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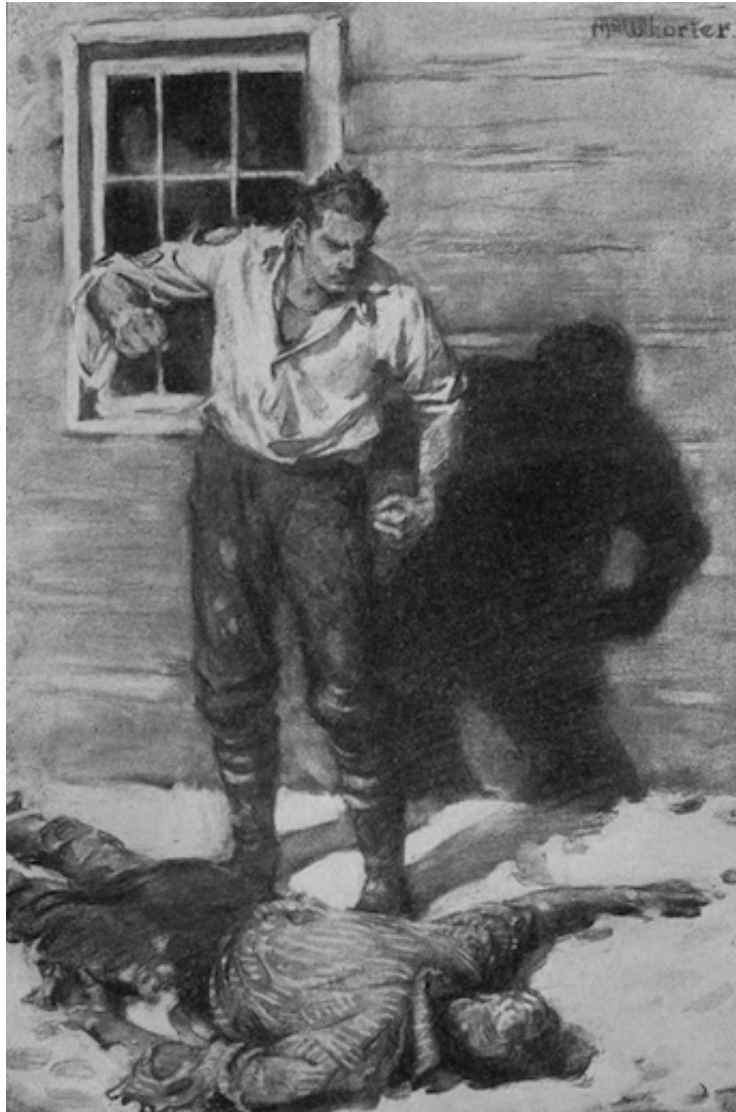
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SNOW-BURNER ***



THE SNOW-BURNER TOPPLED AND FELL FACE DOWNWARD ON THE GROUND

THE
SNOW-BURNER

BY
HENRY OYEN

AUTHOR OF
THE MAN-TRAIL



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THE SNOW BURNER

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PART ONE: THE NATURAL MAN

CHAPTER I—HELP

The brisk November sunrise, breaking over the dark jack-pines, lighted up the dozen snow-covered frame buildings comprising the so-called town of Rail Head, and presently reached in through the uncurtained windows of the Northern Light saloon, where it shone upon the curly head of young Toppo Treplin as, pillowed on his crossed forearms, it lay in repose on one of the saloon tables.

It was a sad, strange place to find Toppo Treplin, one-time All-American halfback, but for the last four years all-around moneyed loafer and waster. Rail Head was far from the beaten path. It lay at the end of sixty miles of narrow-gauge track that rambled westward into the Big Woods from the Iron Range Railroad line, and it consisted mainly of a box-car depot, an alleged hotel and six saloons—none of the latter being in any too good repute with the better element round about.

The existence of the saloons might have explained Toppo's presence in Rail Head had their character and wares been of a nature to attract one of his critical tastes; but in reality Toppo was there because the Iron Range Limited, bearing Harvey Duncombe's private hunting-car, had stopped for a moment the night before out where the narrow-gauge met the Iron Range Railroad tracks.

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Toppo, at that fated moment, was out on the observation platform alone. There had been a row and Toppo had rushed out in a black rage. Within, the car reeked with the mingled odours of cigarette-smoke and spilled champagne. Out of doors the first snowfall of the season, faintly tinted by a newly risen moon, lay unmarked, undefiled.

A girl—small, young, brisk and business-like—alighted from the car ahead and walked swiftly across the station platform to the narrow-gauge train that stood waiting. The anger and champagne raging in him had moved Toppo to one of those wild pranks which had made his name among his fellows synonymous with irresponsibility.

He would get away from it all, away from Harvey Duncombe and his champagne, and all that sort of thing. He would show them!

Toppo had stepped off. The Limited suddenly glided away. Toppo lurched over to the narrow gauge, and that was the last thing he had remembered of that memorable night.

As the sun now revealed him, Mr. Robert Lovejoy Treplin, in spite of his deplorable condition, was a figure to win attention of a not entirely unfavourable sort. Still clad in mackinaw and hunting-clothes, his two hundred pounds of bone and muscle and just a little too much fat were sprawled picturesquely over the chair and table, the six-foot gracefulness of him being obvious despite his rough apparel and awkward position.

His cap had fallen off and the sun glinted on a head of boyish brown curls. It was only in the lazy, good-natured face, puffy and loose-lipped, that one might read how recklessly Toppo Treplin had lived since achieving his football honours four years before.

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The sun crept up and found his eyes, and Toppo stirred. Slowly, even painfully, he raised his head from the table and looked around him. The crudeness of his surroundings made him sit up with a start. He looked first out of the window at the snow-covered "street." Across the way he saw a small, unpainted building bearing a scraggly sign, "Hotel." Beyond this the jack-pines loomed in a solid wall.

Toppo shuddered. He turned his face toward the man behind the bar, who had been regarding him for some time with a look of mingled surprise and amusement. Toppo shuddered again.

The man was a half-breed, and he wore a red woollen shirt. Worse, there was not a sign of a mirror behind the bar. It was distressing.

"Good morning, brother," said Toppo, concealing his repugnance. "Might I ask you for a little information this pleasant morning?"

The half-breed grinned appreciatively but sceptically.

"Little drink, I guess you mean, don't you?" said he. "Go 'head."

Toppo bowed courteously.

"Thank you, brother, thank you. I am sorely puzzled about two little matters—where am I anyway, and if so, how did I get here?"

The grin on the half-breed's face broadened. He pointed at the table in front of Toppo.

"You been sleeping there since 'bout midnight las' night," he exclaimed.

Toppo waved his left hand to indicate his displeasure at the inadequacy of the bartender's reply.

"Obvious, my dear Watson, obvious," he said. "I know that I'm at this table, because here I am; and I know I've been sleeping here because I just woke up. Let's broaden the range of our information. What town is this, if it is a town, and if it is, how did I happen to come here, may I ask?"

The half-breed's grin disappeared, gradually to give place to an expression of amazement.

"You mean to say you come to this town and don't know what town it is?" he demanded. "Then why you come? What you do here?"

Toppo's brow corrugated in an expression of deep puzzlement.

"That's another thing that's rather puzzling, too, brother," he replied. "Why did I come? I'd like to know that, too. Like very, very much to know that. Where am I, how did I come here, and why? Three questions I'd like very, very much to have answered."

He sat for a moment in deep thought, then turned toward the bartender with the pleased look of a man who has found an inspiration.

"I tell you what you do, brother—you answer the first two questions and in the light of that information I'll see if I can't ponder out the third."

The half-breed leaned heavily across the single-plank bar and watched Toppo closely.

"This town is Rail Head," he said slowly, as if speaking to some one of whose mental capacity he had great doubts. "You come here by last night's train. You bring the train-crew over to have a drink; then you fall asleep. You been sleeping ever since. Now you remember?"

"Ah!"

The puzzled look went out of Toppo's eyes.

"Now I remember. Row with Harvey Duncombe. Wanted me to drink two to his one. Stepped outside. Saw little train. Saw little girl. Stepped off big train, got on little train, and here I am. Fine little business."

"You went to sleep in the train coming up, the conductor told me," volunteered the half-breed. "You told them you wanted to go as far as you could, so they took you up here to the end of the line. You remember now, eh, why you come here?"

"Only too well, brother," replied Toppo wearily. "I—I just came to see your beautiful little city."

The bartender laughed bitterly.

"You come to a fine place. Didn't you ever hear 'bout Rail Head?" he asked. "I guess not, or you wouldn't have come. This town's the jumping-off place, that's what she is. It's the most God-forsaken, hopeless excuse for a town in the whole North Country. There's only two kind of business here—shipping men out to Hell Camp and skinning them when they come back. That's all. What you think of that for a fine town you've landed in, eh?"

"Fine," said Toppo. "I see you love it dearly, indeed."

The half-breed nodded grimly.

"It's all right for me; I own this place. Anybody else is sucker to come here, though. You ain't a Bohunk fool, so I don't think you come to hire out for Hell Camp. You just got too drunk, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Toppo, yawning. "What's this Hell Camp thing? Pleasant little name."

"An' pleasant little place," supplemented the man mockingly. "Ain't you never heard 'bout Hell Camp? 'Bout its boss—Reivers—the 'Snow-Burner'? Huh! Perhaps you want hire out there for

job?"

"Perhaps," agreed Toppo. "What is it?"

"Oh, it ain't nothing so much. Just big log-camp run by man named Reivers—that's all. Indians call him Snow-Burner. Twenty-five, thirty miles out in the bush, at Cameron Dam. That's all. Very big camp. Everybody who comes to this town is going out there to work, or else hiding out."

"I see. But why the name?"

"Hell Camp?" The bartender's grin appeared again; then, as if a second thought on the matter had occurred to him, he assumed a noncommittal expression and yawned. "Oh, that's just nickname the boys give it. You see, the boys from camp come to town here in the Spring. Then sometimes they raise ——. That's why some people call it Hell Camp. That's all. Cameron Dam Camp is the right name."

"I see." Toppo was wondering why the man should take the trouble to lie to him. Of course he was lying. Even Toppo, with his bleared eyes, could see that the man had started to berate Hell Camp even as he had berated Rail Head and had suddenly switched and said nothing. It hurt Toppo's head. It wasn't fair to puzzle him this morning. "I see. Just—just a nickname."

"That's all," said the bartender. Briskly changing the subject he said: "Well, how 'bout it, stranger? You going to have eye-opener this morning?"

"I suppose so," said Toppo absently. He again turned his attention to the view from the window. On the low stairs of the hotel were seated half a dozen men whose flat, ox-like faces and foreign clothing marked them for immigrants, newly arrived, of the Slavic type. Some sat on wooden trunks oddly marked, others stood with bundles beneath their arms. They waited stolidly, blankly, with their eyes on the hotel door, as oxen wait for the coming of the man who is going to feed them. Toppo looked on with idle interest.

"I didn't think you could see anything like that this far away from Ellis Island," he said. "What are those fellows, brother?"

"Bohunks," said the bartender with a contemptuous jerk of the head. "They waiting to hire out for the Cameron Dam Camp. The agent he comes to the hotel. Well, what you going to have?"

"Bring me a whisky sour," said Toppo, without taking his eyes off the group across the street. The half-breed grinned and placed before him a bottle of whisky and a glass. Toppo frowned.

"A whisky sour, I said," he protested.

"When you get this far in the woods," laughed the man, "they all come out of one bottle. Drink up."

Once more Toppo shuddered. He was bored by this time.

"Your jokes up here are worse than your booze," he said wearily.

He poured out a scant drink and sat with the glass in his hand while his eyes were upon the group across the street. He was about to drink when a stir among the men drew his attention. The door of the hotel opened briskly. Toppo suddenly set down his glass.

The girl who had got on the narrow-gauge out at the junction the night before had come out and was standing on the stairs, looking about her with an expression which to Toppo seemed plainly to spell, "Help!"

CHAPTER II—THE GIRL

Toppo sat and stared across the street at her with a feeling much like awe. The girl was standing forth in the full morning sunlight, and Toppo's first impulse was to cross the street to her, his second to hide his face. She was small and young, the girl, and beautiful. She was a blonde, such a blonde as is found only in the North. The sun lighted up the aureole of light hair surrounding her head, so that even Toppo behind the windows of the Northern Light caught a vision of its fineness. Her cheeks bore the red of perfect health showing through a perfect, fair complexion, and even the thick red mackinaw which she wore did not hide the trimness of the figure beneath.

"What in the dickens is she doing here?" gasped Toppo. "She doesn't belong in a place like this."

But if this were true the girl apparently was entirely unconscious of it. Among that group of ox-like Slavs she stood with her little chin in the air, as much at home, apparently, as if those men were all her good friends. Only she looked about her now and then as if anxiously seeking a way out of a dilemma.

"What can she be doing here?" mused Toppo. "A little, pretty thing like her! She ought to be back home with mother and father and brother and sister, going to dancing-school, and all the rest of it."

Toppo was no stranger to pretty girls. He had met pretty girls by the score while at college. He had been adored by dozens. After college he had met still more. None of them had interested him to any inconvenient extent. After all, a man's friends are all men.

But this girl, Toppo admitted, struck him differently. He had never seen a girl that struck him like this before. He pushed his glass to one side. He was bored no longer. For the first time in four years the full shame of his mode of living was driven home to him, for as he feasted his eyes on the sun-kissed vision across the street his decent instincts whispered that a man who squandered and swilled his life away just because he had money had no right to raise his eyes to this girl.

"You're a waster, that's what you are," said Toppo to himself, "and she's one of those sweet—"

He was on his feet before the sentence was completed. In her perplexity the girl had turned to the men about her and apparently had asked a question. At first their utter unresponsiveness indicated that they did not understand.

Then they began to smile, looking at one another and at the girl. The brutal manner in which they fixed their eyes upon her sent the blood into Toppo's throat. White men didn't look at a woman that way.

Then one of the younger men spoke to the girl. Toppo saw her start and look at him with parted lips. The group gathered more closely around. The young man spoke again, grimacing and smirking bestially, and Toppo waited for no more. He was a waster and half drunk; but after all he was a white man, of the same breed as the girl on the stairs, and he knew his job.

He came across the snow-covered street like Toppo Treplin of old bent upon making a touchdown. Into the group he walked, head up, shouldering and elbowing carelessly. Toppo caught the young speaker by both shoulders and hurled him bodily back among his fellows. For an instant they faced Toppo, snarling, their hands cautiously sliding toward hidden knives. Then they grovelled, cringing instinctively before the better breed.

Toppo turned to the girl and removed his cap. She had not cried out nor moved, and now she looked Toppo squarely in the eye. Toppo promptly hung his head. He had been thinking of her as something of a child. Now he saw his mistake. She was young, it is true—little over twenty perhaps—but there was an air of self-reliance and seriousness about her as if she had known responsibilities beyond her years. And her eyes were blue, Toppo saw—the perfect blue that went with her fair complexion.

"I beg pardon," stammered Toppo. "I just happened to see—it looked as if they were getting fresh—so I thought I'd come across and—and see if there was anything—anything I could do."

"Thank you," said the girl a little breathlessly. "Are—are you the agent?"

Toppo shook his head. The look of perplexity instantly returned to the girl's face.

"I'm sorry; I wish I was," said Toppo. "If you'll tell me who the agent is, and so on—" he included most of the town of Rail Head in a comprehensive glance—"I'll probably be able to find him in a hurry."

"Oh, I couldn't think of troubling you. Thank you ever so much, though," she said hastily. "They told me in the hotel that he was outside here some place. I'll find him myself, thank you."

She stepped off the stairs into the snow of the street, every inch and line of her, from her solid tan boots to her sensible tassel cap, expressing the self-reliance and independence of the girl who is accustomed and able to take care of herself under trying circumstances.

The bright sun smote her eyes and she blinked, squinting deliciously. She paused for a moment, threw back her head and filled her lungs to the full with great drafts of the invigorating November air. Her mackinaw rose and fell as she breathed deeply, and more colour came rushing into the roses of her cheeks. Apparently she had forgotten the existence of the Slavs, who still stood glowering at her and Toppo.

"Isn't it glorious?" she said, looking up at Toppo with her eyes puckered prettily from the sun. "Doesn't it just make you glad you're alive?"

"You bet it does!" said Toppo eagerly. He saw his opportunity to continue the conversation and hastened to take advantage. "I never knew air could be as exciting as this. I never felt anything like it. It's my first experience up here in the woods; I'm an utter stranger around here."

Having volunteered this information, he waited eagerly. The girl merely nodded.

"Of course. Anybody could see that," she said simply.

Toppo felt slightly abashed.

"Then you—you're not a stranger around here?" he asked.

She shook her head, the tassels of her cap and her aureole of light hair tossing gloriously.

"I'm a stranger here in this town," she said, "but I've lived up here in the woods, as you call it, all my life except the two years I was away at school. Not right in the woods, of course, but in small towns around. My father was a timber-estimator before he was hurt, and naturally we had to live close to the woods."

"Naturally," agreed Toppo, though he knew nothing about it. He tried to imagine any of the girls he knew back East accepting a stranger as a man and a brother who could be trusted at first hand, and he failed.

