering down ravines, crossing frozen lakes and snowy creeks. Indeed, they were thankful when a strip of level surface indicated water, for the toil of getting through the timber was heavy. After two days of travel there was a yellow sunset, and the snow gleamed in the lurid light with an ominous brilliance, while as they made their fire a moaning wind got up. These things presaged a change in the weather, and they were rather silent over the evening meal. They missed the half-breed and the snarling dogs, while it looked as if the good fortune that had so far attended them was coming to an end.

Next morning there was a low, brooding sky, and at noon snow began to fall, but they kept on until evening over very rough ground and then held a council round the fire.

"The situation requires some thought," Blake remarked. "First of all, our provisions won't carry us through the timber belt. Now the shortest course to the prairie, where the going will be easier, is due south, but after we get there we'll have a long march to the settlements. I'd partly counted on our killing a caribou or perhaps a moose, but so far we've seen no tracks."

"There must be some smaller beasts that the Indians eat," Benson suggested.

"None of us knows where to look for them, and we haven't much time to spare for hunting."

"That's so," Harding agreed. "What's your plan?"

"I'm in favour of heading south-west. It may mean an extra hundred miles, or more, but it would bring us nearer the Stony village, and afterwards the logging camp on the edge of the timber, where we might get supplies."

"It's understood that the Indians are often half starved in winter," Benson observed. "For all that, they might have had good luck, and anyhow we couldn't cross the prairie with an empty grub-sack. My vote's for striking off to the west."

Harding concurred, though as his leg had threatened further trouble during the last day or two, he would have preferred the shorter route. Then Blake asked him: "What about the petroleum?"

"We can't stop to look for it unless we can lay in a good stock of food, and I don't suppose we could do much prospecting with the snow upon the ground." He paused a moment with a thoughtful air. "When we reach the settlement I must go home, but if the dollars can be raised, I'll be back as soon as the thaw comes to try for the oil. Clarke's an unusually smart man, and there's no doubt he's on the trail."

"We'll raise enough money somehow," Benson told him, and Blake signified his agreement

with a nod. Then they dropped into casual talk which lasted until they went to sleep.

When dawn came it was snowing hard, and for a week they made poor progress with a bitter gale driving the flakes in their faces, while rations were cut down as the distance covered daily steadily lessened. Harding's leg was getting sore, but he did not mean to speak of this unless it was necessary. They were, however, approaching the neighbourhood of the Indian village and Blake began to speculate upon the probability of their finding its inhabitants at home. He understood that the Stonies wandered about, and realized with uneasiness that it would be singularly unfortunate if they were away on a hunting trip.

At length, after laboriously climbing the rough but gently rising slope of a long divide all one blustering day, they camped on a high tableland, and lay awake, too cold to sleep, beside a sulky, greenwood fire. In the morning it was difficult to get upon their feet, but as the light grew clearer, the prospect they looked down upon seized their attention. The hill summits were wrapped in leaden cloud, but a valley opened up below. It was wider and deeper than any they had met with since leaving the factory, the bottom looked unusually level, and it ran roughly south.

They gazed at it in silence for a time; and then Harding said, "I've a notion that this is the valley where Blake fell sick, and it's going to straighten out things for us if I'm right."

"That's so," Benson agreed. "We would be sure of striking the Stony village, and we could afterwards follow the low ground right down to the river. With the muskegs frozen solid, it ought to make an easy road."

Blake was conscious of keen satisfaction, but there was still a doubt.

"We'll know more about it after another march," he said.

No snow fell that morning, and as their packs were ominously light they made good speed across the hill benches and down a ravine where they scrambled among the boulders of a frozen creek. It was a grey day without the rise in temperature that often accompanies cloudiness, and the light was strangely dim. Rocks and pines melted into one another at a short distance, and leaden haze obscured the lower valley. Blake was, however, becoming sure it was the one they had travelled up and, dispensing with the usual noon halt, they pushed on as fast as possible. All were anxious to set their doubts at rest, for there was now a prospect of obtaining food and shelter in a few days, but they recognized no landmarks, and with the approach of evening the frost grew very keen. The haze drew in closer, the scattered pines they passed wailed drearily in a rising wind, and the men were tired, but they could see no suitable camping place and held on, looking for thicker timber.

It was getting dark when a belt of trees stretched across the valley, and they were thinking of stopping, when Benson, who led the way, cried out.

"What is it?" Harding asked.

Benson hesitated. "Well," he said, "the thing doesn't seem probable, but I believe I saw a light. Anyway, it's gone."

They stopped, gazing eagerly into the gloom. A light meant that there were men not far off, and after the grim desolation they had travelled through all were conscious of a longing for human society. Besides, the strangers would, no doubt, have something to eat and might be cooking a plentiful supper. There was, however, nothing to be seen until Blake moved a few yards to one side. Then he turned to Benson with a cheerful laugh.

"You were right; I can see a glimmer about a mile ahead. I wonder who the fellows are, though that's not important."

They set off as fast as they could go, though travelling among the fallen branches and slanting trees was difficult in the dark. Now and then they lost their beacon, but the brightening glow shone out again and when it was visible Blake watched it with surprise. It was low, and he thought hardly large enough for a fire, besides which it had a curious irregular flicker. Drawing nearer, they dipped into a hollow where they could only distinguish a faint brightness beyond the rising ground ahead which they eagerly ascended. Reaching the summit, they saw the light plainly, but it was very small, and there were no figures outlined against it. Benson shouted, and all three felt a shock of disappointment when he got no answer.

He ran as fast as his snowshoes would let him, smashing through brush, floundering over snowy stones, with Blake and Harding stumbling, short of breath, behind; and then stopped with a hoarse cry close to the light. There was nobody about, and the blaze sprang up mysteriously from the frozen ground.

"A blower of natural gas," said Harding in an excited tone. "In a sense, we've had our run for nothing, but this may be worth a good deal more than your supper."

"If I had the option, I'd trade all the natural gas in Canada for a thick, red moose steak, and a warm place to sleep in," Benson savagely rejoined. "Anyhow, it will help us to light our fire, and

we have a bit of whitefish and a few hard bannocks left."

Blake shared his comrade's disappointment. He was tired and hungry, and felt irritated by Harding's satisfaction. For all that, he chopped wood and made camp, and their frugal supper was half eaten before he turned to the American.

"Now," he said, "you may as well tell us what you think about this gas."

"First of all," Harding answered good-humouredly, "it indicates that there's oil somewhere about; the two generally go together. Anyhow, if there were only gas, it would be worth exploiting so long as we found enough of it, but judging by the pressure there's not much here."

"What would you do with gas in this wilderness?"

"In due time, I or somebody else would build a town. Fuel's power and if you could get it cheap I expect you'd find minerals that would pay for working. Men with money in Montreal and New York are looking for openings like this, and no place is too remote to build a railroad to if you can ensure freight."

"You're the most sanguine man I ever met," Blake said, grinning. "Take care your optimism doesn't ruin you."

"I wonder," Harding continued, "whether Clarke knows about this gas, and on the whole I think it probable. We can't be very far from the Stony camp, and there's reason to believe he's been prospecting this district. It's oil he's out for."

"How did the thing get lighted?" Benson asked in an indifferent tone.

Harding smiled as he gave him a sharp glance. He had failed in his search for the gum and did not expect his companions to share his enthusiasm over a new plan. They had, however, promised to support him, and that was enough, for he believed he might yet show them the way to prosperity.

"Well," he said, "I guess I can't blame you for not feeling very keen, but that's not the point. I can't answer what you ask, and I believe our forest wardens are now and then puzzled about how bush fires get started. We have crossed big belts of burnt trees in a country where we saw no signs of Indians."

"If this blower has been burning long, the Stonies must have known of it," Blake remarked. "Isn't it curious that no news of it has reached the settlements?"

"I'm not sure," Harding rejoined. "They may venerate the thing, and anyway, they're smart in some respects. They know that where the white men come their people are rounded up on reserves, and I guess they'd sooner have the whole country to themselves for trapping and fishing. Then Clarke may have persuaded them to say nothing."

"It's possible," Blake said thoughtfully. "We'll push on for their camp first thing to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RESCUE

Starting at daybreak, they reached a hillside overlooking the Stony village on the third afternoon. Surrounded by willows and ragged spruces the conical tepees rose in the plain beneath, but Blake, who was leading, stopped abruptly as he caught sight of them. They were white to the apex, where the escaping heat of the fire within generally melted the snow, and no curl of smoke floated across the clearing. The village was ominously silent and had a deserted look.

"I'm very much afraid Clarke's friends are not at home," he said with forced calm. "We'll know more about it in half an hour; that is, if you think it worth while to go down."

The others were silent a moment, struggling with their disappointment. They had made a toilsome journey to reach the village, their food was nearly exhausted, and it would cost them two days to return to the valley which was their best road to the south.

Then Harding said, "Now we're here, we may as well spend another hour over the job. It's possible they haven't packed all their stores along."

His companions suspected that they were wasting time, but they followed him down hill, until Benson, who was a short distance to one side of them, called out. When they joined him he

indicated a row of footsteps leading up the slope.

"That fellow hasn't been gone very long; there was snow yesterday," he said. "By the line he took, he must have passed near us. I wonder why he stayed on after the others."

Blake examined the footsteps carefully, and compared them with the impress of his own snowshoes.

"It's obvious that they can't be older than yesterday afternoon," he said. "From their depth and sharpness, I should judge that the fellow was carrying a good load, which probably means that he meant to be some time gone. The stride suggests a white man."

"Clarke," said Harding. "He seems to be up here pretty often, though I can't see how he'd do much prospecting in the winter."

"It's possible," Blake rejoined. "Anyhow, the point doesn't seem to matter, and I'm anxious to find out whether there's anything to eat in the tepees."

They hurried on, and discovered only a few skins in the first tent. Then, separating, they eagerly searched the rest without result, and when they met again were forced to the conclusion that there was no food in the place. It was about three o'clock and a threatening afternoon. The light was dim and a savage wind blew the snow about. They stood with gloomy faces in the shelter of the largest tepee, feeling that luck was hard against them.

"These northern Indians have often to put up with short commons while the snow lies," Benson remarked. "No doubt, they set off for some place where game's more plentiful when they found their grub running out, and as they've all gone the chances are that they won't come back soon. We've had our trouble for nothing, but we may as well camp here. With a big fire going, one could make this tepee warm."

The others felt strongly tempted to agree. The cold had been extreme the last few nights and weary and scantily fed as they were, they craved for shelter. Still they had misgivings and Blake said, "We have wasted too much time already, and there's only a few days' rations in the bag. We have got to get back to the valley and ought to make another three hours' march before we stop."

"Yes," Harding regretfully assented, "I guess that would be wiser."

Setting off at once, they wearily struggled up the hill, and it had been dark some time when they made camp in a hollow at the foot of a great rock. It kept off the wind and the spruces which grew close about it further sheltered them, but Blake told his companions to throw up a snow bank while he cut wood.

"I'm afraid we're going to have an unusually bad night, and we may as well take precautions," he said.

His forecast proved correct, for soon after they had finished supper a cloud of snow swept past the hollow and the spruces roared among the rocks above. Then there was a crash and the top of a shattered tree plunged down between the men and fell on the edge of the fire, scattering a shower of sparks.

"Another foot would have made a difference to two of us," said Harding coolly. "However, it's fallen where it was wanted; help me heave the thing on."

It crackled fiercely as the flame licked about it, and sitting between the snowbank and the fire, the men kept fairly warm, but a white haze drove past their shelter and eddying in now and then covered them with snow. In an hour the drifts were level with the top of the bank, but this was a protection, and they were thankful they had found such a camping place, since death would have been the consequence of being caught in the open. The blizzard gathered strength, but though they heard the crash of broken trees through the roar of the wind no more logs fell, and by and by they went to sleep, secure in the shelter of the rock.

When day broke it was long past the usual hour, and the cloud of driving flakes obscured even the spruces a few yards away. The hollow at the foot of the crag was shadowy, and the snow had piled up several feet above the bank, and lapped over at one end. Still, with wood enough, they could keep warm, and had their supplies been larger they would have been content to rest. As things were, however, they were confronted with perhaps the gravest peril that threatens the traveller in the North—they might be detained by bad weather until their food ran out. None of them spoke of this, but by tacit agreement they made a very sparing breakfast and ate nothing at noon. When night came and the storm still raged, their hearts were very heavy.

It lasted three days, and on the fourth morning it seemed scarcely possible to face the somewhat lighter wind and break a trail through the fresh snow. They, however, dare risk no further delay, and strapping on their packs struggled up the range. At nightfall they were high among the rocks, and it was piercingly cold, but they got a few hours' sleep in a clump of junipers and struck the valley late next day. Finding shelter, they made camp and after dividing a small bannock between them sat talking gloomily. Their fire had been lighted to lee of a cluster of willows and burned sulkily because the wood was green. Pungent smoke curled about them, and

they shivered in the draughts.