"I say," he said as she stepped away. "Just a moment, please. About this agent-thing. Won't you please let me go and look for him?" He waved his hands at the six saloons. "You see, there aren't many places here that a lady can go looking for a man in."

She hesitated, frowning at the lowly grogeries that constituted the major part of Rail Head's buildings.

"That's so," she said with a smile.

"Of course it is," said Topsy eagerly. "And the chances are that your man is in one of them, no matter who he is, because that's about the only place he can be here. You tell me who he is, or what he is, and I'll go hunt him up."

"That's very kind of you." She hesitated for a moment, then accepted his offer without further parley. "It's the employment agent of the Cameron Dam Company that I'm looking for. I am to meet him here, according to a letter they sent me, and he is to furnish a team and driver to take me out to the Dam."

Then she added calmly, "I'm going to keep books out there this Winter."

CHAPTER III—TOPPY GETS A JOB

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Topsy gasped. In the first place, he had not been thinking of her as a "working girl." None of the girls that he knew belonged to that class. The notion that she, with the childish dimple in her chin and the roses in her cheeks, was a girl who made her own living was hard to assimilate; the idea that she was going out to a camp in the woods—out to Hell Camp—to work was absolutely impossible!

"Keep books?" said Topsy, bewildered. "Do they keep books in a—in a logging-camp?"

It was her turn to look surprised.

"Do you know anything about Cameron Dam?" she asked.

"Nothing," admitted Topsy. "It's a logging-camp, though, isn't it?"

"Rather more than that, as I understand it," she replied. "They are building a town out there, according to my letter. There are over two hundred people there now. At present they're doing nothing but logging and building the dam; but they say they've found ore out there, and in the Spring the railroad is coming and the town will open up."

"And—and you're going to keep books there this Winter?"

She nodded. "They pay well. They're paying me seventy-five dollars a month and my board."

"And you don't know anything about the place?"

"Except what they've written in the letter engaging me."

"And still you're going out there—to work?"

"Of course," she said cheerfully. "Seventy-five-dollar jobs aren't to be picked up every day around here."

"I see," said Topsy. He remembered Harvey Duncombe's champagne bill of the night before and grew thoughtful. He himself had shuddered a short while before, at waking in a bar where there was no mirror, and he had planned to wire Harvey for five hundred to take him back to civilisation. And here was this delicate little girl—as delicate to look upon as any of the petted and pampered girls he knew back East—cheerfully, even eagerly, setting her face toward the wilderness because therein lay a job paying the colossal sum of seventy-five dollars a month! And she was going alone!

A reckless impulse swayed Topsy. He decided not to wire Harvey.

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "I'll go find this agent. You'd better wait inside the hotel."

He crossed the street and systematically began to search through the six saloons. In the third place he found his man shaking dice with an Indian. The agent was a lean, long-nosed individual who wore thick glasses and talked through his nose.

"Yes, I'm the Cameron Dam agent," he drawled, curiously eying Topsy from head to toe. "Simmons is my name. What can I do for you?"

"I want a job," said Topsy. "A job out at Hell Camp."

The agent laughed shortly at the name.

"You're wise, are you?" he said. "And still you want a job out there? Well, I'm sorry. That load of Bohunks across the street fills me up. I can't use any more rough labour just at present. I'm looking for a blacksmith's helper, but I guess that ain't you."

"That's me," said Topsy resolutely. "That's the job I want—blacksmith's helper. That's my job."

The agent looked him over with the critical eye of a man skilfully appraising bone and muscle.

"You're big enough, that's sure," he drawled. "You've got the shoulders and arms, too, but—let's see your hands."

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Topy held up his hands, huge in size, but entirely innocent of callouses or other signs of wear. The agent grinned.

"Soft as a woman's," he said scornfully. "When did you ever do any blacksmithing? Long time ago, wasn't it? Before you were born, I guess."

Topy's right hand shot out and fell upon the agent's thin arm. Slowly and steadily he squeezed until the man writhed and grimaced with pain.

"Wow! Leggo!" The agent peered over his thick glasses with something like admiration in his eyes. "Say, you're there with the grip, all right, big fellow. Where'd you get it?"

"Swinging a sledge," lied Topy solemnly. "And I've come here to get that job."

Simmons shook his head.

"I can't do it," he protested. "If I should send you out and you shouldn't make good, Reivers would be sore."

"Who's this man Reivers?"

The agent's eyes over his glasses expressed surprise.

"I thought you were wise to Hell Camp?" he said.

"Oh, I'm wise enough," said Topy impatiently. "I know what it is. But who's this Reivers?"

"He's the boss," said Simmons shortly. "D'you mean to say you never heard about Hell-Camp Reivers, the Snow-Burner?"

"No, I haven't," replied Topy impatiently. "But that doesn't make any difference. You send me out there; I'll make good, don't worry." He paused and sized his man up. "Come over here, Simmons," he said with a significant wink, leading the way toward the door. "I want that job; I want it badly." Topy dived into his pockets. Two bills came to light—two twenties. He slipped them casually into Simmons' hand. "That's how bad I want it. Now how about it?"

The fashion in which Simmons' thin fingers closed upon the money told Topy that he was not mistaken in the agent's character.

"You'll be taking your own chances," warned Simmons, carefully pocketing the money. "If you don't make good—well, you'll have to explain to Reivers, that's all. You must have an awful good reason for wanting to go out."

"I have."

"Hiding from something, mebbe?" suggested Simmons.

"Maybe," said Topy. "And, say—there's a young lady over at the hotel who's looking for you. Said you were to furnish her with a sleigh to get out to Cameron Dam."

An evil smile broke over the agent's thin face as he moved toward the door.

"The new bookkeeper, I suppose," he said, winking at Topy. "Aha! Now I understand why you ___"

Topy caught him two steps from the door. His fingers sank into the man's withered biceps.

"No, you don't understand," he hissed grimly. "Get that? You don't understand anything about it."

"All right," snapped the cowed man. "Leggo my arm. I was just joshing. You can take a joke, can't you? Well, then, come along. As long as you're going out you might as well go at once. I've got to get a double team, anyhow, for the lady, and you've got to start now to make it before dark. Ready to start now?"

"All ready," said Topy.

At the door the agent paused.

"Say, you haven't said anything about wages yet," he said quizzically.

"That's so," said Topy, as if he had forgotten. "How much am I going to get?"

"Sixty a month."

The agent couldn't understand why the new man should laugh. It struck Topy as funny that a little girl with a baby dimple in her chin should be earning more money than he. Also, he wondered what Harvey Duncombe and the rest of the bunch would have thought had they known.

Topy followed the agent to the stable behind the hotel, where Simmons routed out an old hunchbacked driver who soon brought forth a team of rangy bays drawing a light double-seated sleigh.

"Company outfit," explained Simmons. "Have to have a team; one horse can't make it. You can ride in the front seat with the driver. The lady will ride behind."

As Topy clambered in Simmons hurriedly whispered something in the ear of the driver, who was fastening a trace. The hunchback nodded.

"I got this job because I can keep my mouth shut," he muttered. "Don't you worry about anybody pumping me."

He stepped in beside Toppo; and the bays, prancing in the snow, went around to the front of the hotel on the run. There was a wait of a few minutes; then Simmons came out, followed by the girl carrying her suitcase. Toppo sprang out and took it from her hand.

"You people are going to be together on a long drive, so I'd better introduce you," said Simmons. "Miss Pearson, Mr. —"

"Treplin," said Toppo honestly.

"Treplin," concluded Simmons. "New bookkeeper, new blacksmith's helper. Get in the back seat, Miss Pearson. Cover yourself well up with those robes. Bundle in—that's right. Put the suitcase under your feet. That's right. All right, Jerry," he drawled to the driver. "You'd better keep going pretty steady to make it before dark."

"Don't nobody need to tell me my business," said the surly hunchback, tightening the lines; and without any more ado they were off, the snow flying from the heels of the mettlesome bays.

For the first few miles the horses, fresh from the stable and exhilarated to the dancing-point by the sun, air and snow, provided excitement which prevented any attempt at conversation. Then, when their dancing and shying had ceased and they had settled down to a steady, long-legged jog that placed mile after mile of the white road behind them with the regularity of a machine, Toppo turned his eyes toward the girl in the back seat.

He quickly turned them to the front again. Miss Pearson, snuggled down to her chin in the thick sleigh-robes, her eyes squinting deliciously beneath the sharp sun, was studying him with a frankness that was disconcerting, and Toppo, probably for the first time in his life, felt himself gripped by a great shyness and confusion. There was wonderment in the girl's eyes, and suspicion.

"She's wise," thought Toppo sadly. "She knows I've been hitting it up, and she knows I made up my mind to come out here after I talked with her. A fine opinion she must have of me! Well, I deserve it. But just the same I've got to see the thing through now. I can't stand for her going out all alone to a place with a reputation like Hell Camp. I'm a dead one with her, all right; but I'll stick around and see that she gets a square deal."

Consequently the drive, which Toppo had hoped would lead to more conversation and a closer acquaintance with the girl, resolved itself into a silent, monotonous affair which made him distinctly uncomfortable. He looked back at her again. This time also he caught her eyes full upon him, but this time after an instant's scrutiny she looked away with a trace of hardness about her lips.

"I'm in bad at the start with her, sure," groaned Toppo inwardly. "She doesn't want a thing to do with me, and quite right at that."

His tentative efforts at opening a conversation with the driver met instant and convincing failure.

"I hear they've got quite a place out here," began Toppo casually.

"None of my business if they have," grunted the driver.

Toppo laughed.

"You're a sociable brute! Why don't you bark and be done with it?"

The driver viciously pulled the team to a dead stop and turned upon Toppo with a look that could come only from a spirit of complete malevolence.

"Don't try to talk to me, young feller," he snapped, showing old yellow teeth. "My job is to haul you out there, and that's all. I don't talk. Don't waste your time trying to make me. Giddap!"

He cut viciously at the horses with his whip, pulled his head into the collar of his fur coat with the motion of a turtle retiring into its shell, and for the rest of the drive spoke only to the horses.

Toppo, snubbed by the driver and feeling himself shunned, perhaps even despised, by Miss Pearson, now had plenty of time to think over the situation calmly. The crisp November air whipping his face as the sleigh sped steadily along drove from his brain the remaining fumes of Harvey Buncombe's champagne. He saw the whole affair clearly now, and he promptly called himself a great fool.

What business was it of his if a girl wanted to go out to work in a place like Hell Camp? Probably it was all right. Probably there was no necessity, no excuse for his having made a fool of himself by going with her. Why had he done it, anyhow? Getting interested in anything because of a girl was strange conduct for him. He couldn't call to mind a single tangible reason for his actions. He had acted on the impulse, as he had done scores of times before; and, as he had also done scores of times before, he felt that he had made a fool of himself.

He tried to catch the girl's eyes once more, to read in them some sign of relenting, some excuse for opening a conversation. But as he turned his head Miss Pearson also turned and looked away with uncompromising severity. Toppo studied the purity of her profile, the innocence of the baby dimple in her chin, out of the corner of his eye. And as he turned and glanced at the evil face of the hunchback driver he settled himself with a sigh, and thought—

"Nevertheless, and notwithstanding the fact that I've been a fool, I am glad that I'm here."

At noon the road plunged out of the scant jack-pine forest into the gloom of a hemlock swamp. Toppo shuddered as he contemplated what the fate of a man might be who should be unfortunate

enough to get lost in that swamp. A mile in the swamp, on a slight knoll, they came to a tiny cabin guarding a gate across the road. An old, bearded woodsman came out of the cabin and opened the gate, and the hunchback pulled up and proceeded to feed his team.

"Dinner's waiting inside," called the gate-tender. "Come in and eat, miss—and you, too; I suppose you're hungry?" he added to Topsy.

"And hurry up, too," growled the hunchback. "I give you twenty minutes."

"Thank you very much," said the girl, diving into her suitcase. "I've brought my own lunch."

She brought out some sandwiches and proceeded to nibble at them without moving from the sleigh. Topsy tumbled into the cabin in company with the hunchback driver. A rough meal was on the table and they fell to without a word. Topsy noticed that the old woodsman sat on a bench near the door where he could keep an eye on the road. Above the bench hung a pair of field-glasses, a repeating shotgun and a high-power Winchester rifle.

"Any hunting around here?" asked Topsy cheerily.

"Sometimes," said the old watcher with a smile that made Topsy wonder.

He did not pursue the subject, for there was something about the lonely cabin, the bearded old man, and the rifle on the wall that suggested something much more grim than sport.

The driver soon bolted his meal and went back to the sleigh. Topsy followed, and twenty minutes after pulling up they were on the road again. With each mile that they passed now the swamp grew wilder and the gloom of the wilderness more oppressive. To right and left among the trees Topsy made out stretches of open water, great springs and little creeks which never froze and which made the swamp even in Winter a treacherous morass.

Toward the end of the short afternoon the swamp suddenly gave way to a rough, untimbered ridge. Red rocks, which Topsy later learned contained iron ore, poked their way like jagged teeth through the snow. The sleigh mounted the ridge, the runners grating on bare rock and dirt, dipped down into a ravine between two ridges, swung off almost at right angles in a cleft in the hills—and before Topsy realised that the end of the drive had come, they were in full view of a large group of log buildings on the edge of a dense pine forest and were listening to the roar of the waters of Cameron Dam.

CHAPTER IV—"HELL-CAMP" REIVERS

In the face of things there was nothing about the place to suggest that it deserved the title of Hell Camp. The Cameron Dam Camp, as Topsy saw it now, consisted of seven neat log buildings. Of these the first six were located on the road which led into the camp, three on each side. These buildings were twice as large as the ordinary log buildings which Topsy had seen in the woods; but they were thoroughly dwarfed and overshadowed by the seventh, which lay beyond them, and into the enormous doorway of which the road seemed to disappear. This building was larger than the other six combined—was built of huge logs, apparently fifteen feet high; and its wall, which stretched across the road, seemed to have no windows or openings of any kind save a great double door.

Topsy had no time for a careful scrutiny of the place, as the hunchback swiftly pulled up before the first building of the camp, a well-built double-log affair with large front windows and a small sign, "Office and Store." Directly across the road from this building was one bearing the sign, "Blacksmith Shop," and Topsy gazed with keen curiosity at a short man with white hair and broad shoulders who, with a blacksmith's hammer in his hand, came to the door of the shop as they drove up. Probably this was the man for whom he was to work.

"Hey, Jerry," greeted the blacksmith with a burr in his speech that labelled him unmistakably as a Scot.

"Hey, Scotty," replied the hunchback.

"Did ye bring me a helper?"

"Yes," grunted Jerry.

"Good!" said the blacksmith, and returned to his anvil.

The hunchback turned to the girl as soon as the team had come to a standstill.

"This is where you go," he said, indicating the office with a nod. "You," he grunted to Topsy, "sit right where you are till we go see the boss."

An Indian squaw, nearly as broad as she was tall, came waddling out of the store as Miss Pearson stepped stiffly from the sleigh. Topsy wished for courage to get out and carry the girl's suitcase, but he feared that his action would be misinterpreted; so he sat still, eagerly watching out of the corner of his eyes.

"I carry um," said the squaw as the girl dragged forth her baggage. "You go in."

Then the sleigh drove abruptly ahead toward the great building at the end of the road, and

Topy's final view of the scene was Miss Pearson stumping stiffly into the office-building with the squaw, the suitcase held in her arms, waddling behind. Miss Pearson did not look in his direction.

And now Topy had his first shock. For he saw that the building toward which they were hurrying was not a building at all, but merely a stockade-wall, which seemed to surround all of the camp except the six buildings which were outside. What he had thought a huge doorway was in reality a great gate.

This gate swung open at their approach, and Topy's second shock came when he saw that the two hard-faced men who opened it carried in the crooks of their arms wicked-looking, short-barrelled repeating shotguns. One of the men caught the horses by the head as soon as they were through the gate, and brought them to a dead stop, while the other closed the gate behind them.

"Can't you see the boss is busy?" snapped the man who had stopped the team. "You wait right here till he's through."

Topy now saw that they had driven into a quadrangle, three sides of which were composed of long, low, log buildings with doors and windows cut at frequent intervals, the fourth side being formed by the stockade-wall through which they had just passed. The open space which thus lay between four walls of solid logs was perhaps fifty yards long by twenty-five yards wide. In his first swift sight of the place Topy saw that, with the stockade-gate closed and two men with riot-guns on guard, the place was nothing more nor less than an effective prison. Then his attention was riveted spellbound by what was taking place in the yard.

On the sunny side of the yard a group of probably a dozen men were huddled against the log wall. Two things struck Topy as he looked at them—their similarity to the group of Slavs he had seen back in Rail Head, and the complete terror in their faces as they cringed tightly against the log wall. Perhaps ten feet in front of them, and facing them, stood a man alone. And Topy, as he beheld the terror with which the dozen shrank back from the one, and as he looked at the man, knew that he was looking upon Hell-Camp Reivers, the man who was called The Snow-Burner.

Topy Treplin was not an impressionable young man. He had lived much and swiftly and among many kinds of men, and it took something remarkable in the man-line to surprise him. But the sight of Reivers brought from him a start, and he sat staring, completely fascinated by the Manager's presence.