"How far do you make it to the logging camp?" Benson asked. "I'm taking it for granted that the lumber gang's still there."

"A hundred and sixty miles," said Blake.

"And we have food enough for two days; say forty miles."

"About that; it depends upon the snow."

Benson made no answer, and Harding was silent a while, sitting very still with knitted brows. Then he said, "I can't see any way out. Can you?"

"Well," said Blake quietly, "we'll go on as long as we are able. Though I haven't had a rosy time, I've faith in my luck."

Conversation languished after this, but they had a small cake of tobacco left, and sat smoking and hiding their fears while the wind moaned among the willows and thin snow blew past. The camp was exposed and hungry and dejected, as they were, they felt the stinging cold. After an hour of moody silence, Harding suddenly leaned forward, with a lifted hand.

"What's that?" he said sharply. "Didn't you hear it?"

For a few moments the others only heard the rustle of the willows and the swishing sound of driven snow; then a faint patter caught their ears, and a crack followed like the snapping of a whip.

"A dog team!" cried Benson, and springing to his feet set up a loud shout.

It was answered in English and while they stood, shaken by excitement and intense relief, several low shadowy shapes emerged from the gloom; then a tall figure appeared, and after it two more. Somebody shouted harsh orders in uncouth French; the dogs sped towards the fire and stopped. Then their driver, hurrying after them, began to loose the traces, while another man walked up to Blake.

"We saw your fire and thought we'd make for it," he said. "I see your cooking outfit's still lying round."

"It's at your service," Blake told him. "I'm sorry we can't offer you much supper, though there's a bit of a bannock and some flour."

"We'll soon fix that," said the other. "Guess you're up against it, but our grub's holding out." He turned to the driver. "Come and tend to the cooking when you're through, Emile."

Though the order was given good-humouredly, there was a hint of authority in his voice, and the man he spoke to quickened his movements. Then another came up, and while the dogs snapped at each other, and rolled in the snow, the half-breed driver unloaded a heavy provision bag and filled Harding's frying pan.

"Don't spare it," said the first comer. "I guess these folks are hungry; fix up your best menoo."

Sitting down by the fire, shapeless in his whitened coat, with his bronzed face half hidden by his big fur cap, he had nevertheless a soldierly look.

"You'll be wondering who we are?" he said.

"No," Blake answered, smiling. "I can make a guess; there's a stamp on you I recognize. You're from Regina."

"You've hit it first time. I'm Sergeant Lane, R.N.W.M.P. This"—he indicated his companion —"is Private Walthew. We've been up on a special patrol to Copper Lake and left two of the boys there to make some inquiries about the Indians. Now we're on the back trail."

He looked as if he expected the others to return his confidence and Blake had no hesitation about doing so. He knew the high reputation of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, which is a force of well-mounted and carefully chosen frontier cavalry. Its business is to keep order on a vast stretch of plain, to watch over adventurous settlers who push out ahead of the advancing farming community, and to keep a keen eye on the reserve Indians. Men from widely different walks of life serve in its ranks, and the private history of each squadron is rich in romance, but one and all are called upon to scour the windy plains in the saddle in the fierce summer heat and make adventurous sledge journeys across the winter snow. Their patrols search the lonely North from Hudson's Bay to the Mackenzie, living in the open in Arctic weather, and the peaceful progress of Western Canada is largely due to their unrelaxing vigilance. Blake accordingly gave a short account of his journey and explained his present straits.

"Well," said the Sergeant, "I figure we have stores enough to see us down to the settlements all right, and we'll be glad of your company. The stronger the party, the smoother the trail, and

after what you've told me, I guess you can march."

"Where did you find the breed?" Benson asked. "Your chiefs at Regina don't allow you hired packers."

"They surely don't. He's a Hudson's Bay man, working his passage. Going back to his friends somewhere about Lake Winnipeg, and allowed he'd come south with us and take the cars to Selkirk. I was glad to get him; I'm not smart at driving dogs."

"We found it hard to understand the few Indians we met," said Harding. "The farther north you go, the worse it must be. How will the fellows you left up yonder get on?"

The Sergeant laughed. "When we want a thing done, we can find a man in the force fit for the job. One of the boys I took up can talk to them in Cree or Assiniboine, and it wouldn't beat us if they spoke Hebrew or Greek. There's a trooper in my detachment who knows both."

Benson, who did not doubt this, turned to Private Walthew, whose face, upon which the firelight fell, suggested intelligence and refinement.

"What do you specialize in?"

"Farriery," answered the young man, who might have added that extravagance had cut short his career as veterinary surgeon in the old country.

"Knows a horse all over, outside and in," Sergeant Lane interposed. "I allow that's why they sent him when I asked for a good dog driver, though in a general way our bosses aren't given to joking. Walthew will tell you there's a difference between physicking a horse and harnessing a sledge team."

"It's marked," Walthew agreed with a chuckle. "When I first tried to put the traces on I thought they'd eat me. Even now I have some trouble, and I'll venture to remind my superior that he'd be short of some of his fingers if they didn't serve us out good thick mittens."

"That's right," said Lane good-humouredly. "I'm sure no good at dogs. If you're going to drive them, you want to speak Karalit or French. Plain English cussin's no blame use."

By and by Emile said that supper was ready, and the police watched their new acquaintances devour it with sympathetic understanding, for they had more than once covered long distances on very short commons in the Arctic frost. Afterwards they lighted their pipes, and Emile, being tactfully encouraged, told them in broken English stories of the barrens. These were so strange and gruesome that it was only because they had learned something of the wilds that Harding and his friends believed him. Had they been less experienced, they would have denied that flesh and blood could bear the things the half-breed calmly talked about. While he spoke there broke out behind the camp a sudden radiance which leaped from the horizon far up the sky. It had in it the scintillation of the diamond, for the flickering brilliance changed to evanescent blue and rose from pure white light. Spreading in a vast, irregular arc, it hung like a curtain, wavering to and fro and casting off luminous spears that stabbed the dark. For a time it blazed in transcendental splendour, then faded and receded, dying out with Unearthly glimmering far back in the lonely North.

"Now," said Lane with mild approval, "I allow that's pretty fine."

Blake smiled, but made no answer. He and his comrades were getting drowsy, and although a stinging wind swept the camp and the green wood burned badly, they were filled with a serene content. The keen bodily craving was satisfied, they had eaten and could sleep, while it looked as if their troubles were over. The dogs were obviously fit for travel, because they were still engaged in a vigorous quarrel over some caribou bones, the toil of the journey would be lightened by carrying their loads on the sledge, and the party was strong enough to assist any member of it whose strength might give way. There was no reason to apprehend any difficulty in reaching the settlements, and in their relief at the unexpected rescue their thoughts went no further. After the hunger and nervous strain they had borne, they were blissfully satisfied with their present ease. There would be time enough by and by to consider the future.

At length Sergeant Lane got up and shook the snow from his blanket.

"I've seen a better fire, boys, but I've camped with none at all on as cold a night," he said. "So far as I can figure, we have grub enough, but now there are three more of us we don't want to lose time. You'll be ready to pull out by seven in the morning."

They lay down in the most comfortable places they could find, though the choice was limited, and spent the night in comfort, though Harding was once awakened by a dog that crept up to him for warmth.

CHAPTER XXVII

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

It was getting light next morning when the reinforced party entered a belt of thicker timber where they first clearly realized the fury of the storm. The trees were small and sprang from a frozen muskeg so that they could not be uprooted, but the gale had snapped the trunks and laid them low in swaths. Even in the spots where some had withstood its force the ground was strewn with split and broken branches, to lee of which the snow had gathered in billowy drifts. The scene of ruin impressed the men, who were forced to make long rounds in search of a passage for the sledge.

"About as fierce a blizzard as I remember," Sergeant Lane remarked. "We were held up three days and thought ourselves lucky in making a ravine with a steep bank, but the wind couldn't have been quite so strong back north a piece. There'd have been two names less on the roster if we'd been caught down here."

Harding thought this was probable. He had had a protecting rock at his back, but there was no shelter in the valley from the storm that had levelled the stoutest trees. Even the four-footed inhabitants of the wilds could hardly have escaped, and as he stumbled among the wreckage he thought about the man whose footsteps they had seen near the Indian village. Unless he had found some secure retreat he must have had to face the fury of the gale, and Harding felt convinced that the man was Clarke. It was curious that he should have been living alone among the empty tepees, but Harding imagined that he was in some way accountable for the Indians' departure and wondered where he was going when he crossed the range. There was a mystery about the matter, and if an explanation could be arrived at it would be of interest to him and his friends. Even before Clarke had sent them into the muskeg when he knew it was practically impassable, Harding had entertained a deep distrust of him. He was, however, called upon to help in dragging the sledge over an obstacle, and the difficulties of the way afterwards occupied his attention.

By and by they found clearer ground and made good progress until late in the afternoon when, seeing a rocky spur running out from the hillside, they headed for it to look for a sheltered camping place. There was still some daylight, but a cold wind had sprung up, blowing the loose snow into their faces, and when, as they neared the spur, the dogs swerved as if attracted by something, the half-breed struck the nearest beast and drove them on.

"That was curious," said Private Walthew. "It was old Chasseur who led them off and he's not given to playing tricks."

"A dead mink or beaver in the snow," the Sergeant suggested. "I didn't notice anything, but they've a keen scent. Anyhow, let's get into camp."

They found a nook among the rocks and Emile loosed the dogs and threw them some frozen fish while the rest made supper. It was a heavy, lowering evening, and the bitter air was filled with the murmur of the spruces as the wind passed over them. Though the light was fading, they kept their sharpness of outline, rising, black and ragged, from a sweep of chill, lifeless grey. When the meal was nearly finished, Lane looked round the camp.

"Where are the dogs?" he asked. "They're very quiet."

"I leaf zem la bas," said Emile, waving his hand towards a neighbouring hollow. Then moving a few paces forward he exclaimed: "Ah! les coquins!"

"Looks as if they'd bolted," Walthew remarked. "I think I know where to find them."

He left the camp with Emile and presently the others heard the half-breed threatening the dogs; then Walthew's voice reached them and there was a hoarse and urgent tone in it. Springing up, they ran back along the trail and found Emile keeping off the dogs while Walthew bent over a dark object that lay half revealed in the clawed up snow. At first Harding saw only a patch or two of ragged fur that looked as if it belonged to an animal; then with a shock he caught the outline of a man's shoulder and arm. The rest of the party gathered round, breathless after their haste, and when Lane spoke there was grave authority in his voice.

"Give me a hand, boys. We have to get him out."

They did so with mingled compassion and reluctance, though Harding was sensible of a curious strained expectation, and soon the body lay clear of the snow. The dim light fell on the frozen face and Blake started.

"It's Clarke!" he cried.

"Sure," said Harding gravely. "I'm not surprised."

"Then you knew him?" Lane's tone was sharp.

"Yes," Benson interposed, "I knew him pretty well. He lived at Sweetwater, where we're

going. I can give you any particulars you want."

"I'll ask you later." The Sergeant knelt down and carefully studied the dead man's pose before he added: "Looks as if he'd been caught in the blizzard and died of exposure; but that's a thing I've got to ascertain. I'll want somebody's help in getting him out of this big coat."

None of them volunteered, but when Lane gave Walthew a sharp order Blake and Harding joined them and the latter afterwards held the fur coat. Blake noticed that he folded and arranged it on his arm with what seemed needless care, though he first turned his back upon the others. Lane was now engaged in examining the body and the others stood watching him, impressed by the scene. All round the narrow opening the spruces rose darkly against the threatening sky, and in its midst the Sergeant bent over the still form. It made a dark blot on the pale glimmer of the snow and the white patch of the face was faintly distinguishable in the fading light. The spruce tops stirred, shaking down loose snow, which fell with a soft patter, and the wind blew trails of it about.

"I can find nothing wrong," Lane said at last.

"Considering that you came across the man lying frozen after one of the worst storms you remember, what did you expect to find?" Harding asked.

"Well," said the Sergeant drily, "it's my duty to make investigations. Though I didn't think it likely, there might have been a knife cut or a bullet hole. Now one of you had better bring up the sledge. We can't break this ground without dynamite, but there are some loose rocks along the foot of the spur."

The sledge was brought and Clarke gently placed on it, wrapped in his fur coat, after which they took the traces and started for the ridge, where they built up a few stones above the hollow in which they laid him. It was quite dark when they had finished, and Lane made a gesture of relief.

"Well," he said, "that's done and he'll lie safely there. Rough on him, but it's a hard country and many a good man has left his bones in it. I guess we'll get back to camp."

They crossed the snow in silence, trailing the empty sledge and for a time after they reached camp nobody spoke. Lane sat near the fire where the light fell upon the book in which he wrote with a pencil held awkwardly in his mittened hand, while Blake watched him and mused. He had no cause to regret Clarke's death, but he felt some pity for the man. Gifted with high ability he had, through no fault of his own, been driven out of a profession he was keenly interested in and made an outcast. His subsequent life had been a hard and evil one, but it had ended in a tragic manner and, what made this more impressive, Blake and his companions had narrowly escaped his fate. In spite of the cheerful fire, the camp had a lonely air, and Blake shivered as he glanced at the gleaming snow and dusky trees that shut it in. There was something in the desolate North that daunted him.

Harding's reflections also centred on the dead man, and he had food for thought. There was a mystery to be explained, and he imagined that he had a clue to it in his pocket, though he could not follow it up for the present. He waited with some anxiety until Lane closed his book.

"Now," said the Sergeant, "there are one or two points I want explained, and as you know the man, it's possible you can help me. How did he come to be here with only about three days' rations?"

"I can answer that," said Harding. "He was in the habit of staying at the Indian village we told you of. We saw tracks coming from it when we were there the day before the blizzard began."

"A white man's tracks? Why did you go to the village?"

"I believe they were," Blake replied. "We went to look for provisions and didn't get them, because the place was empty."

"Then how do you account for the fellow's being there alone?"

"I can't account for it," Blake said quietly.

Lane turned to Harding, who had a theory but was not prepared to communicate it to the police.

"It's certainly curious," he remarked.

"We'll start for the village to-morrow."

"As the Indians are away, there won't be much to be learned," Benson suggested.

"They may have come back. Anyway, it's my business to find out all I can."

Soon afterwards they went to sleep and rising an hour or two before daylight broke camp and turned back across the hills. The march was rough and toilsome, and when they camped at night

fatigue and drowsiness checked conversation, but Blake's party were sensible of a difference in Lane's manner. It had become reserved and he had a thoughtful look. Reaching the village one evening, they were surprised to find that some of the Indians had returned and after supper Lane summoned them into the tepee he occupied. Emile interpreted, but he had some difficulty in making himself understood, for which Harding was inclined to be thankful.

The Sergeant began by explaining the authority and business of the North-West Police, of whom it appeared one or two of the Indians had heard, after which he made Emile ask them if they knew Clarke. One of them said they did and added that he stayed with them now and then. Lane next asked why they took him in and the Indian hesitated.

"He was a big medicine man and cured us when we were ill," he replied.

"Do you know these white men?" Lane asked, indicating Blake's party.

An Indian declared that they had never seen them, though he added that it was known they were in the neighbourhood. Being questioned about this, he explained that about the time of Clarke's arrival one of the tribe had come in from the North, where he had met a half-breed who told him that he had travelled some distance with three white men who were going to the settlements. Knowing the country, they had calculated that the white men could not be very far off. As he heard this Harding felt anxious. He saw where Lane's questions led, and that the Sergeant meant to sift the matter thoroughly. There was not much cause to fear that he and his friends would be held responsible for Clarke's death, but he suspected things he did not wish the police to guess, and the Indians might mention having seen a white man's footprints on the occasion when he had forcibly taken Clarke away. Owing perhaps to their difficulty in making themselves understood, nothing was, however, said of this, and by and by Lane asked—

"How was it you left the white man in your village by himself?"

The Indians began to talk to one another, and it was with some trouble Emile at length elicited an answer.

"It is a thing that puzzles us," said one. "The white man came alone and told us he had seen tracks of caribou three days' journey back. As we had no meat and our fish was nearly done, six of us went to look for the deer."

"Six of you?" said Lane. "Where are the rest? These tepees would hold a good many people."

"They are hunting farther North," answered the man. "When we got to the place the white man told us of we could see no caribou tracks. As he was a good hunter, we thought this strange, but we went on, because there was another muskeg like the one he spoke of and we might not have understood him. Then the snow came and we camped until it was over and afterwards came back, finding no deer. When we reached the tepees, he had gone and we do not know what has become of him. We could not follow because the snow had covered his trail."

"He is dead," Lane told them. "I found him frozen some days ago."

Their surprise was obviously genuine and Lane was quick to notice signs of regret. He imagined that Clarke had been a person of some importance among them.

"Tell them I don't want them any more," he said to Emile, and when the Indians went out turned to Benson. "You had better give me all the information you are able about the man."

Benson told him as much as he thought judicious, after which Lane sat silent for a time. Then he said, "There is no reason to doubt that he came to his death by misadventure. I don't quite understand what led him to visit these fellows, but after all that doesn't count."

"It isn't very plain," Benson agreed. "Is there anything else you wish to know?"

"No," said Lane, looking at him steadily. "You can take it that this inquiry is closed; we'll pull out first thing to-morrow." He beckoned Walthew. "Now we're here, we may as well find out what we can about these fellows and how they live. It will fill up our report, and they like that kind of information at Regina."

When the police had left the tepee Harding turned to his companions with a smile. "Sergeant Lane is a painstaking officer, but his shrewdness has its limits, and there are points he seems to have missed. It would have been wiser not to have let Clarke's coat out of his hands until he had searched it."

"Ah!" said Blake sharply. "You emptied the pockets?"

"I did; I allow my action was hardly justifiable, but I thought it better that the police shouldn't get on the track of matters that haven't much bearing on Clarke's death. I found two things and they're both of interest to us. We'll take this one first."

He drew out a metal flask and when he unstoppered it a pungent smell pervaded the tepee. "Crude petroleum," he explained. "I should imagine the flashpoint is low. I can't say how Clarke got the stuff when the ground's hard frozen, but here it is."

"Isn't a low flash-point a disadvantage?" Benson asked. "It must make the oil explosive."

"It does, but all petroleum's refined and the by-products they take off, which include gasoline, fetch a remarkably good price. Shake a few drops on the end of a hot log and we'll see how it lights."

A fire burned in a ring of stones in the middle of the tepee and Benson carefully did as he was told. Hardly had the oil fallen on the wood than it burst into flame.

"As I thought!" said Harding. "I suspect the presence of one or two distillates that should be worth as much as the kerosene. We'll get the stuff analysed later, but you had better stopper the flask, because we don't want the smell to rouse Lane's curiosity. The important point is that as I've reasons for believing the oil is fresh from the ground, Clarke must have found it shortly before the blizzard overtook him. That fixes the locality and we shouldn't have much trouble in striking the spot when we come back again." His eyes sparkled as he concluded: "It's going to be well worth while; this is a big thing."

Blake did not feel much elation. His was not a mercenary nature, and he had all along thought his comrade too sanguine, though he meant to back him.

"In a way, it was very hard luck for Clarke," he said. "If you're right in your conclusions, he's been searching for the oil for several years, and now he was cut off just when it looks as if he'd found it."

"You don't owe him much pity. What would have happened if we hadn't met the police?"

"It's unpleasant to think of. No doubt we'd have starved to death."

"A sure thing!" said Harding. "It hasn't struck you that this was what he meant us to do?"

Blake started. "Are you making a bold guess, or have you any ground for what you're saying?"

"I see you'll have to be convinced. Very well; in the first place, the man would have stuck at nothing, and I've already tried to show you that he'd something to gain by Benson's death." He turned to the latter. "I suspected when we took you away from him that you were running a risk."

"I was running a bigger one before that, if you can call a thing a risk when the result's inevitable," Benson rejoined. "The pace I was going would have killed me in another year or two, and even now I'm half afraid——" He paused for a few moments with sombre face and knitted brows; and then resumed thoughtfully: "I believe you're right, Harding, but you haven't told us how he proposed to get rid of me."

"I'm coming to that. There was, however, another member of this party who was in his way, and he made his plans to remove you both."

"You mean me?" Blake broke in. "It's possible, but I don't altogether see how he'd profit."

"First, let's look at what he did. As soon as he reached the village he heard that we had started from the Hudson's Bay post. It wouldn't be difficult to calculate how long the stores we could carry would last, and he'd see that the chances were in favour of our calling at the village for provisions. Presuming on that, he sent his friends away to look for caribou which they couldn't find. Recollect that they owned to being puzzled because he was a good hunter. Then he cleared out by himself, but I believe that if there was any food left in the place he carefully hid it."

The others felt that their comrade was taking something for granted, but they believed his suspicions were correct. They, however, made no comment, and Harding went on, looking at Blake—

"Now I'll show you how he would have profited. I found this in his pocket."

He took out a letter which he gave to Blake, and the latter started as he recognized the writing. It was from Colonel Challoner to Clarke.

"You had better read the thing; it's justifiable," Benson remarked.

Blake read it aloud, holding the paper near the fire with the light upon his face, which looked very grim.

"'In reply to your letter, I have nothing new to say and believe I have already made my intentions plain. It would be useless for you to trouble me with any further proposals.'"

Then Blake folded the letter and put it into his pocket.

"Now," he said, "I think I see. The man had been trying to bleed the Colonel and got his answer."

"Is that all?" Harding asked.

"Well," said Blake, "I believe it proves your conclusions right. I won't go into particulars, but where my uncle and cousin are threatened I'm, so to speak, the leading witness for the defence and it wouldn't have suited Clarke to let me speak. No doubt, that's why he took rather drastic measures to put me out of the way."

"Then you never mean to question the story of the Indian affair?"

"What do you know about it?" Blake asked curtly.

Harding laughed. "I believe I know the true one. Haven't I marched and starved and shared my plans with you? If there had been any meanness in you wouldn't I have found it out? What's more, Benson knows what really happened and so does Colonel Challoner. How else could Clarke have put the screw on him?"

"He doesn't seem to have made much impression; you have heard the Colonel's answer." Blake frowned. "We'll drop this subject. If Challoner attached any importance to what you think Clarke told him, his first step would have been to send for me."

"I expect you'll find a letter waiting for you at Sweetwater," Harding rejoined.

Blake did not answer, and soon afterwards Sergeant Lane came in with Walthew.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A MATTER OF DUTY

Sergeant Lane sat by the camp fire in a straggling bluff, a notebook in his hand, while Emile repacked a quantity of provisions, the weight of which they had been carefully estimating. The scattered trees were small and let the cold wind in, for the party had now reached the edge of the plain where the poplars began to grow. The Sergeant's brows were knitted, for the calculations he had made were not reassuring.

"The time we lost turning back to the Stony village has made a big hole in our grub," he said. "Guess we'll have to cut the menoo down and do a few more miles a day."

"Our party's used to that," Blake answered with a smile. "I suggest another plan. You have brought us a long way and Sweetwater's a bit off your line. Suppose you give us food enough to last us on half rations and let us push on."

"No, sir," said Lane decidedly; "we see this trip through together. For another thing, the dogs are playing out and after the way they've served us I want to save them. With your help at the traces we make better time."

Blake could not deny this. The snow had been in bad condition for the last week, and the men had relieved each other in hauling the sledge. The police camp equipment was heavy, but it could not be thrown away, because they preferred some degree of hunger to lying awake at nights, half frozen. Moreover, neither Blake nor his comrades desired to leave their new friends and once more face the rigours of the wilds alone.

"Then we'll have to make the best speed we can," he said.

They talked about the journey still before them for another hour. It was a clear night and very cold, but with a crescent moon in the sky and no wind stirring. The fragile twigs of the birches which shot up among the poplars were still, and deep silence brooded over the wide stretch of snow. By and by Emile looked up with his face towards the south.

"Ah!" he said; "you hear somet'ing?"

They did not, though they listened hard, but the half-breed had been born in the wilderness and they could not think him mistaken. For a minute or two his pose suggested strained attention, and then he smiled.

"White man come from the sout'. Mais oui! He come, sure t'ing."

Lane nodded. "I guess he's right, but I can't figure on the kind of outfit."

Then Blake heard a sound which puzzled him. It was not the quick patter of a dog-team or the sliding fall of netted shoes. The noise was dull and heavy, and as he knew the snow would deaden it, whoever was coming could not be far away.

"Bob-sled!" Emile exclaimed with scorn. "V'la la belle chose! Arrive the great horse of the

plough."

"The fellow's sure a farmer since he's coming up with a Clydesdale team," Lane said, laughing. "One wouldn't have much trouble in following his trail."

A few minutes later three men appeared, carefully leading two big horses through the trees.

"Saw your fire a piece back," said one, when they had hauled up a clumsy sled. Then he caught sight of Blake. "I'm mighty glad to find you; we were wondering how far we might have to go."

"Then you came up after me, Tom?" said Blake, who knew the man. "You wouldn't have got much further with that team; but who sent you?"

"I don't quite know. It seems Gardner got orders from somebody that you were to be found, and he hired me and the boys. We'd trouble in getting here, but we allowed we could bring up more grub and blankets on the sled and we'd send Jake back with the team when we struck the thick bush. Then we were going to make a depot and pack along the stuff we didn't cache. But I've a letter which may tell you something."

Blake opened it and Harding noticed that his face grew intent, but he put the letter into his pocket and turned to the man.