It was not the size of Reivers that held him, for Topy at first glance judged correctly that Reivers and himself might have come from the same mold so far as height and weight were concerned. Neither was it the terrible physical power which fairly reeked from the man; for though Reivers' rough clothing seemed merely light draperies on the huge muscles that lay beneath, Topy had played with strong men, professionals and amateurs, enough to be blasé in the face of a physical Colossus. It was the calm, ghastly brutality of the man, the complete brutality of an animal, dominated by a human intelligence, that held Topy spellbound.

Reivers, as he stood there alone, glowering at the poor wretches who cowered from him like pygmies, was like a tiger preparing to spring and carefully calculating where his claws and fangs might sink in with most damage to his victims. He stood with his feet close together, his thumbs hooked carelessly in his trousers pockets, his head thrust far forward. Topy had a glimpse of a long, thin nose, thin lips parted in a sneer, heavily browed eyes, and, beneath the back-thrust cap, a mass of curly light hair—hair as light as the girl's! Then Reivers spoke.

"Rosky!" he said in a voice that was half snarl, half bellow.

There was a troubled movement among the dozen men huddled against the wall, but there came no answer.

"Rosky! Step out!" commanded Reivers in a tone whose studied ferocity made Topy shudder.

In response, a tall, broad-shouldered Slav, the oldest and largest man in the group, stepped sullenly out and stood a yard in front of his fellows. He had taken off his cap and held it tightly in his clenched right hand, and the expression on his flat face as he stood with hanging head and scowled at Reivers was one half of fear and half of defiance.

"You no can hit me," he muttered doggedly. "I citizen; I got first papers."

Reivers's manner underwent a change.

"Hit you?" he repeated softly. "Who wants to hit you? I just want to talk with you. I hear you're thinking of quitting. I hear you've planned to take these fellows with you when you go. How about it, Rosky?"

"I got papers," said the man sullenly. "I citizen; I quit job when I want."

"Yes?" said Reivers gently. It was like a tiger playing with a hedgehog, and Topy sickened. "But you signed to stay here six months, didn't you?"

The gentleness of the Manager had deceived the thick-witted Slav and he grew bold.

"I drunk when I sign," he said loudly. "All these fellow drunk when they sign. I quit. They quit. You no can keep us here if we no want stay."

"I can't?" Still Reivers saw fit to play with his victim.

"No," said the man. "And you no dare hit us again, no."

"No?" purred Reivers softly. "No, certainly not; I wouldn't hit you. You're quite right, Rosky. I

won't hit you; no."

He was standing at least seven feet from his man, his feet close together, his thumbs still hooked in his trousers pockets. Suddenly, and so swiftly that Rosky did not have time to move, Reivers took a step forward and shot out his right foot. His boot seemed barely to touch the shin-bone of Rosky's right leg, but Topy heard the bone snap as the Slav, with a shriek of pain and terror, fell face downward, prone in the trampled snow at Reivers' feet.

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And Reivers did not look at him. He was standing as before, as if nothing had happened, as if he had not moved. His eyes were upon the other men, who, appalled at their leader's fate, huddled more closely against the log wall.

"Well, how about it?" demanded Reivers icily after a long silence. "Any more of you fellows think you want to quit?"

Half of the dozen cried out in terror:

"No, no! We no quit. Please, boss; we no quit."

A smile of complete contempt curled Reivers' thin upper lip.

"You poor scum, of course you ain't going to quit," he sneered. "You'll stay here and slave away until I'm through with you. And don't you even dare think of quitting. Rosky thought he'd kept his plans mighty secret—thought I wouldn't know what he was planning. You see what happened to him.

"I know everything that's going on in this camp. If you don't believe it, try it out and see. Now pick this thing up—" he stirred the groaning Rosky contemptuously with his foot—"and carry him into his bunk. I'll be around and set his leg when I get ready. Then get back to the rock-pile and make up for the time it's taken to teach you this lesson."

The brutality of the thing had frozen Topy motionless where he sat in the sleigh. At the same time he was conscious of a thrill of admiration for the dominant creature who had so contemptuously crippled a fellow man. A brute Reivers certainly was, and well he deserved the name of Hell-Camp Reivers; but a born captain he was, too, though his dominance was of a primordial sort.

Turning instantly from his victim as from a piece of business that is finished, Reivers looked around and came toward the sleigh. Some primitive instinct prompted Topy to step out and stretch himself leisurely, his long arms above his head, his big chest inflated to the limit. At the sight of him a change came over Reivers' face. The brutality and contempt went out of it like a flash. His eyes lighted up with pleasure at the sight of Topy's magnificent proportions, and he smiled a quick smile of comradeship, such as one smiles when he meets a fellow and equal, and held out his hand to Topy.

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"University man, I'll wager," he said, in the easy voice of a man of culture. "Glad to see you; more than glad! These beasts are palling on me. They're so cursed physical—no mind, no spirit in them. Nothing but so many pounds of meat and bone. Old Campbell, my blacksmith, is the only other intelligent being in camp, and he's Scotch and believes in predestination and original sin, so his conversation's rather trying for a steady diet."

Topy shook hands, amazed beyond expression. Except for his shaggy eyebrows—brows that somehow reminded Topy of the head of a bear he had once shot—Reivers now was the sort of man one would expect to meet in the University Club rather than in a logging-camp. The brute had vanished, the gentleman had appeared; and Topy was forced to smile in answer to Reivers' genial smile of greeting. And yet, somewhere back in Reivers' blue eyes Topy saw lurking something which said, "I am your master—doubt it if you dare."

"I hired out as blacksmith's helper," he explained. "My name's Treplin."

He did not take his eyes from Reivers'. Somehow he had the sensation that Reivers' will and his own had leaped to a grapple.

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Reivers laughed aloud in friendly fashion.

"Blacksmith's helper, eh?" he said. "That's good; that's awfully good! Well, old man, I don't care what you hired out for, or what your right name is; you're a developed human being and you'll be somebody to talk to when these brutes grow too tiresome." He turned to Jerry, the driver. "Well?" he said curtly.

"She's in the office now," he said.

"All right." Reivers turned and went briskly toward the gate. "Turn Mr. Treplin over to Campbell. You'll live with Campbell, Treplin," he called over his shoulder, as he went through the gate. "And you hit the back trail, Jerry, right away."

As Jerry swung the team around Topy saw that Reivers was going toward the office with long, eager strides.

Old Campbell, the blacksmith, had knocked off from the day's work when, a few minutes later, Toppo stepped from the sleigh before the door of the shop.

"Go through the shop to that room in the back," said Jerry. "You'll find him in there." And he drove off without another word.

Toppo walked in and knocked at a door in a partition across the rear of the shop.

"Come in," spluttered a moist, cheery voice, and Toppo entered. The old blacksmith, naked to the waist and soaped from shoulders to ears, looked up from the steaming tub in which he was carefully removing every trace of the day's smut. He peered sharply at Toppo, and at the sight of the young man's good-natured face he smiled warmly through the suds.

"Come in, come in. Shut the door," he cried, plunging back into the hot water. "I tak' it that you're my new helper? Well—" he wiped the suds from his eyes and looked Toppo over—"though it's plain ye never did a day's blacksmithing in your life, I bid ye welcome, nevertheless. Ye look like an educated man. Well, 'twill be a pleasure and an honour for me to teach ye something more important than all ye've learned before—and that is, how to work.

"I see ye cam' without baggage of any kind. Go ye now across to the store before it closes and draw yerself two blankets for yer bunk. By the time you're back I'll have our supper started and then we'll proceed to get acquanted."

"Tell me!" exploded Toppo, who could hold in no longer. "What kind of a man or beast is this Reivers? Why, I just saw him deliberately break a man's leg out there in the yard! What kind of a place is this, anyhow—a penal colony?"

Campbell turned away and picked up a towel before replying.

"Reivers is a great man who worships after strange gods," he said solemnly. "But you'll have plenty of time to learn about that later. Go ye over to the store now without further waiting. Ye'll find them closed if ye dally longer; and then ye'll have a cold night, for there's no blankets here for your bunk. Hustle, lad; we'll talk about things after supper."

Toppo obeyed cheerfully. It was growing dark now, and as he stepped out of the shop he saw the squaw lighting the lamps in the building across the street. Toppo crossed over and found the door open. Inside there was a small hallway with two doors, one labelled "Store," the other "Office." Toppo was about to enter the store, when he heard Miss Pearson's voice in the office, and her first words, which came plainly through the partition, made him pause.

"Mr. Reivers," she was saying in tones that she struggled to make firm, "you know that if I had known you were running this camp I would never have come here. You deceived me. You signed the name of Simmons to your letter. You knew that if you had signed your own name I would not be here. You tricked me.

"And you promised solemnly last Summer when I told you I never could care for you that you would never trouble me again. How could you do this? You've got the reputation among men of never breaking your word. Why couldn't you—why couldn't you keep your word with me—a woman?"

Toppo, playing the role of eavesdropper for the first time, scarcely breathed as he caught the full import of these words. Then Reivers began to speak, his deep voice rich with earnestness and feeling.

"I will—I am keeping my word to you, Helen," he said. "I said I would not trouble you again; and I will not. It's true that I did not let you know that I was running this camp; and I did it because I wanted you to have this job, and I knew you wouldn't come if you knew I was here. You wouldn't let me give you, or even loan you, the three hundred dollars necessary for your father's operation.

"I know you, Helen, and I know that you haven't had a happy day since you were told that your father would be a well man after an operation and you couldn't find the money to pay for it. I knew you were going to work in hopes of earning it. I had this place to fill in the office here; I was authorised to pay as high as seventy-five dollars for a good bookkeeper. Naturally I thought of you.

"I knew there was no other place where you could earn seventy-five dollars a month, and save it. I knew you wouldn't come if I wrote you over my own name. So I signed Simmons' name, and you came. I said I would not trouble you any more, and I keep my word. The situation is this: you will be in charge of this office—if you stay; I am in charge of the camp. You will have little or nothing to do with me; I will manage so that you will need to see me only when absolutely necessary. Your living-rooms are in the rear of the office. I live in the stockade. Tilly, the squaw, will cook and wash for you, and do the hard work in the store. In four months you will have the three hundred dollars that you want for your father.

"I had much rather you would accept it from me as a loan on a simple business basis; but as you won't, this is the next best thing. And you mustn't feel that you are accepting any favour from me. On the contrary, you will, if you stay, be solving a big problem for me. I simply can not handle accounts. A strange bookkeeper could rob me and the company blind, and I'd never know it. I know you won't do that; and I know that you're efficient.

"That's the situation. I am keeping my word; I will not trouble you. If you decide to accept, go in and take off your hat and coat and tell Tilly to prepare supper for you. She will obey your orders blindly; I have told her to. If you decide that you don't want to stay, say the word and I will have

one of the work-teams hooked up and you can go back to Rail Head to-night.

"But whichever you do, Helen, please remember that I have not broken—and never will break—my promise to you."

Before Reivers had begun to speak Topy had hated the man as a contemptible sneak guilty of lying to get the girl at his mercy. The end of the Manager's speech left him bewildered. One couldn't help wanting to believe every word that Reivers said, there were so much manliness and sincerity in his tone. On the other hand, Topy had seen his face when he was handling the unfortunate Rosky, and the unashamed brute that had showed itself then did not fit with this remarkable speech. Then Topy heard Reivers coming toward the door.

"I will leave you; you can make up your mind alone," he said. "I've got to attend to one of the men who has been hurt. If you decide to go back to Rail Head, tell Tilly, and she'll hunt me up and I'll send a team over right away."

He stepped briskly out in the hallway and saw Topy standing with his hand on the door of the store.

"Oh, hello, there!" he called out cheerily. "Campbell tell you to draw your blankets? That's the first step in the process of becoming a—guest at Hell Camp. Get a pair of XX; they're the warmest."

He passed swiftly out of the building.

"I say, Treplin," he called back from a distance, "did you ever set a broken leg?"

"Never," said Topy.

"I'll give you 'Davis on Fractures' to read up on," said Reivers with a laugh. "I think I'll appoint you M.D. to this camp. 'Doctor Treplin.' How would that be?"

His careless laughter came floating back as he made his way swiftly to the stockade.

For a moment Topy stood irresolute. Then he did something that required more courage from him than anything he had done before in his life. He stepped boldly across the hallway and entered the office, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER VI—"NICE BOY!"

"Miss Pearson!" Topy spoke as he crossed the threshold; then he stopped short.

The girl was sitting in a big chair before a desk in the farther corner of the room. She was dressed just as she had been on the drive; she had not removed cap, coat or gloves since arriving. Her hands lay palms up in her lap, her square little shoulders sagged, and her face was pale and troubled. A tiny crease of worry had come between her wonderful blue eyes, and her gaze wandered uncertainly, as if seeking help in the face of a problem that had proved too hard for her to handle alone. At the sight of Topy, instead of giving way to a look of relief, her troubled expression deepened. She started. She seemed even to shrink from him. The words froze in Topy's mouth and he stood stock-still.

"Don't!" he groaned boyishly. "Please don't look at me like that, Miss Pearson! I—I'm not that sort. I want to help you—if you need it. I heard what Reivers just said. I—What do you take me for, anyhow? A mucker who would force himself upon a lady?"

The anguish in his tone and in his honest, good-natured countenance was too real to be mistaken. He had cried out from the depths of a clean heart which had been stirred strangely, and the woman in the girl responded with quick sympathy. She looked at him with a look that would have aroused the latent manhood in a cad—which Topy was not—and Topy, in his eagerness, found that he could look back.

"Why did you come out here?" she asked plaintively. "Why did you decide to follow me, after you had heard that I was coming here? I know you did that; you hadn't intended coming here until you heard. What made you do it?"

"Because you came here," said Topy honestly.

"But why—why—"

Topy had regained control of himself.

"Why do you think I did it, Miss Pearson?" he asked quietly.

"I—I don't want to think—what I think," she stammered.

"And that is that I'm a cad, the sort of a mucker who forces his attentions upon women who are alone."

"Well—" she looked up with a challenge in her eyes—"you had been drinking, hadn't you? Could you blame me if I did?"

"Not a bit," said Topy. "I'm the one whose to blame. I'm the goat. I don't suppose I had a right

to butt in. Of course I didn't. I'm a big fool; always have been. I—I just couldn't stand for seeing you start out for this Hell Camp alone; that's all. It's no reason, I know, but—there you are. I'd heard something of the place in the morning and I had a notion it was a pretty tough place. You—you didn't look as if you were used to anything of the sort—Well," he wound up desperately, "it didn't look right, your going off alone among all these roughnecks; and—and that's why I butted in."

She made no reply, and Toppo continued:

"I didn't have any right to do it, I know. I deserve to be suspected—"

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"No!" she laughed. "Please, Mr. Treplin! That was horrid of me."

"Why was it?" he demanded abruptly. "Especially after you knew—after this morning. But—here's the situation: I thought you might need a side-kicker to see you through, and I appointed myself to the job. You won't believe that, I suppose, but that's because you don't know how foolish I can be."

He stopped clumsily, abashed by the wondering scrutiny to which she was subjecting him. She arose slowly from the chair and came toward him.

"I believe you, Mr. Treplin," she said. "I believe you're a decent sort of boy. I want to thank you; but why—why should you think this necessary?"

She looked at him, smiling a little, and Toppo, wincing from her "boy," grew flustered.

"Well, you're not sorry I came?" he stammered.

For reply she shook her head. Toppo took a long breath.

"Thanks!" he said with such genuine relief that she was forced to smile.

"But I'm a perfect stranger to you," she said uncertainly. "I can't understand why you should feel prompted to sacrifice yourself so to help me."

"Sacrifice!" cried Toppo. "Why, I'm the one—" He stopped. He didn't know just what he had intended to say. Something that he had no business saying, probably. "Anybody would have done it—anybody who wasn't a mucker, I mean. You can't have any use for me, of course, knowing what kind of a dub I've been, but if you'll just look on me as somebody you can trust and fall back on in case of need, and who'll do anything you want or need, I—I'll be more than paid."

"I do trust you, Mr. Treplin," she said, and held out her hand. "But—do I look as if I needed a chaperon?"

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Toppo trembled at the firm grip of the small, gloved fingers.

"I told you I'd heard what Reivers said," he said hastily. "I didn't mean to; I was just coming in to get some blankets. I don't suppose you're going to stay here now, are you?"

She began to draw off her gloves.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Mr. Reivers is a gentleman and can be depended upon to keep his word."

Toppo winced once more. She had called him a "decent boy"; she spoke of Reivers as a "gentleman."

"But—good gracious, Miss Pearson! Three hundred dollars—if that's all—"

He stopped, for her little jaw had set with something like a click.

"Are you going to spoil things by offering to lend me that much money?" she asked. "Didn't you hear that Mr. Reivers had offered to do it? And Mr. Reivers isn't a complete stranger to me—as you are."

She placed her gloves in a pocket and proceeded to unbutton her mackinaw.

"I don't think you could mean anything wrong by it," she continued. "But please don't mention it again. You don't wish to humiliate me, do you?"

"Miss Pearson!" stammered Toppo, miserable.

"Don't, please don't," she said. "It's all right." Her natural high spirits were returning. "Everything's all right. Mr. Reivers never breaks his word, and he's promised—you heard him, you say? And you've promised to be my—what did you call it?—'side-kicker,' so everything's fine. Except—" a look of disgust passed over her eyes—"your drinking. Oh," she cried as she saw the shame flare into Toppo's face, "I didn't mean to hurt you—but how can nice boys like you throw themselves away?"