"It's from a friend in England," he said. "You were lucky in finding me and we'll go back together in the morning."

After attending to their horses, the new arrivals joined the others at the fire and explained that at the hotelkeeper's suggestion they had meant to head for the Indian village and make inquiries on their way up at the logging camp. Though Blake talked to them, he had a preoccupied look, and Harding knew he was thinking of the letter. He had, however, no opportunity of questioning him and waited until next day, when Emile, whom they were helping, chose a shorter way across a ravine than that taken by the police and the men with the bob-sled. When they reached the bottom of the hollow, Blake told the half-breed to stop, and took his comrades aside.

"There's something I must tell you," he said. "It was Colonel Challoner who sent the boys up from the settlement with food for us and he begs me to come home at once. That's a point on which I'd like your opinion, but you shall hear what he has to say." Then, sitting down upon a log, he began to read from his letter:—

"'A man called Clarke, whom you have evidently met, lately called on me and suggested an explanation of the Indian affair. As the price of his keeping silence on the subject, he demanded that I should take a number of shares in a syndicate he is forming for the exploitation of some petroleum wells.'"

"I think it was a good offer," Harding interposed. "Clarke must have had reason for believing he was about to make a big strike; he'd have kept quiet until he was sure of the thing."

"'The fellow's story was plausible,' Blake continued reading. 'It seems possible that you have been badly wronged, and I have been troubled——' He omitted the next few lines and went on: 'As it happens, another account of the frontier action had been given me some time earlier by a lady who has been in India. It differed from Clarke's in one or two details, but agreed in exonerating you; and she also asked a price which I declined to pay. After giving the matter careful thought, I feel that these people may have hit upon the truth. It would, of course, afford me the keenest satisfaction to see you cleared, but the thing must be thoroughly sifted because ——'"

Blake stopped and added quietly: "He insists upon my going home."

"His difficulty is obvious," Benson remarked. "If you are blameless, his son must be guilty. I arrived at the former conclusion some time ago."

Blake, who did not answer, sat musing with a disturbed expression. There was now no sign of the others, who had left the ravine, and no sound reached the men from the plain above. Emile stood patiently waiting some distance off, and though they were sheltered from the wind it was bitterly cold.

"In some ways, it might be better if I went home at once," he said at last. "I could come back and join you as soon as I saw how things were going. The Colonel would be safe from any further persecution if I were with him, but, all the same, I'm inclined to stay away."

"Why?" Harding asked.

"For one thing, if I were there, he might insist on taking some quite unnecessary course that would only cause trouble."

"Now," said Harding curtly, "I'm going to give you my opinion. I take it that your uncle is a man who tries to do the square thing?"

Blake's face relaxed and his eyes twinkled. "He's what you call white and as obstinate as they're made. Convince him that a thing's right and he'll see it done, no matter how many people it makes uncomfortable. That's why I don't see my way to encourage him."

"Here's a man who's up against a point of honour; he has, I understand, a long, clean record and now he's prepared to take a course that may cost him dear. Are you going to play a low-down game on him; to twist the truth so's to give him a chance of deceiving himself?"

"Aren't you and Benson taking what you mean by the truth too much for granted?"

Harding gave him a searching look. "I haven't heard you deny it squarely; you're a poor liar. It's your clear duty to go back to England right away and see your uncle through with the thing he means to do."

"After all, I'll go to England," Blake answered with significant reserve. "However, we had better get on or we won't catch the others until they've finished dinner."

Emile started the dogs, and when they had toiled up the ascent they saw the rest of the party far ahead on the great white plain.

"We mayn't have another chance of a private talk until we reach the settlement," said Blake. "What are you going to do about the petroleum?"

"I'll come back and prospect the muskeg as soon as the frost goes."

"It will cost a good deal to do that thoroughly. We must hire transport for a full supply of all the tools and stores we are likely to need; one experience of the kind we've had this trip is enough. How are you going to get the money?"

"I'm not going to the city men for it until our position's secure. The thing must be kept quiet until we're ready to put it on the market."

"You were doubtful about taking me for a partner once," Benson interposed. "I don't know that I could blame you, but now I mean to do all I can to make the scheme successful, and I don't think you'll have as much reason for being afraid that I might fail you."

"Call it a deal," said Harding. "You're the man we want."

"Well," said Blake, "I ought to be out again before you start, and if I can raise any money in England, I'll send it over. You're satisfied that this is a project I can recommend to my friends?"

"I believe it's such a chance as few people ever get," Harding answered in a tone of firm conviction.

"Then we'll see what can be done. It won't be your fault if the venture fails."

Harding smiled. "There's hard work and perhaps some trouble ahead, but you won't regret you faced it. You'll be a rich man in another year or two."

Then Emile urged the dogs, and they set off after the others as fast as they could go. Sweetwater was safely reached, but on the morning after his arrival there Blake pushed on south for the railroad with the police and a week later caught a steamer in Montreal. On landing, he took the first train to Shropshire, but before going on to Sandymere called at Hazlehurst, where he had learned that Mrs. Keith was staying.

As it happened, Mrs. Keith was out with Mrs. Foster, and Millicent was the first to welcome him. She started when he was shown into the hall, and, dropping the book she was reading, rose with a tingle of heightened colour, while he felt his heart beat fast. It was a clear winter afternoon and the sunshine that entered a window fell upon the girl. Blake thought she looked very beautiful, and, thrown off her guard as she had been, he caught the gladness in her eyes before she could hide it.

"I expect you are surprised at my turning up," he remarked.

"Yes," she said with a shyness she could not overcome. "Indeed I was startled when you came in, but of course it's pleasant to see you safely back. I knew Colonel Challoner had given orders for you to be traced if possible, and that you had been found, but that was all Mrs. Keith told me. I suppose she didn't know—didn't think, I mean—that I was interested."

"I'd like to believe that was foolish of her," Blake answered with a twinkle.

Millicent laughed; though she felt that his rejoinder did not adequately express his feelings, his humorous manner set her at ease.

"It really was foolish," she said, smiling. "But you must have some tea and wait until she comes. I don't think she will be long."

The tea was brought, and she studied him unobtrusively as he sat opposite her at the small

table. He had grown thin, his bronzed face was worn, and he looked graver than he had done. Though she could not imagine his ever becoming very solemn, it was obvious that something had happened in Canada which had had its effect on him. Looking up suddenly from his plate, he surprised her attentive glance.

"You have changed," she said.

"That's not astonishing," Blake replied. "We didn't get much to eat in the wilds, and I was thinking how pleasant it is to be back again." He examined his prettily decorated cup. "It's remarkable how many things one can do without. In the bush, we drank our tea, when we had any, out of a blackened can and the rest of our table equipment was to match. But we'll take it that the change in me is an improvement?"

It was an excuse for looking at her, as if demanding a reply, but she answered readily: "In a sense, it is."

"Then I feel encouraged to continue starving myself."

"There's a limit; extremes are to be avoided," Millicent rejoined. "But did you starve yourselves in Canada?"

"I must confess that the thing wasn't altogether voluntary. I'm afraid we were rather gluttonous when we got the chance."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No," said Blake, who saw that she was interested. "I think it was a serious disappointment for Harding, and I was very sorry for him at first."

"So am I," said Millicent. "It must have been very hard, after leaving his wife alone and badly provided for and risking everything on his success. But why did you say you *were* sorry for him? Aren't you sorry now?"

"Though we didn't find what we were looking for, we found something else which Harding seems firmly convinced is quite as valuable. Of course, he's a bit of an optimist, but it looks as if he were right this time. Anyway, I'm plunging on his scheme."

"You mean you will stake all you have on it?"

"That's it," Blake agreed with a humorous twinkle. "It's true that what I have doesn't amount to much, but I'm throwing in what I would like to get, and that's a great deal."

There was something of a hint in his manner and she noticed his expression suddenly grow serious. It seemed advisable to choose another topic and she said: "You must have had adventures. Tell me about them."

"Oh!" he protested, "they're really not interesting."

"Let me judge. Is it nothing to have gone where other men seldom venture?"

He began rather awkwardly, but she prompted him with tactful questions, and he saw that she wished to hear his story. By degrees he lost himself in his subject and, being gifted with keen imagination, she followed his journey into the wilds. It was not his wish to represent himself as a hero, and now and then he spoke with deprecatory humour, but he betrayed something of his character in doing justice to his theme. Millicent's eyes sparkled as she listened, for she found the story moving; he was the man she had thought him, capable of grim endurance, determined action, and steadfast loyalty.

"So you carried your crippled comrade when you were exhausted and starving," she said when he came to their search for the factory. "One likes to hear of such things as that! But what would you have done if you hadn't found the post?"

"I can't answer," he said soberly. "We durst not think of it; a starving man's will gets weak." Then his expression grew whimsical. "Besides, if one must be accurate, we dragged him."

"Still," said Millicent softly, "I can't think you would have left him."

He looked at her with some embarrassment and then smiled. "I'm flattered, Miss Graham, but you really haven't very strong grounds for your confidence in me."

Supposing he was thinking of his disgrace, she made a gesture of half scornful impatience.

"Well," she said, "please go on with the tale."

The rest of it had its interest, though he made no reference to Clarke's treachery, and Millicent listened with close attention. It was growing dark, but they had forgotten to ring for lights; neither of them heard the door open when he was near the conclusion, and Mrs. Keith, entering quietly with Mrs. Foster, stopped a moment in surprise. The room was shadowy, but she

could see the man leaning forward with an arm upon the table and the girl's intent face. There was something that pleased her in the scene. Then as she moved forward Millicent looked up quickly and Blake rose.

"So you have come back," said Mrs. Keith, giving him her hand. "How was it you didn't go straight to Sandymere, where your uncle is eagerly waiting you?"

"I sent him a telegram as soon as the steamer was boarded, but on landing found there was an earlier train. As he won't expect me for another two hours, I thought I'd like to pay my respects to you."

"It sounds plausible," Mrs. Keith rejoined with rather dry amusement. "Well, I'm flattered, and as it happens I've something to say to you."

Then Mrs. Foster joined them, and it was some time later when Mrs. Keith took Blake into the empty drawing-room.

"I'm glad you have come home," she said. "I think you are needed."

"That," said Blake, "is how it seemed to me."

His quietness was reassuring. Mrs. Keith knew he was to be trusted, but she felt some misgivings about supporting him in a line of action that would cost him much. Still, she could not be deterred by compassionate scruples when there was an opportunity of saving her old friend from suffering. Troubled by a certain sense of guilt but determined, she tried to test his feelings.

"You didn't find waiting for us tedious," she remarked. "I suppose you were telling Millicent about your adventures when we came in; playing Othello, and she seemed to be listening as Desdemona did."

"I expect she was exercising a good deal of patience," Blake rejoined with a laugh. "Anyway, since you compare me to the Moor, you must own that I've never pretended to be less black that I'm painted."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Keith with marked gentleness, "you needn't pretend to me. I have my own opinion about you, and if it doesn't agree with other people's, so much the worse for theirs. I knew you would come home as soon as you could be found."

"Then you must know what has been going on in my absence."

"I have a strong suspicion. Your uncle has been hard pressed by unscrupulous people with an end to gain. How much impression they have made on him I cannot tell, but he's fond of you, Dick, and in trouble. It's a cruel position for an honourable man with traditions like those of the Challoners' behind him."

"That's true; I hate to think of it. You know what I owe to him and Bertram."

"He's old," continued Mrs. Keith. "It would be a great thing if he could be allowed to spend his last years in quietness, but I fear that's impossible, although, perhaps, to some extent, it lies in your hands." Then she looked steadily at Blake. "Now you have come back, what do you mean to do?"

"Whatever is needful; I'm for the defence. The Colonel's position can't be stormed while I'm on guard; and this time there'll be no retreat."

"Don't add that, Dick; it hurts me. I'm not so hard as I sometimes pretend. I never doubted your staunchness, but I wonder whether you quite realize what the defence may cost you. Have you thought about your future?"

"You ought to know that the Blakes never think of the future. We're a happy-go-lucky, irresponsible lot."

"But suppose you wished to marry?"

He smiled at her. "It's a difficulty that has already been pointed out. If I ever marry, the girl I choose will believe in me in spite of appearances. In fact, she'll have to; I've no medals and decorations to bring her."

"You have much that's worth more!" Mrs. Keith exclaimed, moved by his steadfastness. "Still, it's a severe test for any girl." Then she laid her hand gently on his arm. "In the end, you won't regret the course you mean to take. I have lived a long while and have lost many pleasant illusions, but I believe that loyalty like yours has its reward. I loved you for your mother's sake when you were a boy; afterwards when things looked blackest I kept my faith in you, and now I'm proud I did so."

Blake looked confused. "Confidence like yours is an embarrassing gift. It makes one feel one must live up to it, and that isn't easy."

Mrs. Keith regarded him affectionately. "It's yours, Dick; given without reserve. But I think there's nothing more to be said, and no doubt you're anxious to get away. Besides, the Colonel will be expecting you."

"He used to be seriously annoyed if he had to wait for dinner, and I've been here some time," Blake answered, laughing, and went out to take leave of Mrs. Foster.

CHAPTER XXIX

BLAKE HOLDS HIS GROUND

Dinner was finished at Sandymere, Miss Challoner had gone out, and, in accordance with ancient custom, the cloth had been removed from the great mahogany table. Its glistening surface was only broken by a decanter, two choice wine-glasses, and a tall silver candlestick. There were lamps in other parts of the room, but Challoner liked candles. Lighting a cigar, Blake looked about while he braced himself for the ordeal that must be faced.

He knew the big room well, but its air of solemnity, with which the heavy Georgian furniture was in keeping, impressed him. The ceiling had been decorated by a French artist of the eighteenth century and the faded delicacy of the design, bearing as it did the stamp of its period, helped to give the place a look of age. Challoner could trace his descent much further than his house and furniture suggested, but the family had first come to the front in the East India Company's wars, and while maintaining its position afterwards had escaped the modernizing influence of the country's awakening in the early Victorian days. It seemed to Blake, fresh from the new and democratic West, that his uncle, shrewd and well-informed man as he was, was very much of the type of Wellington's officers. For all that he pitied him. Challoner looked old and worn, and there were wrinkles that hinted at anxious thought round his eyes. His life was lonely, and his unmarried sister, who spent much of her time in visits, was the only relative who shared his home. Now that age was limiting his activities and interests, he had one great source of gratification; the career of the soldier son who was worthily following in his steps. His nephew determined that this should be saved for him, as he remembered the benefits he had received at his hands.

By and by Challoner filled the glasses. "Dick," he said, "I'm very glad to see you home. I should like to think you have come to stay."

"Thank you, sir. I'll stay as long as you need me."

"I feel I need you altogether. It's now doubtful whether Bertram will leave India after all. His regiment has been ordered into the hills where there's serious trouble brewing, and he has asked permission to remain. Even if he comes home, he will have many duties, and I have nobody left."

Blake did not answer immediately, and his uncle studied him. Dick had grown thin, but he looked very hard, and the evening dress set off his fine, muscular figure. His face was still somewhat pinched, but its deep bronze and the steadiness of his eyes and firmness of his lips gave him a very soldierly look and a certain air of distinction. There was no doubt that he was true to the Challoner type.

Then Blake said slowly, "I must go back sooner or later, sir; there is an engagement I am bound to keep. Besides, your pressing me to stay raises a question. The last time we met you acquiesced in my decision that I had better keep out of the country, and I see no reason for changing it."

"The question must certainly be raised; that is why I sent for you. You can understand my anxiety to learn what truth there is in the stories I have heard."

"It might be better if you told me all about it."

"Very well; the task is painful, but it can't be shirked. We'll take the woman's tale first." Challoner carefully outlined Mrs. Chudleigh's theory of what had happened during the night attack and Blake listened quietly.

"Now," he said, "you might give me Clarke's account."

Challoner did so and concluded: "Both these people have an obvious end to serve, and I daresay they're capable of misrepresenting things to suit it. I'll confess I found the thought comforting; but I want the truth, Dick. I must do what's right."

"In the first place, Clarke, who once approached me about the matter, will never trouble either of us again. I helped to bury him up in the wilds."

"Dead!" exclaimed Challoner.

"Frozen. In fact, it was not his fault we escaped his fate. He set a trap for us, intending that we should starve."

"But why?"

"His motive was obvious," Blake rejoined. "There was a man with us whose farm and stock would, in the event of his death, fall into Clarke's hands, and it's clear that I was a serious obstacle in his way. Can't you see that he couldn't use his absurd story to bleed you unless I supported it?"

Challoner felt the force of this. He was a shrewd man, but just then he was too disturbed to reason closely and failed to perceive that his nephew's refusal to confirm the story did not necessarily disprove it. That Clarke had thought it worth while to attempt his life bulked most largely in his uncle's eye.

"He urged me to take some shares in a petroleum syndicate," he remarked.

"Then I believe you missed a good thing, sir." Blake seized upon the change of topic. "The shares would probably have paid you well."

"I thought he proposed it to make the thing look better; in fact, to give me something to salve my conscience with."

"Anyway, he found the oil and put us on the track of it, though I don't suppose he had any wish to do the latter. We expect to make a good deal out of the discovery."

"It looks like justice," said Challoner. "But we are getting away from the point. I'd better tell you that after my talk with the man I felt he might be dangerous and that I must send for you."

"Why didn't you send for Bertram?"

Challoner hesitated. "When I cabled out instructions to find you, there was no word of his leaving India; then you must see how hard it would have been to hint at my suspicions. This would have opened a breach between us that could never be closed."

"Yes," said Blake, leaning forward on the table and speaking earnestly, "your reluctance was very natural. I'm afraid of presuming too far, but I can't understand how you could believe this thing of your only son."

"It lies between my son and my nephew, Dick."

There was emotion in the Colonel's voice. "I had a great liking for your father and I brought you up. Then I took a keen pride in you; there were respects in which I found you truer to our type than Bertram."

"You heaped favours on me," Blake replied. "That I bitterly disappointed you has been my deepest shame; in fact, it's the one thing that counts. For the rest, I can't regret the friends who turned their backs on me, and poverty never troubled the Blakes."

"But the taint—the stain upon your name!"

"I have the advantage of bearing it alone, and, to tell the truth, it doesn't bother me much. That a man should go straight in the present is all they ask in Canada, and homeless adventurers with no possessions, which is the kind of comrades I've generally met, are charitable. As a rule, it wouldn't become them to be fastidious. Anyhow, sir, you must see the absurdity of believing that Bertram could have failed in his duty in the way these tales suggest."

"I once felt that strongly; the trouble is that the objection applies with equal force to you. Your mother had a resolute character; your father was a daring man."

Blake coloured as he answered: "I'm glad you mentioned this; my parents can't be held responsible for my faults. You must know that rather surprising variations are apt to appear in a family strain. It's possible I'm what gardeners call a sport; a throwback to some inferior type. There may have been a weakling even among the Challoners."

"I have dreaded that there was one in the present generation," the Colonel answered with stern gravity. "But we get no farther. Do you deny the stories these people have told me?"

Blake felt that his task was hard. He had to convict himself and must do so logically, since Challoner was by no means a fool. As he nerved himself to the effort he was conscious of a rather grim amusement.

"I think it would be better if I tried to show you how the attack was made. Is the old set of Indian chessmen still in the drawer?"

"I believe so. It must be twenty years since they were taken out. It's strange you should

remember them."

A stirring of half-painful emotions troubled Blake.

He loved the old house and all that it contained and had a deep-seated pride in the Challoner traditions. Now he must show that he was a degenerate scion of the honoured stock and could have no part in them.

"I have forgotten nothing at Sandymere, but we must stick to the subject." Crossing the floor he came back with the chessmen, which he carefully arranged, setting up the white pawns in two separate ranks to represent bodies of infantry, with the knights and bishops for officers. The coloured pieces he placed in an irregular mass.

"Now," he continued, "this represents the disposition of our force pretty well, and I've good reason for remembering it. I was here, at the top of the ravine"—he laid a cigar on the table to indicate the spot—"Bertram on the ridge yonder. This bunch of red pawns stands for the Ghazee rush."

"It agrees with what I've heard," said Challoner, surveying the roughly marked scene of battle with critical eyes. "You were weak in numbers, but your position was strong. It could have been held."

"We'll take Mrs. Chudleigh's suggestion first." Blake began to move the pieces. "The Ghazees rolled straight over our first line; my mine, which might have checked them, wouldn't go off; a broken circuit in the firing wires, I suppose. We were hustled out of the trenches; it was too dark for effective rifle fire."

"The trench the second detachment held should have been difficult to rush."

"Oh! well," said Blake, "you must remember that the beggars were Ghazees; they're hard to stop. Then our men were worn out and had been sniped every night for the last week or two. However, the bugler's the key to my explanation; I'll put this dab of cigar ash here to represent him. This bishop's Bertram, and you can judge by the distance whether the fellow could have heard the order to blow, 'Cease fire,' through the row that was going on."

He resumed his quick moving of the chessmen, accompanying it by a running commentary. "Here's another weak point in the woman's tale, which must be obvious to any one who has handled troops; these fellows couldn't have gained a footing in this hollow because it was raked by our fire. There was no cover and the range was short. Then you see the folly of believing that the section with which the bugler was could have moved along the ridge; they couldn't have crossed between the Ghazees and the trench. They'd have been exposed to our own fire in the rear."

He added more to much the same effect, and concluded: "I think that disposes of Mrs. Chudleigh's theory."

Challoner made a sign of agreement without speaking, and Blake, lighting a fresh cigar, leaned back in his chair. He believed he had succeeded so far, but he was feeling the strain.

"Now I'll deal with Clarke's suggestion; it's certainly ingenious," he said presently and began to rearrange the chessmen.

Proceeding much as he had already done, he followed the movements of the pieces with short explanations, and when he finally swept them up into a heap looked hard at his companion.

"I think you ought to be convinced," he said.

"It all turns upon the bugler's movements," Challoner remarked.

"And he was killed. Mrs. Chudleigh's account presupposes that he was in one place, Clarke's in another, while I've tried to show you that he couldn't have been in either."

Challoner was silent for a time and Blake watched him anxiously until he looked up.

"I think you have succeeded, Dick, though I feel that with a trifling alteration here and there you could have cleared yourself. Now we'll let the painful matter drop for good, unless, indeed, some fresh light is ever thrown on it."

"That can't happen," Blake replied and added with a gleam of humour: "As a matter of fact, I'd sooner remain in friendly obscurity."

Challoner rose and laid a hand on his arm. "If you were once at fault, you have since shown yourself a man of honour. Though the thing hurt me at the time, I'm glad you are my nephew. Had there been any baseness in you, some suspicion must always have rested on your cousin. Well, we are neither of us sentimentalists, but I must say that you have amply made amends."

He turned away and Blake went out into the open air to walk up and down. The face of the old house rose above him, dark against the clear night sky; in front the great oaks in the park

rolled back in shadowy masses. Blake, who loved Sandymere, had thought of it often in his wanderings, and now he was glad that through his action his cousin would enjoy it without reproach. After all, it was some return to make for the favours he had received. For himself there remained the charm of the lonely trail and the wide wilderness, unless, indeed, Harding succeeded better than Blake really expected with his petroleum exploitation scheme.

For all that, he had been badly tempted. Poverty and disgrace were serious obstacles to marriage, and had he been free to do so, he would eagerly have sought the hand of Millicent Graham. He knew now that he loved her and it was hard to hold his longing for her in check, but while this must be done for the present he did not altogether despair. He was hopeful and believed that if she loved him, she would not shrink from his painful story, while it was possible that another of his disadvantages might be removed. Harding was confident that they were going to be rich. Thinking about the girl tenderly, he walked up and down the terrace until he grew calm, and then went in to talk to Miss Challoner.

The next fortnight passed uneventfully and then one afternoon he met Millicent in a field-path and turned back with her to Hazlehurst. It was a raw day and the wind had brought a fine colour into her face, while she wore a little fur cap and fur-trimmed jacket which he thought became her very well.

"You have not been over often; Foster was remarking about it," she said to him.

"That's true," said Blake, who had kept away for fear of his resolution melting if he saw much of her. "Still, my uncle seems to think he has a prior claim, and I mayn't be able to stay with him long."

"Then you are going back to Canada?" The quick way the girl looked up, and something in her tone, suggested unpleasant surprise, for she had been taken off her guard.

"I shall have to go when Harding needs me. I haven't heard from him since I arrived, but I'll get my summons sooner or later."

"I thought you had come home for good."

There was rueful humour but no bitterness in Blake's smile. "Oh! no; though I'm very fond of it, Sandymere is not my home. It will be Bertram's by and by and he is married. I'm the poor relation and no great credit to the family."

Millicent's colour deepened, but she looked at him steadily. "I think that is wrong. Since you have been so frank, I may perhaps say that I know there has been a serious mistake somewhere."

"I'm flattered," Blake rejoined, and something in his voice was out of keeping with his half whimsical bow. "It's nice to know your friends think well of you; but you mustn't let your good-nature get the better of your judgment."

"Perhaps I shouldn't have ventured so far." There was a hint of impatience in Millicent's gesture. "But are you content with your life in the North-West?"

"It has its charm. There are very few restrictions, one feels free. The fences haven't reached us yet; you can ride as far as you can see over miles of grass and through the clumps of bush. There's something attractive in the wide horizon; the riband of trail that seems to run forward for ever draws you on."

"But the Arctic frost and snow?"