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Nice boy! Toppo looked at his toes for a long time. So that was what she thought of him! Nice boy!

"Do you know much about Reivers?" he asked at last, as if he had forgotten her words. "Or don't you want to tell me about him?" He had sensed that he was infinitely Reivers' inferior in her estimation, and it hurt.

"Certainly I do," she said. "Mr. Reivers was a foreman for the company that my father was estimator for. When father was hurt last Summer Mr. Reivers came to see him on company business. It's father's spine; he couldn't move; Reivers had to come to him. He saw me, and two hours after our meeting he—he asked me to marry him. He asked me again a week later, and

once after that. Then I told him that I never could care for him and he went away and promised he'd never trouble me again. You heard our conversation. I hadn't seen or heard of him since, until he walked into this room. That's all I know about him, except that people say he never breaks his word."

Topsy winced as he caught the note of confidence in her voice and thought of the sudden deadly treachery of Reivers in dealing with Rosky. The girl with a lithe movement threw off her mackinaw.

"By Jove!" Topsy exploded in boyish admiration. "You're the bravest little soul I ever saw in my life! Going against a game like this, just to help your father!"

"Well, why shouldn't I?" she asked. "I'm the only one father has got. We're all alone, father and I; and father is too proud to take help from any one else; and—and," she concluded firmly, "so am I. As for being brave—have you anything against Mr. Reivers personally?"

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Thoroughly routed, Topsy turned to the door. "Good night, Miss Pearson," he said politely.

"Good night, Mr. Treplin. And thank you for—going out of your way." But had she seen the flash in Topsy's eye and the set of his jaw she might not have laughed so merrily as he flung out of the room.

In the store on the other side of the hallway Topsy was surprised to find Tilly, the squaw, waiting patiently behind a low counter on which lay a pair of blankets bearing a tag "XX." As he entered, the woman pushed the blankets toward him and pointed to a card lying on the counter.

"Put um name here," she said, indicating a dotted line on the card and offering Topsy a pencil tied on a string.

Topsy saw that the card was a receipt for the blankets. As he signed, he looked closely at the squaw. He was surprised to see that she was a young woman, and that her features and expression distinguished her from the other squaws he had seen by the intelligence they indicated. Tilly was no mere clod in a red skin. Somewhere back of her inscrutable Indian eyes was a keen, strong mind.

"How did you know what I wanted?" Topsy asked as he packed the blankets under his arm.

The squaw made no sign that she had heard. Picking up the card, she looked carefully at his signature and turned to hang the card on a hook.

"So you were listening when Reivers was talking to me, were you?" said Topsy. "Did you listen after he went out?"

"Mebbe," grunted Tilly. "Mebbe so; mebbe no." And with this she turned and waddled back into the living-quarters in the rear of the store.

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Topsy looked after her dumbfounded.

"Huh!" he said to himself. "I'll bet two to one that Reivers knows all about what we said before morning. I suppose that will mean something doing pretty quick. Well, the quicker the better."

CHAPTER VII—THE SNOW-BURNER'S CREED

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When Topsy returned to the room in the rear of the blacksmith-shop he found Campbell waiting impatiently.

"Eh, lad, but you're the slow one!" greeted the gruff old Scot as Topsy entered. "You're set a record in this camp; no man yet has been able to consume so much time getting a pair of blankets from the wannigan. Dump 'em in yon bunk in the corner and set the table. I'll have supper in a wink and a half."

Topsy obediently tossed his blankets into the bunk indicated and turned to help to the best of his ability. The place now was lighted generously by two large reflector-lamps hung on the walls, and Topsy had his first good view of the room that was to be his home.

He was surprised at its neatness and comfort. It was a large room, though a little low under the roof, as rooms have a habit of being in the North. In the farthest corner were two bunks, the sleeping-quarters. Across the room from this, a corner was filled with well filled bookshelves, a table with a reading-lamp, and two easy chairs, giving the air of a tiny library. In the corner farthest from this was the cook-stove, and in the fourth corner stood an oilcloth-covered table with a shelf filled with dishes hung above it. Though the rough edges of hewn logs shown here and there through the plaster of the walls, the room was as spick and span as if under the charge of a finicky housewife. Old Campbell himself, bending over the cook stove, was as astonishing in his own way as the room. He had removed all trace of the day's smithing and fairly shone with cleanliness. His snow-white hair was carefully combed back from his wide forehead, his bushy chin-whiskers likewise showed signs of water and comb, and he was garbed from throat to ankles in a white cook's apron. He was cheerfully humming a dirge-like tune, and so occupied was he with his cookery that he scarcely so much as glanced at Topsy.

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"Now then, lad; are you ready?" he asked presently.

"All ready, I guess," said Toppo, giving a final look at the table.

"You've forgot the bread," said Campbell, also looking. "You'll find it in yon tin box on the shelf. Lively, now." And before Toppo had dished out a loaf from the bread-box the old man had a huge platter of steak and twin bowls of potatoes and turnips steaming on the table.

"We will now say grace," said Campbell, seating himself after removing the big apron, and Toppo sat silent and amazed as the old man bowed his head and in his deep voice solemnly uttered thanks for the meal before him.

"Now then," he said briskly, raising his head and reaching for a fork as he ended, "fall to."

The meal was eaten without any more conversation than was necessary. When it was over, the blacksmith pushed his chair leisurely back from the table and looked across at Toppo with a quizzical smile.

"Well, lad," he rumbled, "what would ye say was the next thing to be done by oursel's?"

"Wash the dishes," said Toppo promptly, taking his cue from the conspicuous cleanliness of the room.

"Aye," said Campbell, nodding. "And as I cook the meal——"

"I'm elected dish-washer," laughed Toppo, springing up and taking a large dish-pan from the wall. He had often done his share of kitchen-work on hunting-trips, and soon he had the few dishes washed and dried and back on the shelf again. Campbell watched critically.

"Well enough," he said with an approving jerk of his head when the task was completed. "Your conscience should be easier now, lad; you've done something to pay for the meal you've eaten, which I'll warrant is something you've not often done."

"No," laughed Toppo, "it just happens that I haven't had to."

"Haven't had to!" snorted Campbell in disgust. "Is that all the justification you have? Where's your pride? Are you a helpless infant that you're not ashamed to let other people stuff food into your mouth without doing anything for it? I suppose you've got money. And where came your money from? Your father? Your mother? No matter. Whoever it came from, they're the people who've been feeding you, but by the great smoked herring! If you stay wi' David Campbell you'll have a change, lad. Aye, you'll learn what it is to earn your bread in the sweat of your brow. And you'll bless the day you come here—no matter what the reason that made you come, and which I do not want to hear."

Toppo bowed courteously.

"I've got no come-back to that line of conversation, Mr. Campbell," he said good-naturedly. "Whenever anybody accuses me of being a bum with money I throw up my hands and plead guilty; you can't get an argument out of me with a corkscrew."

Old Campbell's grim face cracked in a genial smile as he rose and led the way to the corner containing the bookshelves.

"We will now step into the library," he chuckled. "Sit ye down."

He pushed one of the easy chairs toward Toppo, and from a cupboard under the reading-table drew a bottle of Scotch whisky of a celebrated brand. Toppo's whole being suddenly cried out for a drink as his eyes fell on the familiar four stars.

"Say when, lad," said Campbell, pouring into a generous glass. "Well?" He looked at Toppo in surprise as the glass filled up. Something had smitten Toppo like a blow between the eyes—"How can nice boys like you throw themselves away?" And the pity of the girl as she had said it was large before him.

"Thanks," said Toppo, seating himself, "but I'm on the wagon."

The old smith looked up at him shrewdly from the corners of his eyes.

"Oh, aye!" he grunted. "I see. Well, by the puffs under your eyes ye have overdone it; and for fleeing the temptations of the world I know of no better place ye could go to than this. For it's certain neither temptations nor luxuries will be found in Hell Camp while the Snow-Burner's boss."

"Now you interest me," said Toppo grimly. "The Snow-Burner—Hell-Camp Reivers—Mr. Reivers—the boss. What kind of a human being is he, if he is human?"

Campbell carefully mixed his whisky with hot water.

"You saw him manhandle Rosky?" he asked, seating himself opposite Toppo.

"Yes; but it wasn't manhandling; it was brute-handling, beast-handling."

"Aye," said the Scot, sipping his drink. "So think I, too. But do you know what Reivers calls it? An enlightened man showing a human clod the error of his ways. Oh, aye; the Indians were smart when they named him the Snow-Burner. He does things that aren't natural."

"But who is he, or what is he? He's an educated man, obviously—'way above what a logging-boss ought to be. What do you know about him?"

"Little enough," was the reply. "Four year ago I were smithing in Elk Lake Camp over east of here, when Reivers came walking into camp. That was the first any white men had seen of him

around these woods, though afterward we learned he'd lived long enough with the Indians to earn the name of the Snow-Burner.

"It were January, and two feet of snow on the level, and fifty below. Reivers came walking into camp, and the nearest human habitation were forty mile away. 'Red Pat' Haney were foreman—a man-killer with the devil's own temper; and him Reivers de deliberately set himself to arouse. A week after his coming, this same Reivers had every man in camp looking up to him, except Red Pat.

"And Reivers drove Pat half mad with that contemptuous smile of his, and Pat pulled a gun; and Reivers says, 'That's what I was waiting for,' and broke Pat's bones with his bare hands and laid him up. Then, says he, 'This camp is going on just the same as if nothing had happened, and I'm going to be boss.' That was all there was to it; he's been a boss ever since."

"And you don't know where he came from? Or anything else about him?"

"Oh, he's from England—an Oxford man, for that matter," said Campbell. "He admitted that much once when we were argufying. He'll be here soon; he comes to quarrel with me every evening."

"Why does an Oxford man want to be 'way out here bossing a logging-camp?" grumbled Toppo.

Campbell nodded.

"Aye, I asked that of him once," he said. "'Though it's none of your business,' says he, 'I'll tell you. I got tired of living where people snivel about laws concerning right and wrong,' says he, 'instead of acknowledging that there is only one law ruling life—that the strong can master the weak.' That is Mr. Reivers' religion. He was only worshipping his strange gods when he broke Rosky's leg, for he considers Rosky a weaker man than himself, and therefore 'tis his duty to break him to his own will."

"A fine religion!" snapped Toppo. "And how about his dealings with you?"

The Scot smiled grimly.

"I'm the best smith he ever had," he replied, "and I've warned him that I'd consider it a duty under my religion to shoot him through the head did he ever attempt to force his creed upon me." He paused and held up a finger. "Hist, lad. That's him coming noo. He's come for his regular evening's mouthfu' of conversation."

Toppo found himself sitting up and gripping the arms of his chair as Reivers came swinging in. He eagerly searched the foreman's countenance for a sign to indicate whether Tilly, the squaw, had communicated the conversation she had heard between Toppo and Miss Pearson, but if she had there was nothing to indicate it in Reivers' expression or manner. His self-mastery awoke a sullen rage in Toppo. He felt himself to be a boy beside Reivers.

"Good evening, gentlemen," greeted Reivers lightly, pulling a chair up to the reading-table. "It is a pleasure to find intelligent society after having spent the last hour handling the broken leg of a miserable brute on two legs. Bah! The whisky, Scotty, please. I wonder what miracles of misbreeding have been necessary to turn out alleged human beings with bodies so hideous compared to what the human body should be. Treplin, if you or I stripped beside those Hunkies the only thing we'd have in common would be the number of our legs and arms."

He drew toward him a tumbler which Campbell had pushed over beside the bottle and, filling the glass three-quarters full, began to drink slowly at the powerful Scotch whisky as another man might sip at beer or light wine. Old Campbell rocked slowly to and fro in his chair.

"'He that taketh up the sword shall perish by the sword,'" he quoted solemnly. "No man is a god to set himself up, lord over the souls and bodies of his fellows. They will put out your light for you one of these days, Mr. Reivers. Have care and treat them a little more like men."

Reivers smiled a quick smile that showed a mouthful of teeth as clean and white as a hound's.

"Let's have your opinion on the subject, Treplin," he said. "New opinions are always interesting, and Scotty repeats the same thing over and over again. What do you think of it? Do you think I can maintain my rule over those hundred and fifty clods out there in the stockade as I am ruling them, through the law of strength over weakness? Do you think one superior mind can dominate a hundred and fifty inferior organisms? Or do you think, with Scotty here, that the dregs can drag me down?"

Toppo shook his head. He was in no mood to debate abstract problems with Reivers.

"Count me out until I'm a little acquainted with the situation," he said. "I'm a stranger in a strange land. I've just dropped in—from almost another world you might say."

In a vain attempt to escape taking sides in what was evidently an old argument he hurriedly rattled off the story of his coming to Rail Head and thence to Hell Camp, omitting to mention, however, that it was Miss Pearson who was responsible for the latter part of his journey. Reivers smote his huge fist upon the table as Toppo finished.

"That's the kind of a man for me!" he laughed. "Got tired of living the life of his class, and just stepped out of it. No explanations; no acknowledgement of obligations to anybody. Master of his own soul. To — with the niceties of civilisation! Treplin, you're a man after my own scheme of life; I did the same thing once—only I was sober."

"But let's get back to our subject. Here's the situation: This camp is on a natural town-site.

There's water-power, ore and timber. To use the water-power we must build a dam; to use the timber we must get it to the saws. That takes labour, lots of it—muscle-and-bone labour. Labour is scarce up here. It is too far from the pigsties of towns. Men would come, work a few days, and go away. The purpose of the place would be defeated—unless the men are kept here at work.

"That's what I do. I keep them here. To do it I keep them locked up at night like the cattle they are. By day I have them guarded by armed man-killers—every one of my guards is a fugitive from man's silly laws, principally from the one which says, 'Thou shalt not kill.'

"But my best guard is Fear—by which I rule alike my guards and the poor brutes who are necessary to my purpose. There you are: a hundred and fifty of them, fearing and hating me, and I'm making them do as I please. No foolishness about laws, about order, about right or wrong. Just a hundred and fifty half-beasts and myself out here in the woods. As a man with a trained mind, do you think I can keep it up? Or do you think there is mental energy enough in that mess of human protoplasm to muster up nerve enough to put out my light, as Scotty puts it? It's a problem that furnishes interesting mental gymnastics."

He propounded the problem with absolutely no trace of personal interest. To judge by his manner, the matter of his life or death meant nothing to him. It was merely an interesting question on which to expend the energy fulminating in his mind. In his light-blue eyes there seemed to gleam the same impersonal brutality which had shown out when he so casually crippled Rosky.

"Oh, it's an impossible proposition, Reivers!" exploded Topsy, with the picture of the writhing Slav in his mind's eye. "You've got to consider right and wrong when dealing with human beings. It isn't natural; Nature won't stand it."

"Ah!" Reivers' eyes lighted up with intellectual delight. "That's an idea! Scotty, you hear? You've been talking about my perishing by the sword, but you haven't given any reason why. Treplin does. He says Nature will revolt, because my system is unnatural." He threw back his head and laughed coldly. "Rot, Treplin—silly, effeminate, bookish rot!" he roared. "Nature has respect only for the strong. It creates the weaker species merely to give the stronger food to remain strong on."

Old Scotty had been rocking furiously. Now he stopped suddenly and broke out into a furious Biblical denunciation of Reivers' system. When he stopped for breath after his first outbreak, Reivers with a few words and a cold smile egged him on. Topsy gladly kept his mouth shut. After an hour he yawned and arose from his chair.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll turn in," he said. "I'm too sleepy to listen or talk."

Without looking at him Reivers drew a book from his pocket and tossed it toward him.

"'Davis on Fractures,'" he grunted. "Cram up on it to-morrow. There will be need of your help before long. Go on, Scotty; you were saying that a just retribution was Nature's law. Go on."

And Topsy rolled into his bunk, to lie wide awake, listening to the argument, marvelling at the character of Reivers, and pondering over the strange situation he had fallen into. He scarcely thought of what Harvey Duncombe and the bunch would be thinking about his disappearance. His thoughts were mainly occupied with wondering why, of all the women he had seen, a slender little girl with golden hair should suddenly mean so much to him. Nothing of the sort ever had happened to him before. It was rather annoying. Could she ever have a good opinion of him?

Probably not. And even if she could, what about Reivers? Topsy was firmly convinced that the speech which Reivers had made to Miss Pearson was a false one. Reivers might have a great reputation for always keeping his word, but Topsy, after what he had seen and heard, would no more trust to his morals than those of a hungry bear. If Tilly, the squaw, told Reivers what she had heard, what then? Well, in that case they would soon know whether Reivers meant to keep his promise not to bother Miss Pearson with his attentions. Topsy set his jaw grimly at the thought of what might happen then. The mere thought of Reivers seemed to make his fists clench hard.

He lay awake for a long time with Reivers' voice, coldly bantering Campbell, constantly in his ears. When Reivers finally went away he fell asleep. Before his closed eyes was the picture of the girl as, in the morning, she had kicked up the snow and looked up at him with her eyes deliciously puckered from the sun; and in his memory was the stinging recollection that she had called him a "nice boy."