"After all, they're bracing. Our board shacks with the big stoves in them are fairly warm, and no one can tell what developments may suddenly come about in such a country. A railroad may be run through, wheat-land opened up, minerals found, and wooden cities spring up from the empty plain. Life's rapid and strenuous; one is swept along with the stream."

"But you were in the wilds."

Blake laughed. "We were, but not far behind us the tide of population pours across the plain, and if we had stayed a year or two in the timber, it would have caught us up. That flood won't stop until it reaches the Polar Sea."

"But can people live in a rugged land covered with snow that only melts for a month or two?"

"It depends upon what they find there. So long as the country has natural resources, the climate doesn't count. One hears of precious metals and some are being mined." He paused and added in a tone of humorous confidence: "My partner believes in oil."

They were now close to Hazlehurst and Millicent could ask no more questions because as they reached the high-road Mrs. Keith joined them.

"You might go in and write the letter I told you about," she said to Millicent, and then turned to Blake. "As I want a quiet walk, Dick, I daresay you will keep me company."

Blake said he would be delighted, and when Millicent had left them remarked: "I didn't know you were given to this form of exercise."

"I may as well tell you that I came out because I couldn't take part in the meaningless chatter that was going on. As a matter of fact, I was too disturbed to stay in."

"May one ask what disturbed you?"

"Mrs. Foster's announcement that Mrs. Chudleigh is coming down again. She only heard this morning."

"You think this means a fresh attack upon my persecuted relative?"

"Judge for yourself. Mrs. Chudleigh had no pressing invitation to come back and has not been away long; after all, she and Lucy Foster are not great friends. Now she has only a flimsy excuse for the visit—I've seen her letter. Why should the woman force herself into Hazlehurst, unless it's to be within striking distance of your uncle?"

"I don't know. I suppose she couldn't have come down independently and called on him, because it would have excited remark; but that's not the question. The Colonel mustn't see her."

"How would you prevent his doing so if she goes to the house?"

"I think," said Blake, "the matter could be most effectively dealt with by letting her see me."

"An excellent plan, but if your uncle's to be kept in ignorance, it will need some arranging."

"Undoubtedly," said Blake; "that's your business."

"I suppose I must undertake it. The probability is that Mrs. Chudleigh doesn't know you are at home and she must, if possible, be kept from learning it until she sees you. As she's only down for a few days, I expect she'll make her first move to-morrow. Is your uncle going to the Croxleigh meet?"

"He is; so am I. Is there any risk of Mrs. Chudleigh's turning up at the cover?"

"I don't think so. Foster has only one spare horse, and as he promised it to Millicent I'll see she goes. I'm more afraid that Mrs. Chudleigh will make Lucy Foster take her across to Sandymere in the afternoon, and if I'm able to prevent that, she'll go alone. She has cultivated an acquaintance with your aunt."

"Well," said Blake, "it's a long way to Croxleigh, and the Colonel won't ride hard. He'll probably be satisfied with seeing the hounds throw off and then go quietly home. As it happens, there isn't a direct road."

"Where does all this lead?"

"I should imagine it will be four o'clock when he gets back, while by leaving the hunt and heading straight across country I ought to beat him by some time. In fact, I might get rid of the lady before he arrives. After she has seen me she mayn't wish to stay."

"Very well," said Mrs. Keith. "If Lucy goes to Sandymere, I'll go with them and hurry them off as soon as I can. Then I'll try to make an opportunity for you."

After a few more words she dismissed him and turned back to Hazlehurst. She thought the plan would work.

CHAPTER XXX

MRS. CHUDLEIGH'S DEFEAT

Challoner kept one or two good horses, though he no longer used them much, and he and his nephew were well mounted when they rode to Croxleigh gorse. As the place was difficult of access, the meet had been arranged late, and it was after mid-day when they drew near a broad stretch of furze on the crest of a grassy hill. Mounted men and a few women were climbing the slope, the scarlet coats shining in a gleam of light, carriages and motors were drawn up in the shelter of a beech wood, and from the summit there fell a faint blast of a horn.

It was a raw day, with a nipping wind and blinks of sunshine that swept across grass and ploughland and faded again. There were glistening pools in the narrow road and drops of moisture hung on the briars and withered fern along the hedgerows. Both Challoner and Blake were dressed in sober tweed, for the Colonel said he only wore the pink when he felt fit to follow

the hounds and now he must be content to see them find. Glancing at his watch, he pulled up his horse to a walk.

"We are in good time, and it's generally a lengthy matter getting a fox out of the gorse," he said. "Though we haven't hurried, it's rather a long way, and I feel I have done enough. Don't trouble about me when the hounds get off. I expect to pick up some elderly crony, and, if the fox does not run straight, may be able to see something of the hunt after an easy ride; then I'll jog quietly home."

"I'll stay with you, if you'd prefer it, sir," Blake declared, though this was far from his wish, but Challoner shook his head.

"Get a good run if you can, my boy. Old folks mustn't be selfish, and I know what young blood is." He turned and regarded Blake affectionately. "You have been a good nephew, Dick, and since you came home I have felt that I ought to make some provision for you. That, of course, was my intention when you were young, but when the break occurred you cut yourself adrift and refused assistance."

Blake coloured, for there were, he thought, adequate reasons why he should take no further favours from his uncle. If the truth about the frontier affair ever came out, it would look as if he had valued his honour less than the money he could extort and the Colonel would bear the stigma of having bought his silence.

"I'm grateful, sir, but I must still refuse," he said.

"But why? The property would stand the cost of the arrangement I thought of making, and Bertram wouldn't feel that I had been unfair to him; besides, his wife has means."

"Bertram's as generous as you are; he pressed me to take some help from him in Montreal, but I could not consent."

"I think you were wrong, and see I have made a mistake. I should have stuck to my first intention of saying nothing about it and putting you into my will, but it struck me that you would like to know how you stood, in case you thought of marrying or going in for farming on a remunerative scale in Canada."

"Thank you, but if my future is to be provided for, I'm the person who ought to look after it. There's no reason why it should become a charge on you."

"I think there is," Challoner rejoined. "In fact, I feel somewhat hurt that you don't see it."

Blake was touched, but his determination held. "I'm glad you made me the offer, sir, because it shows I haven't forfeited your regard. You must, however, let me have my way, particularly as I see a chance of making money."

"Then you have some plan?"

"My partner has," Blake answered, smiling. "I leave that kind of thing to him. I told you about the oil."

"You did, and Clarke had something to say upon the subject. He, however, gave me to understand that capital was needed."

"That is so," Blake replied unguardedly, for he did not see where his uncle's remark led. "Boring plant is expensive, and transport costs something. Then you have to spend a good deal beforehand if you wish to float a company."

"But you believe this venture will pay you?"

"Harding is convinced of it, and he's shrewd. Personally, I don't know enough about the business to judge, but if I had any money to risk I'd take his word for it."

"Well," said Challoner, urging his horse to a trot, "perhaps we had better get on."

They joined the company gathered round the edge of the gorse and when Challoner greeted an acquaintance Blake found what he thought was a good place for getting a start from. He could hear the cries of the huntsman and an occasional blast of his horn among the furze; once or twice a ranging dog broke cover and disappeared again. Outside, red-coated men and some in grey jammed their hats tight and tried to keep their fidgeting horses quiet. Close by a young girl, finely habited, with a glowing face, gracefully controlled her plunging mount, and a few older women seemed to have some trouble in holding their thoroughbreds. Everybody wore a strained, eager look, but Blake was disappointed, for although he looked round for Millicent and Foster he did not see them.

By and by a deep baying broke out and swelled into a burst of thrilling sound, the horn called sharply, somebody shouted, and there was a rush of well-mounted riders towards a corner of the gorse. Then the hounds streamed out, speeding across the grassy slope with a small, red-brown object travelling very fast some distance in front. Blake, who let his chestnut go, swept down the

hill at a furious gallop, and felt the horse rise and heard a thud of hoofs on sloppy ground as a fence was cleared. Then he toiled across a strip of ploughing, with firm grip on the bridle, for, exhilarating as the chase was, he could not enjoy it long. In his younger days he had hunted the country he was now riding over, he had been a crack polo player, and had covered wide stretches of the Canadian prairie in the saddle. He could feel the power of the good horse he bestrode, the speed fired his blood, and for the first few minutes he had been in danger of forgetting that the keen pleasure he was conscious of could not be enjoyed long.

There was a crash as they broke through the top of a bending hedge, he heard a rail break beneath the hoofs, and they were flying across a wide pasture, the chestnut pulling hard. It needed some strength of will to hold him, but Blake did so, keeping his place behind the foremost while the rest of the hunt tailed out. After another awkward jump or two most of the rearguard were out of sight, scattering, no doubt, in search of gates, and Blake was not pleased to find himself level with two well-mounted, red-coated men. There was a brook with a fringe of willows along its side not far ahead and, a short distance to the right, a deep, tree-shrouded hollow. This was where he must break off, but, sitting a good horse in the company of hard-riding men, it was not pleasant to look as if he shirked the leap.

"'Ware rotten bank!" cried one, glancing round at him. "Head for the pollard stump!"

"Give me a lead," Blake shouted. "You know the country."

With a strong effort, he held the chestnut back, and saw the first red-coated figure rise above the willows and alight with the mire flying among the rushes across the stream. Then he swung to the right, where he remembered there was a broad, shallow place, and drove the chestnut at its widest part. They came down with a great splash and the horse floundered badly, for the bottom was soft, but Blake had done what he meant to do, and as the second horseman leaped across a narrower spot he caught a sympathetic, "Hard luck!"

Then he turned the chestnut and scrambling out upon the bank he had left trotted to the hollow, where he was lost among the trees before the tail of the hunt came up. He thought he had withdrawn himself neatly and must now get home as soon as possible, because if his uncle saw no opportunity of picking up the hounds again after an easy ride, he might return before Mrs. Chudleigh could be dealt with.

Crossing a sunk lane by and by, Blake, who glanced at his watch, held straight across the fields, and was glad to find that the hunt-club subsidies had had some effect in determining the nature of the fences. The most part could be jumped without much trouble, but the chestnut was foul-coated and flecked with spume when at length he turned into a road. There he pulled up to a steady trot and got home, rather wet and splashed with mire, early in the afternoon, and after a bath and change felt himself ready for the encounter. He had not much diplomacy, but thought he could make up for that by stubbornly sticking to his point.

As he sat in the library with the door left open he heard Mrs. Foster and her friends arrive and recognized the voices. Mrs. Keith had come and Millicent, besides another lady whom he surmised was Mrs. Chudleigh. He hardly thought his aunt, whom he had not taken into his confidence, would mention him, and it might be better if he waited until tea was served, after which the party would probably separate and saunter about the hall and picture gallery. It was important that he should have a few words with Mrs. Chudleigh alone. Fortune favoured him, for when he entered the gallery she stood before a picture and the nearest of her companions was some yards further on. She started when he came up and joined her.

"You remember me, though I imagine my appearance is a surprise to you," he said with a bow.

"Yes," she answered calmly, though she had received something of a shock. "Nobody told me you had returned from Canada."

"There was no obvious reason for thinking you would be interested. But will you sit down? My uncle has some rather good miniatures which might please you. They're in yonder drawer."

She looked at him sharply. "You may bring them. I suppose you have something to say."

Blake placed the case of miniatures on a table and she took up one or two. "They are worth seeing, and in good French style; beauties of Marie Antoinette's court, perhaps, though this one in the high-waisted dress may have been attached to Josephine's." Then she put them down with a smile. "Now they have served their purpose. What have you to say?"

"You must excuse the bluntness which I feel is needful. You came over to see my uncle and I'm afraid you were disappointed in finding me instead."

"Suppose I admit it? That wouldn't prevent my seeing Colonel Challoner another time."

"Certainly not, provided that you still wished to do so, but I'm inclined to think you won't consider it necessary when you know what my attitude is. You must realize that a good deal depends on this."

"Yes," she said frankly, "in a sense, you're important. I see you understand the situation."

"You believe you have the power to force my uncle into furthering a plan of yours. You found him obstinate at your first attempt, but you think his resolution may since have given way."

"Yes," she said; "if I insist, he cannot refuse me."

"That is where we differ. I'm in your way, and you'll excuse my saying that you'll find me rather troublesome to remove. Then a secret loses its value when people find it out, and it's perhaps news to you that a man from Canada called upon my uncle not long since with a story very like yours. He found the Colonel no more amenable than you did."

Mrs. Chudleigh looked surprised, but that was all. "It may save us both trouble if you tell me candidly what you mean to do."

Blake glanced down the gallery. Mrs. Keith was sitting at a table with some old prints spread out before her, but as the light was fading he hardly supposed that she could see him well, though he imagined that she was watching. In the background Mrs. Foster was talking to Miss Challoner, with Millicent standing in the shadow. The Challoner portraits were growing indistinct, though their heavy gold frames glimmered faintly, and he could no longer distinguish the carving on the ends of the dark oak beams. Though he thought he was safe from interruption by any of the others, Blake realized that he had no time to lose, because Challoner must arrive soon.

"Yes," he said, "I think it would be better. Well, I mean to relieve my uncle from any further attacks of the kind you have made on him and to defend my cousin's honour. You must see that you are powerless to injure it unless I confirm your tale."

Mrs. Chudleigh clenched her hand and her eyes flashed. "You are willing to bear undeserved disgrace, to wander about Canada, an outcast from all society you could take pleasure in? It's incomprehensible, unless you have something to gain."

Blake regarded her with a tolerant smile. "My dear lady, it's obvious that I should not gain anything by supporting your ingenious theory of what happened on the frontier, because if you were right, your only power over the Colonel would lie in his supposed desire to keep it quiet, which would, of course, prevent my clearing my character. If, however, you wish to believe that I have been bought over by him or Bertram, you must do so. I'll own that it seems the best explanation; but I should then have a strong reason for opposing you."

"But you are opposing me."

"Yes," said Blake. "My object in doing so hasn't much bearing on the matter so far as you are concerned, but it will simplify things if you will realize that I mean to stand between my relatives and harm. I'm not a clever player of this kind of game, but you must see I hold the ace of trumps among my cards. Now you know I'm ready to play it, don't you think it would be wiser to leave the Colonel alone?"

For a few moments she looked at him in silence, and though she burned with anger and disappointment she kept her head. She was beaten; no art that she could practise and no argument would prevail against the man's resolution. The only thing left was to retire with as much dignity as possible from the fight.

"Well," she answered, getting up, "I suppose there is no more to be said, and after all you might have shown me less consideration. I must do you the justice to admit that I believe you are acting out of loyalty to your friends."

"Thank you," Blake said with a bow. "Now I notice Mrs. Foster coming towards us and imagine that she doesn't mean to stay much longer."

Mrs. Chudleigh left him, and in another few minutes Mrs. Foster declared that she must go, while as they walked towards the staircase Mrs. Keith came up to Blake.

"Well?" she asked in an anxious tone.

Blake smiled at her. "I think we needn't fear any further trouble."

Admiration shone in Margaret Keith's eyes. "It's a great relief, though I knew the worst danger was over when you came home. None of the Challoners ever did so fine a thing, Dick."

She went by before he could answer and he turned back into the gallery while the others descended to the hall. Standing near a window, he saw Foster's car speed down the drive; then the hoot of the horn reached him from the corner by the lodge, and there was silence again. It was broken a few minutes later by a beat of hoofs, and Blake, looking out, saw Challoner dismount.

"Where did you get to, Dick?" the Colonel asked when his nephew went down to meet him. "I saw you close behind the hounds for a time, but you disappeared and nobody seemed to know what had become of you."

"I had a good run," Blake said, smiling. "Then I dropped out and rode home across country. I remembered that there was something I had to do."

"It must have been something important to take you off the field when the hounds were running as they were then."

"I thought the matter needed attention," Blake rejoined, lighting a cigar.

CHAPTER XXXI

A DIFFICULT QUESTION

On the evening after Mrs. Chudleigh's visit, Challoner sent for Blake, who had just returned from an afternoon's shooting with Foster. The Colonel was sitting in a big leather chair near a good fire, but he had a heavy rug wrapped about him.

"Had you good sport?" he asked. "You must have found it very cold standing about the covers."

"We made a fair bag. The air was raw, but nothing unusual."

"I can't keep warm; I've been shivering all day. It looks as if I'd got a chill waiting outside Croxleigh gorse, but that is not what I want to talk about." His tone grew sharper. "It's curious that I wasn't told Mrs. Chudleigh came here yesterday; had you anything to do with keeping the information from me?"

"I'm afraid I must own up, sir. I thought it might disturb you, if you knew."

"Your intentions were, no doubt, good, but please remember in future that I can't permit things that concern me to be taken out of my hands. I believe I'm still capable of managing my affairs."

It struck Blake that his uncle looked ill, which might account for his asperity, and he made an apologetic answer.

"You may as well tell me what she said," Challoner resumed.

"As a matter of fact, she didn't say very much," Blake answered with a twinkle. "I did most of the talking, but you must guess her object; she seems a persistent lady."

"Then what did you say?"

"I tried to show her that she was helpless to make any trouble so long as I stuck to my guns, and I think she recognized it. Anyhow, Foster mentioned that she told his wife this morning she was afraid she couldn't stay as long as she had expected. I suppose this means she's ready to leave the field as soon as she can do so without exciting curiosity."

Challoner looked much relieved, but when Blake left him he grew thoughtful. His nephew's demonstration with the chessmen had lifted a weight off his mind, but he was troubled by a doubt about the absolute correctness of his explanation. Moreover, when he dwelt upon it, the doubt gathered strength, but there was nothing that he could do; Dick obviously meant to stick to his story, and Bertram could not be questioned. Another matter troubled him; Dick, whom he had meant to provide for, would not allow it, and though Challoner admired his independence he thought Dick was carrying it too far.

In the meanwhile, Blake sought Miss Challoner and said, "I don't think my uncle's looking fit. Mightn't it be better to send for Dr. Onslow?"

"He wouldn't be pleased," Miss Challoner answered dubiously "Still, he sometimes enjoys a talk with Onslow, who's a tactful man. If he looked in, as it were, casually——"

"Yes," said Blake; "we'll give him a hint. I'll send the groom with a note at once."

The doctor came and left without expressing any clear opinion, but when he returned next day he ordered Challoner to bed and told Blake he feared a sharp attack of pneumonia. His fears were justified, for it was some weeks before Challoner was able to leave his room. During his illness he insisted on his nephew's company whenever the nurses would allow it, and when he began to recover, again begged him to remain at Sandymere. He had come to lean upon the younger man and entrusted him with all the business of the estate, which he was no longer able to attend to.

"Dick," he said one day when Blake thought he was too ill to perceive that he was casting a reflection on his son, "I wish my personal means were larger, so I could give Bertram enough and leave Sandymere to you; then I'd know the place would be in good hands. On the surface, you're a happy-go-lucky fellow, but that's deceptive. In reality, you have a surprising grip of things—however, you know my opinion of you. But you won't go away, Dick?"

The nurse interrupted them, and Blake was glad he had written to Harding stating his inability to rejoin him. A week or two later he received a cable message: "No hurry."

When spring came he was still at Sandymere, for Challoner, who got better very slowly, would not let him go, and saw Millicent frequently. At first he felt that this was a weakness, since he had nothing to offer her except a tainted name, but his love was getting beyond control and his resistance feebler. After all, he thought, the story of the Indian disaster must be almost forgotten, and Harding had a good chance of finding the oil. If the latter had not already started for the North, he would do so soon, but Blake had had no news from him since his cabled message.

Then, after a quiet month, things began to happen, for one afternoon when Challoner had driven over to Hazlehurst with his nephew, Foster came in from the station, bringing a newspaper. The party was sitting in the conservatory; Mrs. Keith talking to Challoner, Millicent and Blake standing close by, but there were no other guests, and Mrs. Chudleigh had left some weeks earlier. Foster sat down near the Colonel.

"Here's a paragraph that may be of interest; it wasn't in the morning papers." he remarked. "I believe I've heard Miss Graham and Mrs. Chudleigh mention a Captain Sedgwick."

"Yes," said Millicent; "we both knew him, but what has he been doing?"

"He seems to have got into trouble, but I'll read you the account."

The interest he had roused was obvious. Challoner leaned forward with an intent face, Blake dropped the match with which he was lighting a cigarette, while Mrs. Keith fixed her eyes eagerly on Foster. Millicent was the least concerned, and she wondered at the others' air of tension while Foster unfolded his paper.

"'Telegraphic news has been received of a disaster to a small British force in Western Africa,' he read. 'Captain Sedgwick left his headquarters at Ambolana with a detachment of native troops to demand guarantees of good behaviour from the headman of a fortified village near the French frontier. The expedition was ambushed in thick jungle, but, escaping after heavy loss, made a stand against large numbers at a place which appears to lie outside the British boundary. Here Sedgwick again suffered some loss before a body of French black troops appeared upon the field. Further details are anxiously waited, since the affair, which is complicated by a doubt about the headman's suzerainty, may lead to strong representations from France.'"

"It looks as if your friend will get a wigging," Foster remarked to Millicent as he laid down the paper. "As I understand it, the Government doesn't thank too zealous officers who make trouble with our neighbours, unless there's some substantial gain. There can't be any in this case, because the French had to rescue the fellow."

"Then I'm sorry for Captain Sedgwick," Millicent replied. "I met him in Quebec, but only saw him for a few weeks." She turned to Blake. "The news seems to have made some impression on you."

"It has, in a way," Blake admitted with embarrassment, because he did not wish his interest to be noticed. "As it happens, I've heard a good deal about the man."

Then Mrs. Keith beckoned the girl. "I think I left my outdoor spectacles in my room; would you mind getting them?"

Millicent went away and Mrs. Keith led Foster to talk about something else, because she saw that his wife's curiosity was aroused. It was undesirable that any one should guess that the news had its importance to Challoner. Prudence prevented her saying anything to her old friend alone before he left, but she gave him a look which was expressive of relief and satisfaction. As they drove home Challoner turned to Blake.

"I'll know more about the matter in a day or two," he said. "Greythorpe's coming down."

"In my opinion, Sedgwick has ruined himself," Blake replied. "No influence could get him the appointment now."

This view was taken by Greythorpe when he sat talking with Challoner a few evenings afterwards.

"You were right about Captain Sedgwick," he remarked. "The man came near getting us into serious difficulties. I suppose you have read the newspaper account?"

"Yes. You have more complete information?"

Greythorpe nodded. "The other was accurate, so far as it went. The fellow played a bold stroke, making the usual excuse; the necessity for putting an end to the depredations and barbarities of a native headman."

"To do him justice, I daresay the excuse was good."

"It's possible, but Sedgwick's motive was not humanitarian. He knew that if he could seize the headman's stronghold and effectively occupy the surrounding country, we should stay there and after a protest or two the French would have to acquiesce. As it happened, he bungled the business, and, worst of all, had to be extricated by the people he meant to outwit. They led him politely but very firmly across the frontier, and now it's our part to express our regret and promise to avoid any fresh aggression."

"What will you do with Sedgwick?"

"He'll have to be reprimanded, and after this we can't trust him with independent authority. He's too venturesome, though I'll admit that it would have been different if he had succeeded. Still, he has his talents, and I daresay we'll find him useful in a subordinate post. I'm inclined to sympathize with your friend Mrs. Chudleigh."

Challoner made no answer to this, and they talked about matters until Blake came in, when Greythorpe left them alone together.

"He agrees with you about the African affair," said the Colonel. "Sedgwick is, so to speak, done for and will be kept in the background after this."

"It's more important that Mrs. Chudleigh is disposed of," Blake replied. "As she can't help the man, she'll no longer have any motive for troubling us, and I don't think she would do so out of malice. That sets me free, and as you're getting strong again I ought to go back to Canada as soon as I can."

"If you feel you must go, I'll have to consent."

"I've a duty to my partner. It's probable that he has already set off, but I know where to find him and there'll be plenty to do. For one thing, as transport is expensive, we'll have to relay our supplies over very rough country and that means making the same stage several times, while I don't suppose Harding will have been able to buy very efficient boring plant."

"He may have done better than you imagined," Challoner remarked. "A man as capable as he seems to be would somehow get hold of what was needful."

Blake was surprised at this, because his uncle understood their financial difficulties; but he said, "There's a fast boat next Saturday. I think I'll go by her."

"Wait another week, to please me," Challoner urged him. "You have had a dull time since I've been ill, and now I'd like you to get about. I shall miss you badly, Dick."

Blake agreed. He felt that he ought to have sailed earlier, but the temptation to remain was strong. He now met Millicent every day, and it might be a very long time before he returned to England. He feared that he was laying up trouble for himself, but he recklessly determined to make the most of the present, and, in spite of his misgivings, the next eight or nine days brought him many delightful hours. Now she knew he was going, Millicent abandoned the reserve she had sometimes shown. She was sympathetic, interested in his plans, and, he thought, wonderfully charming. They were rapidly drawn closer together, and the more he learned of her character, the stronger his admiration grew. At times he imagined he noticed a tender shyness in her manner, and though it delighted him he afterwards took himself to task. He was not acting honourably; he had no right to win this girl's love, as he was trying to do, but there was the excuse that she knew his history and it had not made her cold to him.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Keith, who had grown very fond of her companion and entirely approved of her, looked on with observant eyes and made opportunities for throwing the two together. One afternoon a day or two before Blake's departure she called Millicent into her room and asked her abruptly: "Have you ever thought about your future?"

"Not often since I have been with you," Millicent answered. "Before that it used to trouble me."