CHAPTER VIII—TOPPY WORKS

At daylight next morning began Topsy's initiation as a blacksmith's helper. For the next four days he literally earned his bread in the sweat of his brow, as Campbell had warned him he would. The dour old Scot took it as his religious duty to give his helper a severe introduction to the world of manual labour, and circumstances aided him in his aim.

Two dozen huge wooden sleighs had come from the "wood-butcher"—the camp carpenter-shop—to be fitted with cross-rods, brace-irons and runners. Out in the woods the ice-roads, carefully

sprinkled each night, were alternately freezing and thawing, gradually approaching the solid condition which would mean a sudden call for sleighs to haul the logs, which lay mountain-high at the rollways, down to the river. One cold night and day now, and the call would come, and David Campbell was not the man to be found wanting—even if handicapped by a helper with hands as soft as a woman's.

Toppy had no knowledge or skill in the trade, but he had strength and quickness, and the thoughts of Reivers' masterfulness, and the "nice boy" in the mouth of the girl, spurred him to the limit. The heavy sledgework fell to his lot as a matter of course. A twenty-pound sledge was a plaything in Toppy's hand—for the first fifteen minutes.

After that the hammer seemed to increase progressively in weight, until at the end of the first day's work Toppy would gladly have credited the statement that it weighed a ton. Likewise the heavy runner-irons, which he lifted with ease on the anvil in the morning, seemed to grow heavier as the day grew older. Had Toppy been in the splendid condition that had helped him to win his place on the All-American eleven four years before, he might have gone through the cruel period of breaking-in without faltering. But four years of reckless living had taken their toll. The same magnificent frame and muscles were there; the great heart and grit and sand likewise. But there was something else there, too; the softening, weakening traces of decomposed alcohol in organs and tissues, and under the strain of the terrific pace which old Campbell set for Toppy, abused organs, fibres and nerves began to creak and groan, and finally called out, "Halt!"

It was only Toppy's grit—the "great heart" that had made him a champion—and the desire to prove his strength before Reivers that kept him at work after the first day. His body had quit cold. He had never before undergone such expenditure of muscular energy, not even in the fiercest game of his career. That was play; this was torture. On the second morning his body shrank involuntarily from the spectacle of the torturing sledge, anvil and irons, but pride and grit drove him on with set jaw and hard eyes. Quit? Well, hardly. Reivers walked around the camp and smiled as he saw Toppy sweating, and Toppy swore and went on.

On the third day old Campbell looked at him with curiosity.

"Well, lad, have ye had enough?" he asked, smiling pityingly. "Ye can get a job helping the cookee if you find man's work too hard for ye."

Toppy, between clenched teeth, swore savagely. He was so tired that he was sick. The toxins of fatigue, aided and abetted by the effects of hard living, had poisoned him until his feet and brain felt as heavy as lead. It hurt him to move and it hurt him to think. He was groggy, all but knocked out; but something within him held him doggedly at the tasks which were surely mastering him.

That night he dragged himself to bed without waiting for supper. In the morning Campbell was amazed to see him tottering toward his accustomed place in the shop; for old Campbell had set a pace that had racked his own iron, work-tried body, and he had allowed Toppy two days in which to cry enough.

"Hold up a little, lad," he grumbled. "We're away ahead of our job. There's no need laying yourself up. Take you a rest."

"You go to —!" exploded the overwrought Toppy. "Take a rest yourself if you need one; I don't."

He was working on his nerve now, flogging his weary arms and body to do his bidding against their painful protests; and he worked like a madman, fearing that if he came to a halt the run-down machinery would refuse to start afresh.

It was near evening when a teamster drove up with a broken sleigh from which Campbell and the man strove in vain to tear the twisted runner. Reivers from the steps of the store looked on, sneering. Toppy, his lips drawn back with pain and weariness, laughed shrilly at the efforts of the pair.

"Yank it off!" he cried contemptuously. "Yank it off—like this."

He drove a pry-iron under the runner and heaved. It refused to budge. Toppy gathered himself under the pry and jerked with every ounce of energy in him. The runner did not move. His left ankle felt curiously weak under the awful strain. Across the way he heard Reivers laugh shortly. Furiously Toppy jerked again; the runner flew into the air. Toppy felt the weak ankle sag under him in unaccountable fashion, and he fell heavily on his side and lay still.

"Sprained his ankle," grunted the teamster, as they bore him to his bunk. "I knew something had to give. No man ever was made to stand up under that lift."

"But I yanked it off!" groaned Toppy, half wild with pain. "I didn't quit—I yanked the darn thing off!"

"Aye," said old Campbell, "you yanked it off, lad. Lay still now till we have off your shoe."

"And holy smoke!" said the teamster. "What a yank! Hey! Whoap! Holy, red-roaring—he's gone and fainted!"

This latter statement was not precisely true. Toppy had not fainted; he had suddenly succumbed to the demands of complete exhaustion. The overdriven, tired-out organs, wrenched and abused tissues, and fatigue-deadened nerves suddenly had cried, "Stop!" in a fashion that not all of Toppy's will-power could deny. One instant he lay flat on his back on the blankets of his bunk, wide awake, with Campbell tugging at the laces of his shoes; the next—a mighty sigh of peace heaved his big chest. Toppy had fallen asleep.

It was not a natural sleep, nor a peaceful one. The racked muscles refused to be still; the raw nerve-centres refused to soothe themselves in the peace of complete senselessness. His whole body twitched. Topy tossed and groaned. He awoke some time in the night with his stomach crying for food.

"Drink um," said a voice somewhere, and a sturdy arm went under his head and a bowl containing something savoury and hot was held against his lips. 66

"Hello, Tilly," chuckled Topy deliriously. It was quite in keeping with things that Tilly, the squaw, should be holding his head and feeding him in the middle of the night. He drank with the avidity of a man parched and starving, and the hot broth pleasantly soothed him as it ran down his throat.

"More!" he said, and Tilly gave him more.

"Good fellow, Tilly," he murmured. "Good medicine. Who told you?"

"Snow-Burner," grunted Tilly, laying his head on the pillow. "He send me. Sleep um now."

"Sure," sighed Topy, and promptly fell back into his moaning, feverish slumber.

CHAPTER IX—A FRESH START 67

When he awoke again to clear consciousness, it was morning. The sun which came in through the east window shone in his eyes and lighted up the room. Topy lay still. He was quite content to lie so. An inexplicable feeling of peace and comfort ruled in every inch of his being. The bored, heavy feeling with which for a long time past he had been in the custom of facing a new day was absolutely gone. His tongue was cool; there was none of the old heavy blood-pressure in his head; his nerves were absolutely quiet. Something had happened to him. Topy was quite conscious of the change, though he was too comfortable to do more than accept his peaceful condition as a fact.

"Ho, hum! I feel like a new man," he murmured drowsily. "I wonder—ow!"

He had stretched himself leisurely and thus became conscious that his left ankle was bandaged and sore. His cry brought old Campbell into the room—Campbell solemnly arrayed in a long-tailed suit of black, white collar, black tie, spick and span, with beard and hair carefully washed and combed.

"Hello!" gasped Topy sleepily. "Where you going—funeral?"

"'Tis the Sabbath," said Campbell reverently, as he came to the side of the bunk. "And how do ye feel the day, lad?" 68

"Fine!" said Topy. "Considering that I had my ankle sprained last evening."

The Scot eyed him closely.

"So 'twas last evening ye broke your ankle, was it?" he asked cannily.

"Why, sure," said Topy. "Yesterday was Saturday, wasn't it? We were cleaning up the week's work. Why, what are you looking at me like that for?"

"Aye," said Campbell, his Sunday solemnity forbidding the smile that strove to break through. "Yesterday was Saturday, but 'twas not the Saturday you sprained your leg. A week ago Saturday that was, lad, and ye've lain here in a fever, out of your head, ever since. Do you mind naught of the whole week?"

Topy looked up at Campbell in silence for a long time.

"Scotty, if you have to play jokes——"

"Jokes!" spluttered Campbell, aghast. "Losh, mon! Didna I tell ye 'twas the Sabbath? No, 'tis no joke, I assure you. You did more than sprain your ankle when ye tripped that Saturday. You collapsed completely. Lad, you were in poor condition when you came to camp, and had I known it I would not have broken you in so hard. But you're a good man, lad; the best man I ever saw, if you keep in condition. And do you really feel good again?"

"Why, I feel like a new man," said Topy. "I feel as if I'd had a course of baths at Hot Springs."

Campbell nodded.

"The Snow-Burner said ye would. It's Tilly he's had doctoring ye. She's been feeding you some Indian concoction and keeping ye heated till your blankets were wet through. Oh, you've had scandalous good care, lad; Reivers to set your ankle, Tilly to doctor ye Indian-wise, and Miss Pearson and Reivers to drop in together now and anon to see how ye were standing the gaff. No wonder ye came through all right!" 69

The room seemed suddenly to grow dark for Topy. Reivers again—Reivers dropping in to look at him as he lay there helpless on his back. Reivers in the position of the master again; *and the girl with him!* Topy impatiently threw off his covering.

"Gimme my clothes, Scotty," he demanded, swinging himself to the edge of the bunk. "I'm tired of lying here on my back."

Campbell silently handed over his clothing. Toppo was weak, but he succeeded in dressing himself and in tottering over to a chair.

"So Miss Pearson came over here, did she?" he asked thoughtfully. "And with Reivers?"

"Aye," said Scotty drily. "With Reivers. He has a way with the women, the Snow-Burner has."

Toppo debated a moment; then he broke out and told Campbell all about how Reivers had deceived Miss Pearson into coming to Hell Camp. The old man listened with tightly pursed lips. As Toppo concluded he shook his head sorrowfully.

"Poor lass, she's got a hard path before her then," he said. "If, as you say, she does not wish to care for Reivers."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," said Campbell slowly, "ye'll be understanding by this time that the Snow-Burner is no ordinar' man?"

"He's a fiend—a savage with an Oxford education!" exploded Toppo.

"He is—the Snow-Burner," said Campbell with finality. "You know what he is toward men. Toward women—he's worse!"

"Good Heavens!"

"Not that he is a woman-chaser. No; 'tis not his way. But—yon man has the strongest will in him I've ever seen in mortal man, and 'tis the will women bow to." He pulled his whiskers nervously and looked away. "I've known him four year now, and no woman in that time that he has set his will upon but in the end has—has followed him like a slave."

Toppo's fists clenched, and he joyed to find that in spite of his illness his muscles went hard.

"Ye've seen Tilly," continued Scotty with averted eyes. "Ye'll not be so blind that ye've not observed that she's no ordinar' squaw. Well, three years ago Tilly was teacher in the Chippewa Indian School—thin and straight—a Carlisle graduate and all. She met Reivers, and shunned him—at first. Reivers did not chase her. 'Tis not his way. But he bent his will upon her, and the poor girl left her life behind her and followed him, and kept following him, until ye see her as she is now. She would cut your throat or nurse ye as she did, no matter which, did he but command her. And she's not been the only one, either."

"Nor have the rest of them been red."

"The swine!" muttered Toppo.

"More wolf than swine, lad. Perhaps more tiger than wolf. I don't think Reivers intends to break his word to yon lass. But I suspect that he won't have to. No; as it looks now, he won't. Given the opportunity to put his will upon her and she'll change her mind—like the others."

"He's a beast, that's what he is!" said Toppo angrily. "And any woman who would fall for him would get no more than she deserves, even if she's treated like Tilly. Why, anybody can see that the man's instincts are all wrong. Right in an animal perhaps, but wrong in a human being. The right kind of women would shun him like poison."

"I dunno," said Campbell, rubbing his chin. "Yon lass over in the office is as sweet and womanly a little lass as I've seen sin' I was a lad. And yet—look ye but out of the window, lad!"

Toppo looked out of the window in the direction in which Campbell pointed. The window commanded a view of the gate to the stockade. Reivers was standing idly before the gate. Miss Pearson was coming toward him. As she approached he carelessly turned his head and looked her over from head to foot. From where he sat Toppo could see her smile. Then Reivers calmly turned his back upon her, and the smile on the girl's face died out. She stood irresolute for a moment, then turned and went slowly back toward the office, glancing occasionally over her shoulder toward the gate. Reivers did not look, but when she was out of sight he began to walk slowly toward the blacksmith-shop.

"Bah!" Toppo turned his eyes from the window in mingled anger and disgust. He sat for a moment with a multitude of emotions working at his heart. Then he laughed bitterly.

"Well, well, well!" he mocked. "You'd expect that from a squaw, but not from a white woman."

"Mr. Reivers is a remarkable man," said Campbell, shaking his head.

"Sure," said Toppo, "and it's a mistake to look for a remarkable woman up here in the woods."

"I dunno." The smith looked a little hurt. "I dunno about that, lad. Yon lass seems remarkably sweet and ladylike to me."

"Sure," sneered Toppo, pointing his thumb toward the gate. "That looked like it, didn't it?"

"As for that, you've heard what I've told you about the Snow-Burner and women," said Campbell sorrowfully. "He has a masterful way with them."

"A fine thing to be masterful over a little blonde fool like that!"

Campbell scowled.

"Even though you have no respect for the lass," he said curtly, "I see no reason why you should put it in words."

"Why not? Why shouldn't I, or any one else, put it in words after that?" Topy fairly shouted the words. "She's made the thing public herself. She came creeping up to him right out where anybody who was looking could see her, and there won't be a man in camp to-morrow but'll have heard that she's fallen for Reivers. Apparently she doesn't care; so why should I, or you, or anybody else? Reivers has got a masterful way with women! Ha, ha! Let it go at that. It's none of my business, that's a cinch."

"No," agreed Campbell; "not if you talk that way, it's none of your business; that's sure."

Topy could have struck him for the emphatic manner in which he uttered the words. But Topy was beginning to learn to control himself and he merely gritted his teeth. The sudden stab which he had felt in his heart at the sight of the girl and Reivers had passed. In one flash there had been overthrown the fine structure which he had built about her in his thoughts. He had placed her high above himself. For some unknown reason he had looked up to her from the first moment he had seen her. He had not considered himself worthy of her good opinion. And here she was flaunting her subservience to Reivers—to a cold, sneering brute—before the eyes of the whole camp!

The rage and pain at the sight of the pair had come and gone, and that was all over. And now Topy to his surprise found that it didn't make much difference. The girl, and what she was, what she thought of him, or of Reivers, no longer were of prime importance to him. He didn't care enough about that now to give her room in his thoughts.

Reivers was what mattered now—Reivers, with his air of contemptuous dominance; Reivers, who had looked on and laughed when Topy was tugging at the runner of the broken sleigh. That laugh seemed to ring in Topy's ears. It challenged him even as it contemned him. It said, "I am your master; doubt it if you dare"; even as Reivers' cold smile had said the same to Rosky and the huddled bunch of Slavs.

The girl—that was past. But Reivers had roused something deeper, something older, something fiercer than the feelings which had begun to stir in Topy at the sight of the girl. Man—raw, big-thewed, world-old and always new man—had challenged unto man. And man had answered. The petty considerations of life were stripped away. Only one thing was of importance. The world to Topy Treplin had become merely a place for Reivers, the Snow-Burner, and himself to settle the question which had cried for settlement since the moment when they first looked into each other's eyes: Which was the better man?

Topy smiled as he stretched himself and noted the new life that seemed to have come into his body. He knew what it meant. That strenuous siege of work and a week of fevered sweating had driven the alcohol out of his system. He was making a fresh start. A few weeks at the anvil now, and he would be in better shape than at any time since leaving school. He set his jaw squarely and heaved his big arms high above his head.

"Well, Treplin," came an unmistakable voice from the doorway, "you're looking strenuous for a man just off the sickbed."

CHAPTER X—THE DUEL BEGINS

"I'm feeling pretty good, thank you, Reivers," said Topy quietly, though the voice of the man had thrilled him with the challenge in it. He turned his head slowly and looked up from his chair at Reivers with an expression of great serenity. The Big Game had begun between them, and Topy was an expert at keeping his play hidden.

"Much obliged for strapping up my ankle, Reivers," he said. "Silly thing, to sprain an ankle; but thanks to your expert bandaging it'll be ready to walk on soon."

"It wasn't a bad sprain," said Reivers, moving up and standing in front of him. That was Reivers all through. Topy was sitting; Reivers was standing, looking down on him, his favourite pose. The black anger boiled in Topy's heart, but by his expression one could read only that he was a grateful young man.

"No, it wasn't a bad sprain," continued Reivers, his upper lip lifting in its customary smile of scorn, "but—a man who attempts such heavy lifts must have no weak spot in him."

Topy twisted himself into a more comfortable position in his chair and smiled.

"'Attempts' is hardly the right word there, Reivers. Pardon me for differing with you," he laughed. "You may remember that the attempt was a success."

A glint of amusement in Reivers' cold eyes showed that he appreciated that something more weighty than a mere question of words lay beneath that apparently casual remark. For an instant his eyes narrowed, as if trying to see beyond Topy's smile and read what lay behind, but Topy's good poker-face now stood him in good stead, and he looked blandly back at Reivers' peering eyes and continued to smile. Reivers laughed.

"Quite right, Treplin; obliged to you for correcting me," he said. "A chap gets rusty out here, where none of the laws of speech are observed. I'll depend upon you to bring me back to form again—later on. Is your ankle really feeling strong?"

For answer Topy rose and stood on it.

"Well, well!" laughed Reivers. "Then Miss Pearson's sympathy was all wasted. What's the matter, Treplin? Aren't you glad to hear that charming young lady is enough interested in you to hunt me up and ask me to step in and see how you are this morning?"

"Not particularly," replied Topy, although he was forced to admit to himself a glow at this explanation of the girl's conversation with Reivers.

"What are you interested in?" said Reivers suddenly.

Topy looked up at him shrewdly.

"I tell you what I'd like to do, Reivers; I'd like to learn the logging-business—learn how to run a camp like this—run it efficiently, I mean."

"Worthy ambition," came the instant reply, "and you've come to the right school. How fortunate for you that you fell into this camp! You might have got into one where the boss had foolish ideas. You might even have fallen in with a humanitarian. Then you'd never have learned how to make men do things for you, and consequently you'd never have learned to run a camp efficiently." 76

"Thank your lucky stars, Treplin, that you fell in with me. I'll rid you of the silly little ideas about right and wrong that books and false living have instilled in your head. I believe you've got a good head—almost as good as mine. If, for instance, you were in a situation where it was your life or the other fellow's, you'd survive. That's the proof of a good head. Want to learn the logging-business, do you? Good! Is your ankle strong enough for you to get around on?"

Topy took an ax-handle from the corner and, using it as a cane, hobbled around the room.

"Yes, it will stand up all right," he said. "What's the idea?"

"Come with me," laughed Reivers, swinging toward the door. "We're just in time for lesson number one on how to run a camp efficiently."

CHAPTER XI—"HELL-CAMP" COURT 77

As Reivers led the way out of the shop Topy saw that Miss Pearson was standing in the door of the office across the way. He saw also that she was looking at him. He did not respond to her look nor volunteer a greeting, but deliberately looked away from her as he kept pace with Reivers, who was setting the way toward the gate of the stockade.

It was a morning such as the one when, back in Rail Head, the girl had kicked up the snow and said to him, "Isn't it glorious?" But since then Topy felt bitterly that he had grown so much older, so disillusioned, that never again would he be guilty of the tender feelings that the girl had evoked that morning. The sun was bright, the crisp air invigorating, and the blood bounded gloriously through his young body. But Topy did not wax enthusiastic.

He was grimly glad of the mighty stream of life that he felt surging within him; he would have use for all the might later on. But no more. The world was a harder, a less pretty place than he, in his inexperience, had fancied it before coming to Hell Camp.

"What's this lesson?" he asked gruffly of Reivers. "What are you going to show me?"

"A little secret in the art of keeping brute-men satisfied with the place in life which a superior mind has allotted to them," replied Reivers. "What is the first need of the brute? Food, of course. And the second is—fight. Give the lower orders of mankind, which is the kind to use in running a camp efficiently, plenty of food and fight, and the problem of restlessness is solved." 78

"That's history, Treplin, as you know. If these foolish, timid capitalists and leaders of men who are searching their petty souls for a remedy to combat the ravages of the modern disease called Socialism only would read history intelligently, they would find the remedy made to order. Fight! War! Give the lower brutes war; let 'em get out and slaughter one another, and they'd soon forget their pitiful, clumsy attempts to think for themselves. Give them guns with a little sharp steel on the end of the barrel, turn them loose on each other—any excuse would do—and they'd soon be so busy driving said steel into one another's thick bodies that the leaders could slip the yoke back on their necks and get 'em under hand again, where they belong.

"And they'd be happier, too, because a man-brute has got to have so much fighting, or what he calls his brain begins to trouble him; and then he imagines he has a soul and is otherwise unhappy. If there is fighting, or the certain prospect of fighting, there's no alleged thinking. There's the solution of all difficulties with the lower orders. Of course you've noticed how perfectly contented and happy the men in this camp are?" he laughed, turning suddenly on Topy.

"Yes," said Topy. "Especially Rosky and his bunch."

The Snow-Burner smiled appreciatively.

"Rosky, poor clod, hadn't had any fighting. I'd overlooked him. Had I known that thoughts had begun to trouble his poor, half-ox brain, I'd have given him some fighting, and he'd have been as content for the next few weeks as a man who—who's just been through delirium tremens.

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"He had no object in life, you see. If he'd had a good enemy to hate and fight, he wouldn't have been troubled by thoughts, and consequently he wouldn't now be lying in his bunk with his leg in splints.

"There is the system in a nutshell—give a man an enemy to hate and wish to destroy, and he won't be any trouble to you during working-hours or after. That's what I do—pick out the ones who might get restless and set them to hating each other. And now," he concluded, as they reached the gate and passed through, "you'll have a chance to see how it works out."

The big gate, opened for them by two armed guards, swung shut behind them, and Topy once more looked around the enclosure in which he had had his first glimpse of the Snow-Burner's system of handling the men under him. The place this morning, however, presented a different, a more impressive scene. It was all but filled with a mass of rough-clad, rough-moving, rough-talking male humanity.

Perhaps a hundred and fifty men were waiting in the enclosure. For the greater part they were of the dark, thick and heavily clumsy type that Topy had learned to include under the general title of Bohunk; but here and there over the dark, ox-like faces rose the fair head of a tall man of some Northern breed. Slavs comprised the bulk of the gathering; the Scandinavians, Irish, Americans—the "white men," as they called themselves—were conspicuous only by contrast and by the manner in which they isolated themselves from the Slavs.

And between the two breeds there was not much room for choice. For while the faces of the Slavs were heavy with brute stupidity and malignity, those of the North-bred men reeked with fierceness, cruelty and crime. The Slavs were at Hell Camp because they were tricked into coming and forced to remain under shotgun rule; the others were there mostly because sheriffs found it unsafe and unprofitable to seek any man whom the Snow-Burner had in his camp. They were "hiding out." Criminals, the majority of them, they preyed on the stupid Slavs as a matter of course; and this situation Reivers had utilised, as he put it, "to keep his men content."

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Though there was a gulf of difference between the extreme types of the crowd, Topy soon realised that just now their expressions were strangely alike. They were all impatient and excited. The excitement seemed to run in waves; one man moved and others moved with him. One threw up his head and others did likewise. Their faces were expectant and cruel. It was like the milling of excited cattle, only worse.

"Come along, Treplin," said Reivers, and led the way toward the centre of the enclosure. The noises of the crowd, the talking, the short laughter, the shuffling, ceased instantly at his appearance. The crowd parted before him as before some natural force that brushed all men aside. It opened up even to the centre of the yard, and then Topy saw whither Reivers was leading.

On the bare ground was roped off a square which Topy, with practised eye, saw was the regulation twenty-four-foot prize-fight ring. Rough, unbarked tamarack poles formed the corner-posts of the ring, and the ropes were heavy wire logging-cable. A yard from one side of the ring stood a table with a chair upon it. Reivers, with a careless, "Take a seat on the table and keep your eyes open," stepped easily upon the table, seated himself in the chair and looked amused as the men instinctively turned their faces up toward him.

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"Well, men," he said in a voice which reached like cold steel into the far corners of the enclosure, "court is open. The first case is Jan Torta and his brother Mikel against Bill Sheedy, whom they accuse of stealing ninety-eight dollars from them while they slept."

As he spoke the names two young Slavs, clumsy but strongly built, their heavy faces for once alight with hate and desire for revenge, pushed close to one side of the ring, while on the other side a huge red-haired Celt, bloated and evil of face, stepped free of the crowd.

"Bill stole the money, all right," continued Reivers, without looking at any of them. "He had the chance, and being a sneak thief by nature he took it. That's all right. The Torta boys had the money; now Bill's got it. The question is: Is Bill man enough to keep it? That's what we're going to settle now. He's got to show that he's a better man than the two fellows he took the money from. If he isn't, he's got to give up the money, or the two can have him to do what they want to with him. All right, boys; get 'em started there."

At his brisk order four men whom Topy had seen around camp as guards stepped forward, two to Sheedy, two to the Torta brothers, and proceeded first to search them for weapons, next to strip them to the waist. Sheedy hung back.

"Not two av um tuh wanst, Mr. Reivers?" he asked humbly. "One after deh udder it oughta be; two tuh wanst, that ain't no way."

"And why not, Bill?" asked Reivers gently. "You took it from both of them, didn't you? Then keep it against both of 'em, Bill. Throw 'em in there, boys!"

Topy looked around at the rows of eager faces that were pressing toward the ringside. Prize-fights he had witnessed by the score. He had even participated in one or two for a lark, and the brute lust that springs into the eyes of spectators was no stranger to him. But never had he seen

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anything like this. There was none of the restraint imposed upon the human countenance by civilisation in the fierce faces that gathered about this ring.

Out of the dull eyes the primitive killing-animal showed unrestrained, unashamed. No dilettante interest in strength or skill here; merely the bare bloodthirsty desire to see a fellow-animal fight and bleed. Up above, the sky was clean and blue; the rough log walls shut out the rest of the world; the breathing of a mob of excited men was the only sound upon the quiet Sunday air. It was the old arena again; the merciless, gore-hungry crowd; the maddened gladiators; and upon the chair on the table, Reivers, lord of it all, the king-man, to whom it was all but an idle moment's play.

Reivers, above it all, untouched by it all, and yet directing and swaying it all as his will listed. Laws, rules, teachings, creeds—all were discarded. Primitive force had for the nonce been given back its rule. And over it, and controlling it, as well as each of the maddened eight-score men around the ring—Reivers.

And so thoroughly did Reivers dominate the whole affair that Toppo, sitting carelessly on the edge of the table, was conscious of it, and knew that he, too, felt instinctively inclined to do as the men did—to look to Reivers for a sign before daring to speak or make a move. The Snow-Burner was in the saddle. It wasn't natural, but every phase of the situation emanated from his master-man's will. It was even his wish that Toppo should sit thus at his feet and look on, and his wish was gratified.

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But it was well that the visor of Toppo's cap hid his eyes, else Reivers might have wondered at the look that flashed up at him from them.

"Throw 'em in!" snapped Reivers, and the handlers thrust the three combatants, stripped to the waists but wearing calked lumberjack shoes, through the ropes.

A cry went up to the sky from a hundred and fifty throats around the ringside—a cry that had close kinship with the joyous, merciless "*Au-rr-ruh*" of a wolf about to make its kill. Then an instant's silence as the rudely handled fighters came to their feet and faced for action. Then another hideous yelp rent the still air; the fighters had come together!

"Queer ring-costumes, eh, Treplin?" came Reivers' voice mockingly. "Our own rules; the feet as well as the hands. Lord, what oxen!"

The two Slavs had sprung upon their despoiler like two maddened cattle. Sheedy, rushing to meet them, head down, swung right and left overhand; and with a mighty smacking of hard fist on naked flesh, one Torta rolled on the ground while his brother stopped in his tracks, his arms pressed to his middle. The crowd bellowed.

"Yes, I knew Sheedy had been a pug," said Reivers judicially.

Sheedy deliberately took aim and swung for the jaw of the man who had not gone down. The Slav instinctively ducked his head, and the blow, slashing along his jawbone, tore loose his ear. Half stunned, he dropped to his knees, and Sheedy stepped back to poise for a killing kick. But now the man who had been knocked down first was on his feet, and with the scream of a wounded animal he hurled himself through the air and went down, his arms close-locked around Sheedy's right leg. Sheedy staggered. The ring became a little hell of distorted human speech. Sheedy bellowed horrible curses as he beat to a pulp the face that sought to bury itself in his thigh; his assailant screeched in Slavish terror; and the bull-like roar of his brother, rising to his feet with cleared senses and springing into the battle, intermingled with both. Sheedy's red face went pale.

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Around the ringside the faces of the Slavs shone with relief. The fight was going their way; they roared encouragement and glee in their own guttural tongue. The others—Irish, Americans, Scandinavians—rooting for Sheedy only because he was of their breed, were silent.

"Hang tough, Bill," said one man quietly; and then in a second the slightly superior brains in Sheedy's head had turned the battle. Like a flash he dropped flat on his back as his fresh assailant reached out to grip him. The furious Slav followed him helplessly in the fall; and a single gruff, appreciative shout came from the few "white men."

For they had seen, even as the Slav stumbled, Bill Sheedy's left leg shoot up like a catapult, burying the calked shoe to the ankle in the man's soft middle and flinging him to one side, a shuddering, senseless wreck. The man with his arms around Sheedy's leg looked up and saw. He was alone now, alone against the big man who had knocked him down with such ease. Toppo saw the man's mouth open and his face go yellow.

"Na, na, na!" he cried piteously, as Sheedy's blows again rained upon him. "I give up, give up, give up!"

He tried to bury his face in Bill's thigh; and Bill, mad with success, strove to pound him loose.

"Kill him, Bill!" said one of the Irishmen quietly. "You got him now; kill him."

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"Stop." Reivers did not raise his voice. He seemed scarcely interested. Yet the roars around the ring died down. Sheedy stopped a blow half delivered and dropped his arms. The Slav released his clawlike hold and ran, sobbing, toward his prostrate brother.

"All right, Bill; you keep the money—for all them," said Reivers. "Clear out the ring, boys, and get that other pair in there."

The guards, springing into the ring as if under a lash, picked up the senseless man and thrust

him like a sack of grain through the ropes and on to the ground at the feet of a group of his countrymen. Topy saw these pick the man up and bear him away. The man's head hung down limply and dragged on the ground, and a thin stream of blood ran steadily out of one side of his mouth. His brother followed, loudly calling him by name.

"Very efficacious, that left leg of Bill's; eh, Treplin?" said Reivers lightly. "Bill was the superior creature there. He had the wit and will to survive in a crisis; therefore he is entitled to the rewards of the superior over the inferior, which in this case means the ninety-eight dollars which the Torta boys once had. That's justice—natural justice for you, Treplin; and all the fumbling efforts of the lawmakers who've tried through the ages to reduce life to a pen-and-paper basis haven't been able to change the old rule one bit.

"I'll admit that courts and all the fakery that goes with them have reduced the thing to a battle of brains, but after all it's the same old battle; the stronger win and hold. And," he concluded, waving his hand at the crowd, "you'll admit that Bill, and those Torta boys wouldn't be at their best in a contest of intelligence."

Topy refused Reivers the pleasure of seeing how the brutality of the affair disgusted him.

"Why don't you follow the thing out to its logical conclusion?" he said carelessly. "The thing isn't settled as long as the Torta boys can possibly make reprisals. To be a consistent savage you'd have to let 'em go to it until one had killed the other. But even you don't dare to do that, do you, Reivers?"

Reivers laughed, but the look that he bent on Topy's bland face indicated that he was a trifle puzzled.

"Then you wouldn't be running the camp efficiently, Treplin," he said. "It wouldn't make any difference if they were all Tortas; but Bill's a valuable man. He furnishes some one a bellyful of hating and fighting every week. No; I wouldn't have Bill killed for less than two hundred dollars. He's one of my best antidotes for the disease of discontent."

The guards now had pulled two other men up to the ropes and were searching and stripping them. Topy stared at the disparity in the sizes of the men as the clothes were pulled off them. One stood up strong and straight, the muscles bulging big beneath his dark skin, his neck short and heavy, his head cropped and round. He wore a small, upturned moustache and carried himself with a certain handy air that indicated his close acquaintance with ring-events. The other man was short and dark, obviously an Italian; the skin of his body was a sickly white, his face olive green. He stood crouched, and beneath his ragged beard two teeth gleamed, like the fangs of a snarling dog.

"Antonio, the Knife-Expert, and Mahmout, the Strangling Bulgarian," announced Reivers laughingly. "Tony tried to stick Mahmout because of a little lady back in Rail Head, and made such a poor job of it that Mahmout has offered to meet him in the ring; Tony with his knife, Mahmout with his wrestling-tricks. Start 'em off."

The Bulgarian was under the ropes and upright in the ring before the Italian had started. He was in his stocking-feet, and despite the clumsiness of his build he moved with a quickness and ease that told of the fine co-ordination of the effective athlete. When the Italian entered the ring he held his right hand behind his back, and in the hand gleamed the six-inch blade of a wicked-looking stiletto.

A shiver ran along Topy's spine, but he continued to play the game.

"Evidently Mahmout isn't a valuable man; you don't care what happens to him," he said.

"Not particularly," replied Reivers seriously. "He's a good man on the rollways—nothing extra. Still, I hardly believe Tony can kill him—not this time, at least."

The faces around the ring grew fiercer now. Growled curses and exclamations came through clenched teeth. Here was the spectacle that the brute-spirit hungered for—the bare, living flesh battling for life against the merciless, gleaming steel.

The big Bulgarian moved neatly forward, bent over at the waist, his strong arms extended, hands open before him in the practised wrestler's guard and attack. His feet did not leave the ground as he sidled forward, and his eyes never moved from the Italian's right arm. The latter, snarling and panting, retreated slightly, then began to circle carefully, his small eyes searching for the opening through which he could leap in and drive home his steel.

The Bulgarian turned with him, his guard always before him, as a bull turns its head to face the circling wolf. Without a sound the knife-man suddenly stopped and lunged a sweeping slash at the menacing hands. Mahmout, grasping for a hold on hand or wrist, caught the tip of the blade in his palm, and a slow bellow of rage shook him as he saw the blood flow. But he did not lower his guard nor take his eyes from his opponent.