"Then I'm afraid you're imprudent. You have no relations you could look to for help, and while my health is pretty good I can't, of course, live for ever. I might leave you something, but it would not be much, because my property is earmarked for a particular purpose."

Millicent wondered where this led, but Mrs. Keith went on: "As you have found out, I'm a frank old woman and not afraid to say what I think. Well, considering how attractive you are, there's a way out of the difficulty, and I believe it's the best one. You ought to marry; it's your true vocation."

"I'm not sure," said Millicent, blushing. "Besides it mightn't be possible. I owe everything to

your generosity, but you have brought me into a station where I must stand comparison with girls who have more advantages."

"You mean they have more money? Well, it's not to be despised, but I've met men who didn't attach too much importance to it. They had the sense to see there were other things of greater value, and while I don't often flatter people, you're not poor in this respect. But if you liked a man who was far from rich, would you marry him?"

"It would depend," Millicent replied, while her colour deepened. "Why do you ask? I can't give you a general answer."

"Then give me a particular one; I want to know."

The girl was embarrassed, but she had learned that her employer was not to be put off easily.

"I suppose his being poor wouldn't daunt me, if I loved him enough."

"Then we'll suppose something else. If he had done something to be ashamed of?"

Millicent looked up with a flash in her eyes. "People are so ready to believe the worst. He did nothing that he need blush for—that's impossible." Then she saw the trap into which her generous indignation had led her, but instead of looking down in confusion she boldly faced Mrs. Keith. "Yes," she added, "if he loved me, I would marry him in spite of what people are foolish enough to think."

"And you would not regret it." Mrs. Keith laid her hand on the girl's arm with a caressing touch. "My dear, if you value your happiness, you will tell him so. Remember that he is going away in a day or two."

"How can I tell him?" Millicent cried with burning face. "I only—I mean you tricked me into telling you."

"It shouldn't be difficult to give him a tactful hint, and that wouldn't be a remarkably unusual course," Mrs. Keith rejoined with amusement. "The idea that a proposal comes quite spontaneously is to some extent a convention nowadays. I don't suppose you need reminding that we dine at Sandymere to-morrow."

Millicent made no reply, and as she seemed rather overwhelmed by her employer's frankness, the latter took pity on her.

"You might ask Foster for the review he promised me, but you can send it up instead of coming back," she said, and added as Millicent turned away: "Think over what I told you."

The recommendation was superfluous, because Millicent thought of nothing else. She knew Blake was her lover and believed she understood why he had not declared himself. Now he might go away without speaking if she let him. Mrs. Keith's blunt candour left her no excuse for shirking the truth; she loved the man, but it was hateful to feel that she must make the first advances and reveal her tenderness for him. She said she could not do so and yet vacillated, for the alternative was worse.

CHAPTER XXXII

HARDING STRIKES OIL

Next evening Millicent accompanied Mrs. Keith to Sandymere in a troubled mood. Dinner was a trying function, because she sat next to Foster, who talked in a humorous strain and expected her to appreciate his jokes. She found it hard to smile at the right moment and noticed that Blake was unusually quiet. It was his last evening in England.

When they went into the drawing-room Challoner engaged her in conversation for a time and she was afterwards asked to sing. An hour passed before Blake had an opportunity of exchanging a word with her, and then Miss Challoner was sitting close by.

"They'll make you sing again if you stop here," he said softly.

She understood that he wanted her to himself and thrilled at something in his voice, but instead of complying she asked: "Don't you wish me to?"

"Yes, of course," he answered lamely and was silent for a few moments. Then he resumed: "You're interested in Eastern brasswork, I think?"

"I hardly know," said Millicent. "I haven't seen much of it."

She was vexed with herself for her prudish weakness. An opportunity that might never be repeated was offered her, and she could not muster the courage to seize it. Blake, however, did not seem daunted.

"You said you were delighted with the things my uncle showed you when you were last here and a friend has just sent him a fresh lot from Benares." He gave her an appealing look. "It struck me you might like to see them."

"Yes," said Millicent with forced calm; "I really think I would."

"Will you give me the key of the Indian collection?" Blake asked Challoner.

"Here it is," said the Colonel, who turned to Mrs. Keith. "That reminds me, you haven't seen my new treasures yet. Dryhurst has lately sent me some rather good things; among others there's a small Buddha, exquisitely carved. Shall we go and look at them?"

Mrs. Keith felt angry with him for a marplot, but she said: "Wouldn't it be better to wait until I'm here in the daylight? If I try to examine anything closely with these spectacles, they strain my eyes."

"I've had a new lamp placed in front of the case," Challoner persisted, and Mrs. Keith found it hard to forgive him for his obtuseness.

"Very well," she said in a resigned tone, and when Millicent and Blake had gone out walked slowly to the door with Challoner.

They were half way up the staircase which led rather sharply from the hall when she stopped and turned to her companion.

"It's obvious that you have recovered," she said.

"I certainly feel much better, but what prompted your remark?"

"These stairs. You don't seem to feel them, but if you expect me to run up and down, you'll have to make them shallower and less steep. I've been up twice since I came; Hilda insisted on my seeing the new decorations in the west wing, and I must confess to a weakness in my knee."

Challoner gave her a sharp glance and then said, "I'm sorry. Mrs. Foster mentioned something about your not walking much; I should have remembered."

"It's the weather; I find the damp troublesome. If you don't mind, I think we'll go down."

Challoner gave her his arm, and Millicent, standing in the picture gallery, noticed their return. She suspected that this was the result of some manoeuvre of Mrs. Keith's intended for her advantage, and tried to summon her resolution. The man she loved would sail next day, believing that his poverty and the stain he had not earned must stand between them, unless she could force herself to give him a hint to the contrary. This was the only sensible course, but she timidly shrank from it.

Blake unlocked a glass case and taking out two shelves laid them on a table. "There they are," he said with a rather nervous smile. "I've no doubt the things are interesting, and if our friends come up they can look at them. But it wasn't Benares brassware that brought me here."

"Was it not?" Millicent asked with a fluttering heart.

"Certainly not! One couldn't talk with Foster enlarging upon the only rational way of rearing pheasants, and you know I'm going away first thing to-morrow."

"Yes; I know," said Millicent, and then looked up at him with sudden courage. "I'm sorry."

"Truly sorry; you mean that?" He gave her a very keen glance while he knitted his brows.

"Yes," she said recklessly; "I mean it. You ought to know I do."

He laid his hand on her shoulder, holding her a little away from him. "I came up here in a state of horrible indecision, torn different ways by a sense of the duty I owed you and my selfish longing. Even if nothing had been said to make it harder for me, I can't tell how the struggle would have ended."

"Why should there be a struggle?" she asked him.

His grasp tightened and his eyes were steadily fixed upon her face. "You're very young and beautiful and, though I love you, I'm a broken man."

"Then it's through no fault of yours."

"The consequences are the same and, apart from this, I have nothing to offer. Can you

wonder, my dear, that I was afraid? I come to you a beggar, with everything to gain."

"Ah!" she said, "all I have to give is yours; I think it was yours before you asked for it."

"Then you are not afraid?"

She looked at him with a happy smile. "What should I fear? Aren't you able to take care of me? It must be for my sake that you are so timid and I love you for it, but I think this must be the first time you ever hesitated long. Where has your usual recklessness gone?"

"It's coming back." He passed his arm about her waist, drawing her strongly to him. "We'll laugh at cold-blooded prudence and take our chances. It's a wide world, and we'll find a nook somewhere if we go out and look for it. All my care will be to smooth the trail for your dear, pretty feet."

They spent a time in happy talk, and Blake murmured when Millicent protested that they must go back, while she feared that her lover's exultant air would betray them as they entered the drawing-room.

"Where's the key?" Challoner asked.

"I'm afraid I forgot it, sir," Blake confessed. "Very sorry, but I'm not even sure I put the things away."

Challoner rang a bell and gave an order to a servant. Then he asked Millicent: "Did you see the Buddha?"

"No," she said. "I don't think so."

"Or the brass plate with the fantastic serpent pattern round the rim?"

"I'm afraid I didn't," Millicent owned with a trace of confusion.

Challoner looked hard at Blake, and then his eyes twinkled.

"Well," he said pointedly, "perhaps it wasn't to be expected."

There was a moment's silence. Millicent looked down with the colour in her face; Blake stood very straight, smiling at the others. Then he said, "We are all friends here, and I'm proud to announce that Millicent has promised to marry me as soon as I return from Canada." He bowed to Mrs. Keith and the Colonel. "As you have taken her guardian's place, madam, and you, sir, are the head of the house, I should like to think we have your approval."

"How formal, Dick!" said Mrs. Keith with a laugh. "I imagine my consent is very much a matter of form, but I give it with the greatest satisfaction."

Challoner got up and took Millicent's hand. "My dear, I am very glad, and I think Dick has shown great wisdom. I wish you both all happiness."

Mrs. Foster and her husband offered their congratulations, and for the next hour they discussed Blake's future plans, after which they were interrupted by the entrance of a servant with a small silver tray.

"Telegram, sir, for Mr. Blake," he said. "Hopkins was at the post office, and they gave it him."

Blake took the envelope and looked at Miss Challoner for permission to open it. When he had done so, he started and gave the form to Millicent.

"Oh, Dick!" she cried with sparkling eyes. "Isn't this very good."

"I believe so." Blake turned to the others. "After the good feeling you have shown towards us, I daresay you'll be interested to hear my partner's latest news." He read out: "'Come. Struck it. Tell Challoner.'"

He turned to Mrs. Keith. "This should set me firmly on my feet and may make me rich." Then he addressed Challoner. "But I don't understand the last of it. Why does he wish you to know?"

The Colonel chuckled. "I sent Mr. Harding five hundred pounds to buy anything he needed for his prospecting, and told him to give me an option on a good block of shares in the new syndicate at par. You're very independent, Dick, but I can't see why you should object to your relatives putting money into what looks like a promising thing."

"I've no doubt it was mainly through your help Harding found the oil," Blake said gratefully.

Soon after this the Fosters rose to go, but they waited sympathetically in the hall while Millicent lingered with Blake in the drawing-room.

"Dick," she said, blushing, "you made a rash statement, I didn't quite promise to marry you as soon as you came back."

"Then it was understood," Blake answered firmly.

"I can't let you off."

"Well," she said; "if it will bring you home any quicker, dear! But how long must you stay?"

"I can't tell; there may be much to do and, if Harding needs me, I must see it out, but I won't delay a minute more than's needful. You know we may have to live in Canada?"

"Yes," she said shyly; "I won't object. Where you are will be home."

Then Foster opened the door. "The car's waiting, and it's coming on to rain."

Millicent went out with him; and Blake, who sailed next day, found, on reaching the timber belt, that, as he had predicted, there was much to be done. After some months' hard work, Harding, who was confident that the oil would pay handsomely, left him in charge while he set off for the cities to arrange about pipes and plant and the raising of capital. It was early winter when he returned, satisfied with what he had accomplished, and Blake saw that he would be able to visit England in a few weeks.

He was sitting in their office shack one bitter day when a sledge arrived with supplies, and the teamster brought him a telegram. His face grew grave as he opened it and read—

"Bertram killed in action.—Challoner."

"This sets you free, doesn't it?" Harding remarked after expressing his sympathy.

"I can't tell," Blake answered. "I haven't thought of it in such a light. I was very fond of my cousin."

"But the action must have been in India," Harding resumed after a while. "Didn't you tell me Captain Challoner was coming home?"

"He gave up a good appointment when he found his regiment was to be sent to a station where there was a likelihood of some fighting. I think I can guess the reason."

Shortly before Blake left the camp he received further news by mail and some English newspapers. Bertram had been shot when leading an attack upon a fort among the frontier hills, and the accounts agreed that he had shown exceptional gallantry.

On reaching England, Blake found Millicent at the station. Mrs. Keith, she told him, had given up her London house and taken one near Sandymere. Then she looked thoughtful when he asked about his uncle.

"I'm afraid you will see a marked change in him," she said. "He has not been well since you left, and the news of Bertram's death was a shock."

She was with him when he met Challoner, who looked very frail and forlorn.

"It's a comfort to see you back, Dick; you are all I have now," he said, and went on with a break in his voice: "After all, it was a good end my boy made—a very daring thing! The place was supposed to be unassailable by such a force as he had, but he stormed it. In spite of his fondness for painting, he was true to strain."

Some time later Blake said to Millicent, "You heard what he told me, dear? The secret must still be kept; I can't speak."

"No," said Millicent, "not while your uncle lives. It's hard, when I want everybody to know what you are."

He kissed her. "I daresay it's natural that you should be prejudiced in my favour, but I like it."

"Oh!" she answered, smiling, "I've no doubt you have some faults, but you're very staunch. You must do what you think right, Dick, and I'll try to be content. One reason for my loving you is that you are brave enough to take this generous part."

THE END

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