The Italian retreated and circled again. A horrible sneer distorted his face, and the knife flashed in the sunlight as he slashed it to and fro before the other's hands. The crowd growled its appreciation. Three times Antonio leaped forward, slashed, and leaped back again; and each time the blood flowed from Mahmout's slashed fingers. But the wrestler's guard never lowered nor did he falter in his set plan of battle. He was working to get his man into a corner.

The Italian soon saw this and, leaping nimbly sidewise, lunged for Mahmout's ribs. The right arm of the Bulgarian dropped in time to save his life, but the knife, deflected from its fatal aim, ripped through the top muscles of his back for six inches. The mob roared at the fresh blood, but

Mahmout was working silently. In his spring the Italian had only leaped toward another corner of the ring.

Mahmout leaped suddenly toward him. Antonio, stabbing swiftly at the hands reached out for him, jumped back. A cry from a countryman in the crowd warned him. Swiftly he glanced over his shoulder, saw that he was cornered, and with a low, sweeping swing of the arm he threw the knife low at Mahmout's abdomen.

The blade glinted as it flashed through the air; it thudded as it struck home; but the death-cry which the mob yelped out died short. With the expert's quickness Mahmout had flung his huge forearms before the speeding blade. Now he held his left arm up. The stiletto, quivering from the impact, had pierced it through.

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With a fierce roar Mahmout plucked out the knife, hurled it from the ring and dived forward. The Italian fought like a fury, feet, teeth and fingernails making equal play. He sank his teeth in the injured left arm. Mahmout groped with his one sound hand and methodically clamped a hold on an ankle. He made sure that the hold was a firm one; then he wrenched suddenly—once. The Italian screamed and stiffened straight up under the appalling pain. Then he fell flat to the ground, and Topsy saw that his right foot was twisted squarely around and that the leg lay limp on the ground like a twisted rag.

"Stop," said Reivers, and Mahmout stepped back. "Take Tony's knife away from him, boys. Mahmout wins—for the time being."

"Inconsistent again," muttered Topsy. "Your scheme is all fallacies, Reivers. You give Tony a knife with which he may kill Mahmout at one stroke, but you don't let Mahmout finish him when he's got him down. Why don't you carry your system to its logical conclusion?"

"Why don't I?" chuckled Reivers, stepping down from the table. "Why, simply because Signor Antonio is the camp cook, and cooks are too scarce to be destroyed unnecessarily. Now come along, Treplin. Court's adjourned; a light docket to-day. I've been thinking of your wanting to learn how to run a logging-camp. I'm going to give you a change of jobs. You'll be no good in the blacksmith-shop till your ankle's normal again. Come along; I'll show you what I've picked out for you."

He turned away from the ring as from a finished episode in the day's work. That was over. Whether Torta or Antonio lived or died, were whole or crippled for the rest of their lives, had no room in his thoughts. He strode toward the gate as if the yard were empty, and the crowd opened a way far before him. Outside the gate he led the way around the stockade toward where the river roared and tumbled through the chutes of Cameron Dam.

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A cliff-like ledge, perhaps thirty feet in height, situated close to one end of the dam, was Reivers' objective, and he led Topsy around to the side facing the river. Here the dirt had been scraped away on the face of the ledge, and a great cave torn in the exposed rock. The hole was probably fifty feet wide, and ran from twelve to fifteen feet under the brow of the ledge. Topsy was surprised to see no timbers upholding the rocky roof, which seemed at any moment likely to drop great masses of jagged stone into the opening beneath.

"My little rock-pile," explained Reivers lightly. "When my brutes aren't good I put 'em to work here. The rock goes into the dam out there. Just at present Rosky's band of would-be malcontents are the ones who are suffering for daring to be dissatisfied with the—ah—simplicity, let us say, of Hell Camp."

He laughed mirthlessly.

"I'm going to put you in charge of this quarry, Treplin. You're to see that they get one hundred wheelbarrows of rock out of here per hour. You'll be here at daylight to-morrow."

Topsy nodded quietly.

"What's the punishment here?" he asked, puzzled. "It looks like nothing more than hard work to me."

Reivers smiled the same smile that he had smiled upon Rosky.

"Look at the roof of that pit, Treplin," he said. "You've noticed that it isn't timbered up. Occasionally a stone drops down. Sometimes several stones. But one hundred barrows an hour have to come out of there just the same. And those rocks up there, you'll notice, are beautifully sharp and heavy."

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Topsy felt Reivers' eyes upon him, watching to see what effect this explanation would have, and consequently he no more betrayed his feelings than he had at the brutal scenes of the "court."

"I see," he said casually. "I suppose this is why you made me read up on fractures?"

"Partly," said Reivers. He looked up at the jagged rocks in the roof of the pit and grinned. "And sometimes an accident here calls for a job for a pick and shovel. But I'm just, Treplin; only the malcontents are put to work in here."

"That is, those who have dared to declare themselves something besides your helpless slaves."

"Or dared to think of declaring themselves thus," agreed Reivers promptly.

"I see." Topsy was looking blandly at the roof, but his mind was working busily.

"Just why do you give me charge of this hole, Reivers—if you don't mind my asking? Isn't it rather

an unusual honour for a green hand to be put over a crew like this?"

"Unusual! Oh, how beastly banal of you, Treplin!" laughed Reivers carelessly. "Surely you didn't expect me to do the usual thing, did you? You say you want to learn how to handle a camp like this. You're an interesting sort of creature, and I'd like to see you work out in the game of handling men, so I give you this chance. Oh, I'll do great things for you, Treplin, before I'm done with you! You can imagine all that I've got in store for you."

The smile vanished and he turned away. He was through with this incident, too. Without another word or look at Topsy he went back to the stockade, his mind already busy with some other project. Topsy stood looking after him until Reivers' broad back disappeared around the corner of the stockade. 92

"No, you clever devil!" he muttered. "I can't imagine. But whatever it is, I promise I'll hand it back to you with a little interest, or furnish a job for a pick and shovel."

He walked slowly back to the blacksmith-shop. He was glad to be left alone. Though he had permitted no sign of it to escape him, Topsy had been enraged and sickened at what he had seen in the stockade. He admitted to himself that it was not the fact that men had been disabled and crippled, nor the brutal rules that had governed, nor that men had been exposed to death at the hands of others before his eyes, that had stirred him so. It was—Reivers. Reivers sitting up there on the table playing with men's bodies and lives as with so many cards—Reivers, the dominant, lord over his fellows.

The veins swelled in Topsy's big neck as he thought of Reivers, and his hitherto good-natured face took on a scowl that might have become some ancestral man-captain in the days of mace and mail, but which never before had found room on Topsy's countenance—not even when the opposing half-backs were guilty of slugging. But he was playing another game now, an older one, a fiercer one, and one which called to him as nothing had called before. It was the man-game now; and out there in the old, stern forest, spurred by the challenge of the man who was his natural enemy, the primitive fighting-man in Topsy shook off the restraint with which breeding, education and living had cumbered him, and stood out in a fashion that would have shocked Topsy's friends back East.

Near the shop he met Miss Pearson. By her manner he saw that she had been waiting for him, but Topsy merely raised his cap and made to pass on. 93

"Mr. Treplin!" There was astonishment at his rudeness in her exclamation.

"Well?" said Topsy.

"Your ankle?"

"Oh, yes. Pardon me for not expressing my thanks before. It's almost well—thanks to you and Mr. Reivers."

She made a slight shrinking movement and stood looking at him for a moment. She opened her lips, but no words came.

"Old Scotty told me about your kindness in coming to see me, you and Mr. Reivers together," said Topsy. "It was a relief to learn that your confidence in Reivers was justified."

She looked up quickly, straight into his eyes. A troubled look swept over her face. Then with a toss of the head she turned and crossed the road, and Topsy swung on his way to the room in the rear of the shop and closed the door behind him with a vicious slam.

CHAPTER XII—TOPPY'S FIRST MOVE 94

Next morning, in the cold stillness which precedes the coming of daylight in the North, Topsy stood leaning on his axe-handle cane and watched his crew of a dozen men file out of the stockade gate and turn toward the stone-quarry. They walked with the driven air of prisoners going to punishment. In the darkness their squat, shapeless figures were scarcely human. Their heads hung, their steps were listless, as if they had just completed a hard day's work instead of having arisen from a hearty breakfast.

The complete lack of spirit evinced by the men irritated Topsy. Was Reivers right after all? Were they nothing but clods, undeserving of fair and intelligent treatment?

"Hey! Wake up there! You look like a bunch of corpses. Show some life!" cried Topsy, in whom the bitter morning air was sending the red blood tingling.

The men did not raise their heads. They quickened their stumbling steps a little, as a heavy horse shambles forward a little under the whip. One or two looked back, beyond where Topsy was walking at the side of the line. Treplin with curiosity followed their glances. A grim-lipped shotgun guard with a hideous hawk nose had emerged from the darkness, and with his short-barrelled weapon in the crook of his arm was following the line at a distance of fifty or sixty feet. Topsy halted abruptly. So did the guard. 95

"What's the idea?" demanded Topsy. "Reivers send you?"

"Yes," said the guard gruffly.

"Does it take two of us to make this gang work?" Toppo was irritated. Reivers, he knew, would have handled the gang alone.

"The boss sent me," said the guard, with a finality that indicated that for him that ended the discussion.

The daylight now came wanly up the gap made in the forest by the brawling river, and the men stood irresolute before the quarry and peered up anxiously at the roof of the pit.

"Grab your tools," said Toppo. "Get in there and get to it."

The men, some of them taking picks and crowbars, some wheelbarrows, were soon ready to begin the day's work. But there was a hitch somewhere. They stood at the entrance to the pit and did not go in. They looked up at the threatening roof; then they looked anxiously, pleadingly, at Toppo. But Toppo was thinking savagely of how Reivers would have handled the gang alone and he paid no attention.

"Get in there!" he roared. "Come on; get to work!"

Accustomed to being driven, they responded at once to his command. Between two fears, fear of the dropping rocks and fear of the man over them, they entered the quarry and began the day's work. The guard took up a position on a slight eminence, where he was always in plain sight of the men, whether in the cave or wheeling the rock out to the dam. He held his gun constantly in the hollow of his arm, like a hunter.

Ten minutes after the first crowbar had clanged against rock in the quarry there was a rumbling sound, a crash, a scream; and the men came scrambling out in terror. Their rush stopped abruptly just outside the cave. Toppo was standing directly before them; the man with the gun had noisily cocked his weapon and brought the black barrel to bear on the heads of the men. Half of them slunk at once back into the cave. One of the others held up a bleeding hand to Toppo.

"Ah, pleess, bahss, pleess," he pleaded. "Rock kill us next time. Pleess, bahss!"

There was a moment of silence while Toppo looked at the men's terror-stricken faces. The shotgun guard rattled the slide on his gun. The men began to retreat into the cave, their helplessness and hopelessness writ large upon their flat faces.

"Hold on there!" said Toppo suddenly. After all, a fellow couldn't do things like that—drive helpless cattle like these to certain injury, even possible death. "I'll take a look in there."

He hobbled and shouldered his way through the men and entered the pit. A few rocks had dropped from the roof, luckily falling in a far corner beyond where the men were working. But Toppo saw at once how serious this petty accident was; for the whole roof of the cave now was loosened, and as sure as the men pounded and pried at the rocks beneath they would bring a shower of stone down upon their heads.

"Like rats in a trap," he thought. "Hi!" he called. "Get out of here. Get out!"

Down near the dam he had noticed a huge pile of old timbers which probably had been used for piling while the dam was being put in. Thither he now led his men, and shouldering the largest piece himself he hobbled back to the cave followed by the gang, each bearing a timber. A sudden change had come over the men as he indicated what he was going to do. They moved more rapidly. Their terror was gone. Some of them smiled, and some talked excitedly. Under Toppo's direction they went to work with a vim shoring up the loosened roof of the cave. It was only a half-hour's work to place the props so that the men working beneath were free of any serious danger from above. Toppo could sense the change of feeling toward him that had come over the men as they saw the timbers go into place, and he was forced to admit that it warmed him comfortably. They sprang eagerly to obey his slightest behest, and the gratitude in their faces was pitiful to behold.

"Now jump!" said Toppo when the roof was safely propped. "Hustle and make up the time we've lost."

As he came out of the cave the place fairly rang with noise as the men furiously tore loose the rock and dumped it in the barrows. Toppo took a long breath and wiped his brow. The hawk-nosed guard spat in disgust.

"Will you do me a favour?" said Toppo, suddenly swinging toward him.

"What is it?" asked the man.

"Take a message to Mr. Reivers from me. Tell him your services are no longer required at this spot. Tell him I said you looked like a fool, standing up there with your bum gun. Tell him—" Toppo, despite his sore ankle, had swung up the rise and was beside the guard before the latter thought of making a move—"that I said I'd throw you and your gun in the river if you didn't duck. And for your own information—" Toppo was towering over the man—"I'll do it right now, unless you get out of here—quick!"

The guard's shifty eyes tried to meet Toppo's and failed. Against the Slavs he would have dared to use his gun; they were his inferiors. Against Toppo he did not dare even so much as to think of the weapon, and without it he was only a jail-rat, afraid of men who looked him in the eyes.

"The boss sent me here," he said sullenly.

Toppy leaned forward until his face was close to the guard's. The man shrank.

"Duck!" said Toppy. That was all. The guard moved away with an alacrity that showed how uncomfortable the spot had become to him.

"You'll hear about this!" he whined from a distance.

And Toppy laughed, laughed carelessly and loudly, rampant with the sensation of power. The men, scurrying past with barrows of rock, noted the retreat of the guard and smiled. They looked up at Toppy with slavish admiration, as lesser men look up to the champion who has triumphed before their eyes. One or two of the older men raised their hats as they passed him, their Old-World serf-like way of showing how they felt toward him.

"Jump!" ordered Toppy gruffly. "Get a move on there; make up that lost time."

Reivers had said that a hundred barrows an hour must be dumped into the dam. With a half hour lost in shoring up the roof, there were fifty loads to be caught up during the day if the average was to be maintained. Carefully timing each load and keeping tally for half an hour, Toppy saw that a hundred loads per hour was the limit of his gang working at a normal pace. To get out the hundred loads they must keep steadily at work, with no time lost because of the falling rocks from above.

He began to see the method of Reivers' apparent madness in placing him in charge of the gang. With the gang working in the dead, terrorised fashion that had characterised their movements before the timbers were in place, Toppy knew that he would have failed; he could not have got out the hundred loads per hour. Reivers would have proved him to be his inferior; for Reivers, with his inhumanity, would have driven the gang as if no lives nor limbs hung on the tissue.

Toppy smiled grimly as he looked at his watch and marked new figures on the tally sheet. The men, pitifully grateful for the protecting timbers, had taken hold of their work with such new life that the rock was going into the dam at the rate of one hundred and twenty loads an hour.

"Move number one!" muttered Toppy, snapping shut his watch. "I wonder what the Snow-Burner's come-back will be when he knows. Hey, you roughnecks! Keep moving, there; keep moving!"

The men responded cheerfully to his every command. They could gladly obey his will; they were safe under him; he had taken care of them, the helpless ones. That evening, when they filed back into the stockade under Toppy's watchful eye, one of the older men, a swarthy old fellow with large brass rings in his ears, sank his hat low as he passed in.

"Buna nopte, Domnule," he said humbly.

"What did he say?" demanded Toppy of one of the young men who knew a little English.

"Plees, bahss; old man, he Magyar," was the reply. "He say, 'Good night, master.'"

Toppy stood dumfounded while the line passed through the gate.

"Well," he said with a grin, "what do you know about that?"

CHAPTER XIII—REIVERS REPLIES

Reivers did not come to the shop that night for his evening diversion, nor did Toppy see him at all during the next day. But in the morning following he saw that Reivers had taken cognizance in his own peculiar way of Toppy's action in driving the shotgun guard away from the quarry. As the line of rock men filed out of the stockade in the chill half light Toppy saw that the best worker of his gang, a cheerful, stocky man called Mikal, was missing. In his place, walking with the successful plug-ugly's insolent swagger, was none other than Bill Sheedy, the appointed troublemaker of Hell Camp; and Toppy knew that Reivers had made another move in his tantalising game.

He went hot despite the raw chilliness at the thought of it. Reivers was playing with him, too, playing even as he had played with Rosky! And Toppy knew that, like Rosky, the Snow-Burner had selected him, too, to be crushed—to be marked as an inferior, to be made to acknowledge Reivers as his master.

Reivers had read the challenge which was in Toppy's eyes and had, with his cold smile of complete confidence and contempt, taken up the gauge. The substitution of Bill Sheedy, Reivers' pet troublemaker, for an effective workman was a definite move toward Toppy's humiliation.

There was nothing in Toppy's manner, however, to indicate his feelings as he followed the line to the quarry. Toppy allowed Sheedy's swagger, by which he plainly indicated that he was hunting for trouble, to go as if unobserved. Sheedy, being extremely simple of mind, leaped instantly to the conclusion that Toppy was afraid of him and swaggered more insolently than ever. He was in an irritable mood this morning, was Bill Sheedy; and as soon as the gang was out of sight of the stockade—and, thought Toppy bitterly, therefore out of possible sight of Reivers—he began to vent his irritation upon his fellow-workmen.

He shouldered them out of his way, swore at them, threatened them with his fists, kicked them

carelessly. There was no finesse in Bill's method; he was mad and showed it. When the daylight came up the river sufficiently strong to begin the day's work, Bill had worked himself up to a proper frame of mind for his purpose. He stood still while the other men willingly seized their tools and barrows and tramped into the quarry.

Topsy apparently did not notice. So far as he indicated by his manner he was quite oblivious of Sheedy's existence. Bill stood looking at Topsy with a scowl on his unpretty face, awaiting the order to go in with the other men. The order did not come. Topsy was busy directing the men where to begin their work. He did not so much as look at Bill. Bill finally was forced to call attention to himself.

"—!" he growled, spitting generously. "Yah ain't goin' tuh git me tuh wurruk in no hole like that."

"All right, Bill," said Topsy instantly. "All right."

Bill was staggered. His simple mind failed utterly to comprehend that there might lie something behind Topsy's apparently humble manner. Bill could see only one thing—the straw-boss was afraid of him.

"Yah — know it, it's all right!" he spluttered. "If it ain't I'd — soon make it all right."

"Sure," said Topsy, and without looking toward Bill he hurried into the quarry to see how the timbers were standing the strain. Bill stood puzzled. He had bluffed the straw-boss, sure enough; but still the thing wasn't entirely satisfactory. The boss didn't seem to care whether he worked or whether he loafed. Bill refused to be treated with such little consideration. He was of more importance than that.

"Hey, you!" he called as Topsy emerged from the pit. "I'm going to wheel rock down to the dam, that's what I'm going tuh do. Going to wheel it; but yuh ain't goin' tuh make me go in there and dig it. See? I'm going to wheel rock."

Now for the first time Topsy seemed to consider Bill.

"What makes you think you are?" he said quietly. He was looking at his watch, but Bill noticed that in spite of his sore ankle and cane the boss had managed to move near to him in uncannily swift fashion.

"You know you can't work here now," Topsy continued before Bill's thick wits had framed an answer. "You won't go into the quarry, so I can't use you."

Bill stared as if bereft of all of his faculties. The boss had slipped his watch back into his pocket. He had turned away.

"Can't use me—can't—Say! Who says I can't work here?" roared Bill, shaking his fists. He was standing on the plank on which the wheelbarrows were rolled out of the cave, blocking the way of the men with the first loads of the day.

"Look out, Bill!" said Topsy softly, turning around. Instinctively Bill threw up his guard—threw it up to guard his jaw. Topsy's left drove into his solar plexus so hard that Bill seemed to be moulded on to the fist, hung there until he dropped and rolled backward on the ground.

"Get along there!" commanded Topsy to the wheel-barrowmen. "The way's clear. Jump!"

Grinning and snatching glances of ridicule at the prostrate Sheedy, they hurried past. They dumped their loads in the dam and came back with empty barrows, and still Sheedy lay there, like a dumped grain-sack, to one side of their path. The flat faces of the men cracked with grins as they looked worshipfully at Topsy.

"Jump!" said he. "Get a move on, you roughnecks"

And they grinned more widely in sheer delight at his rough ordering.

Bill Sheedy lay for a long time as he had fallen. The blow he had stopped would have done for a pugilist in good condition, and Sheedy's midriff was soft and fat. Finally he raised his head and looked around. Such surprise and wobegoneness showed in his expression that the grinning Slavs laughed outright at him. Bill slowly came to a sitting posture and drew a hand across his puzzled brow while he looked dully at the laughing men and at Topsy. Then he remembered and he dropped his eyes.

"Get on your way, Bill," said Topsy casually. "If you're not able to walk, I'll have half a dozen of the men help you. You're through here."

Bill lurched unsteadily to his feet and staggered away a few steps. That terrific punch and the iron-calm manner of the man who had dealt it had scared him. His first thought was to get out of reach; his second, one of anger at the Bohunks who dared to laugh at him, Bill Sheedy, the fighting man!

But the fashion in which the men laughed took the nerve out of Bill. They were laughing contemptuously at him; they looked down upon him; they were no longer afraid. And there were a dozen of them, and they laughed together; and Bill Sheedy knew that his days as camp bully were over. The straw-boss was looking at him coldly, and Bill moved farther away. Fifteen minutes later the straw-boss, who had apparently been oblivious of his presence, swung around and said abruptly:

"What's the matter, Bill? Why don't you go back to Reivers?"

Bill's growled reply contained several indistinct but definitely profane characterisations of Reivers.

"I can't go back to him," Sheedy said sullenly.

"Why not?" laughed Treplin. "He's your friend, isn't he? He let you keep the money you'd stolen, and all that."

"Keep——!" growled Sheedy. "He's got that himself. Made me make him a present of it, or—or he'd turn me over for a little trouble I had down in Duluth."

Topy stiffened and looked at him carefully.

"Telling the truth, Bill?"

"Ask him," replied Sheedy. "He don't make no bones about it; he gets something on you and then he grafts on you till you're dry."

Topy stood silent while he assimilated this information. His scrutiny of Sheedy told him that the man was telling the truth. He felt grateful to Sheedy; through him he had got a new light on Reivers' character, light which he knew he could use later on.

"Through making an ass of yourself here, Bill?" he asked briskly. Bill's answer was to hang his head in a way that showed how thoroughly all the fight was taken out of him.

"All right, then; grab a wheelbarrow and get into the pit. Keep your end up with the other men and there'll be no hard feelings. Try to play any of your tricks, and it's good night for you. Now get to it, or get out."

Sheedy's rush for a wheelbarrow showed how relieved he was. He had been standing between the devil and the deep sea—between Reivers with his awful displeasure and Topy with his awful punch; and he was eager to find a haven.

"I ain't trying any tricks," he muttered as he made for the quarry. "The Snow-Burner—he's the one. He copped me dough and sent me down here and told me to work off my mad on you."

"Well, you've worked it off now, I guess," said Topy curtly. "Dig in, now; you're half a dozen loads behind."

Sheedy did not fill the place of the man he had supplanted, for in his mixed-ale condition he was unable to work a full day at a strong man's pace. However, he did so well that when Topy checked up in the evening he found that his tally again was well over the stipulated average of a hundred loads of rock per hour.

"Move two," he thought. "I wonder what comes next?"

CHAPTER XIV—"JOKER AND DEUCES WILD"

When Topy went back to the shop that evening he found old Campbell cooking the evening meal with only his right hand in use, the left being wrapped in a neat bandage.

"That's what comes of leaving me without a helper," grumbled the Scot as Topy looked enquiringly at the injured hand. "I maun have ye back, lad; I will not be knocking my hands to pieces doing two men's work to please any man. And yet—" he cocked his head on one side and looked fondly at the bandage—"I dunno but what 'twas worth it. I'm an auld man, and it's long sin' I had a pretty lass make fuss over me."

"What?" snapped Topy.

"Oh, go on with ye, lad," teased Scotty, holding the bandage up for his admiration. "Can not you see that I'm by nature a fav'rite with the ladies? Yon lass in the office sewed this bandage on my old meat hook.

"Does it hurt, Mr. Campbell?" says she. 'Not as much as something that's heavy on my mind, lass,' says I. 'What's that?' she says. 'Mr. Reivers and you, lass,' says I; and I told her as well as an old man can tell a lass who's little more than a child just what the Snow-Burner is. 'I can't believe it,' says she. 'He's a gentleman.' 'More's the pity,' I says. 'That's what makes him dangerous.' 'Were you not afraid of him at first?' says I. 'Yes,' she says. 'Tell me honest, as you would your own father,' says I, 'are you not afraid of him now?'

"With that she gave me a look like a little fawn that has smelled the wolf circling 'round it, but she will not answer. 'He can't be what you say he is,' she says, trembling. 'Lass,' says I, 'a week ago you would never have believed it possible that you'd ever wish aught to do with him. Now you walk with him and talk with him, and smile when he does.' And I told her of Tilly.

"It's not so," says she. 'It can't be so. Mr. Reivers is a gentleman, not a brute. He's too strong and fine,' says she, 'for such conduct.' And the bandage being done, I was dismissed with a toss of the head. Aye, aye, lad; but 'twas fine to have her little fingers sewing away around my old hand. Yon's a fine, sweet lass; but I fear me Reivers has set his will to win her."

Topy made no reply. Campbell's words aroused only one emotion in him—a fresh flare of anger

against Reivers. For it was Reivers, and his strength and dominance, that was responsible. Topy already was sorry for the swift judgment that he had passed on the girl on Sunday, and for the rudeness which, in his anger, he had displayed toward her. He knew now the power that lay in Reivers' will, the calm, compelling fire that lurked in his eyes.

Men quailed before those eyes and did their bidding. And a girl, a little girl who must naturally feel grateful toward him for her position, could hardly be expected to resist the Snow-Burner's undeniable fascinations. Why should she? Reivers was everything that women were drawn to in men—kinglike in his power of mind and body, striking in appearance, successful in whatever he sought to do.

It was inevitable that the girl should fall under his spell, but the thought of it sent a chill up Topy's spine as from the thought of something monstrous. He raged inwardly as he remembered how clearly the girl had let him see his own insignificance in her estimation compared with Reivers. She had refused to believe Campbell; Topy knew that she would refuse to listen to him if he tried to warn her against Reivers.

The fashion in which he slammed the supper-dishes on the table brought a protest from Scotty.

"Dinna be so strong with the dishes, lad; they're not iron," said he.

"You 'tend to your cooking," growled Topy. "I'll set this table."

Campbell paused with a spoon in midair and gaped at him in astonishment. He opened his mouth to speak, but the black scowl on Topy's brow checked his tongue. Silently he turned to his cooking. He had seen that he was no longer boss in the room behind the shop.

After supper Campbell brought forth a deck of cards and began to play solitaire. Topy threw himself upon his bunk and lay in the darkness with his troublesome thoughts. An unmistakable step outside the door brought him to his feet, for he had an instinctive dislike to meeting Reivers save face to face and standing up. Reivers came in without speaking and shut the door behind him. He stood with his hand on the knob and looked over at Topy and shook his head.

"Treplin, how could you disappoint me so?" he asked mockingly. "After I had reposed such confidence in you, too! I'm sorely disappointed in you. I never looked for you to be a victim of the teachings of weak men and I find—ye gods! I find that you're a humanitarian!"

By this and this only did Reivers indicate that he had knowledge of how Topy had protected his men.

Topy looked steadily across the room at him, a grim smile on his lips.

"Did Bill Sheedy call me that?" he asked drily. "Shame on him if he did; I didn't make him slip me the Torta boys' money as a present."

Reivers' laugh rang instantly through the room.

"So you've won Bill's confidences already, have you?" he said without the slightest trace of shame or discomfiture. "Dear old Bill! He actually seemed to be under the impression that he had a title to that money—until I suggested otherwise. I ask you, Treplin, as a man with a trained if not an efficient mind, is Bill Sheedy a proper man to possess the title to ninety-eight dollars?"

He swung across the room, laughing heartily, and reached into the cupboard for Scotty's whiskey. As he did so his eyes fell upon the cards which Scotty was placing upon the table, and for the first time Topy saw in his eyes the gleam of a human weakness. Reivers stood, paused, for an instant, his eyes feasting upon the cards. It was only an instant, but it was enough to whisper to Topy the secret of the Snow-Burner's passion for play. And Topy exulted at this chance discovery of the vulnerable joint in Reivers' armour; for Topy—alas for his misspent youth!—was a master-warrior when a deck of cards was the field of battle.

"It's none of my funeral, Reivers," he said carelessly, strolling over to the table where Campbell went on playing, apparently oblivious to the conversation. "I don't know anything about Sheedy. Of course, if you're serious, the Torta boys are the only ones in camp who've got any right to the money."

Reivers stopped short in the act of pouring himself a drink. Campbell, with his back toward Reivers, paused with a card in his hand. Topy yawned and dropped into a chair from which he could watch Campbell's game.

"But that's none of my business," he said as if dropping the subject. "There's a chance for your black queen, Scotty."

Reivers poured himself his tumbler full of Scotch whiskey, drew up a third chair to the table and sat down across from Topy. The latter apparently was absorbed in watching Campbell's solitaire. Reivers took a long, contented sip of his fiery tippie and smiled pleasantly.

"You turned loose an idea there, Treplin," he said. "But can you make your premise stand argument? Are you sure that the Torta boys are the ones who have a right to that ninety-eight dollars? On what grounds do you give them the exclusive title to the money?"

"It's theirs. Bill stole it from them. You said he did. That's all I know about it," said Topy, scarcely raising his eyes from the cards.

"Why do you say it was theirs, Treplin?" persisted Reivers smilingly. "Merely because they had it in their possession! Isn't that so? You don't know how they came by it, but because they had it in their possession you speak of it as theirs. Very well. Bill Sheedy took it away from them. It was in

his possession, so, following your line of logic, it was his—for a short while.

"I took it from Bill. It's in my possession now. Therefore, if your premise is sound, the money is mine. Why, Treplin, I'm really obliged to you for furnishing me such a clear title to my loot. It was—ah—beginning to trouble my conscience." He laughed suddenly, punctuating his laughter with a blow of his fist on the table.

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"All rot, Treplin; all silly sophistry which weak men have built up to protect themselves from the strong! The infernal lie that because a man is in possession of a certain thing it is his to the exclusion of the rest of the world! Property-rights! I'll tell you the truth—why this money is mine, why I'm the one who has the real title to it. I was able to take it, and I am able to keep it. There's the natural law of property-rights, Treplin. What do you say to that?"

"Fine!" laughed Topy, throwing up his hands in surrender. "You bowl me over, Reivers. The money is yours; and—" he glanced at the cards "—and if you and I should play a little game of poker, joker and deuces wild, and I should take it away from you, it would be mine; and there you are."

The words had slipped out of him, apparently without any aim; but Topy saw by the sudden glance which Reivers dropped to the cards that the gambling-hunger in the Snow-Burner had been awakened.

"Joker and deuces wild," he repeated as if fascinated. "Yes, that ought to help make a two-handed game fast."

The whole manner of the man seemed for the moment changed. For the first time since Topy had met him he seemed to be seriously interested. Previously, when he played with the lives and bodies of men or devilled their minds with his wiles, his interest had never been deeper than that of a man who plays to keep himself from being bored. He was the master in all such affairs; they could furnish him at their best but an idle sort of interest. But not even the Snow-Burner was master of the inscrutable laws of Chance. Nor was he master of himself when cards were flipping before his eyes. Topy had guessed right; Reivers had a weakness, and it was to be "card-crazy."

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"Get over there on that other table with your solitaire, Campbell!" he ordered. He reached into Campbell's liquor-cabinet and drew out a fresh pack of cards, which he tossed to Topy. "You started something, Mr. Humanitarian," he continued, clearing the table. "Open the deck and cut for deal. Then show me what you've got to stack up against this ninety-eight dollars." And he slapped a wad of crumpled bills on the table.

Topy nonchalantly reached into his pockets. Then he grinned. The two twenty-dollar bills which he had paid the agent back in Rail Head for the privilege of hiring out to Hell Camp were all the money he had with him. He was broke. He debated with himself a moment, then unhooked his costly watch from the chain and pushed it across to Reivers.

"You can sell that for five hundred—if you win it," he said. "I'll play it even against your ninety-eight bucks. Give me forty-nine to start with. If you win them give me forty-nine more, and the watch is yours. Right?"

"Right," said Reivers, keeping the watch and dividing his roll with Topy. "Dollar jack-pots, table-stakes. Deal 'em up."

Topy lost ten dollars on the first hand almost before he realised that the game had begun. He called Reivers' bet and had three fours and nothing else in his hand. Reivers had two of the wild deuces and a king. Topy shook his head, like a pugilist clearing his wits after a knockdown. Why had he called? He knew his three fours weren't good. His card-sense had told him so. He had called against his judgment. Why?

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Suddenly, like something tangible pressing against his brain, he felt Reivers' will thrusting itself against his. Then he knew. That was why he had called. Reivers had willed that he do so, and, catching him off his guard, had had his way.

"Good work!" said Topy, passing the cards. He was himself again; his wits had cleared. He allowed Reivers to take the next three pots in succession without a bet. Reivers looked at him puzzled. The fourth pot Topy opened for five dollars and Reivers promptly raised him ten. After the draw Topy bet a dollar, and Reivers again raised it to ten more. Topy called. Reivers, caught bluffing without a single pair, stared as Topy laid down his hand and revealed nothing but his original openers, a pair of aces. A frown passed over Reivers' face. He peered sharply at Topy from beneath his overhanging brows, but Topy was raking in the pot as casually as if such play with a pair of aces was part of his system.

"Good work!" said Reivers, and gathered the cards to him with a jerk.

Half a dozen hands later, on Reivers' deal, Topy picked up his hand and saw four kings.

"I'll pass," said he.

"I open for five," said Reivers.

"Take the money," laughed Topy carelessly throwing his hand into the discard. For an instant Reivers' eyes searched him with a look of surprise. The glance was sufficient to tell Topy that what he had suspected was true.

"So he's dealing 'em as he wants 'em!" thought Topy. "All right. He's brought it on himself."

An hour later Reivers arose from the table with a smile. The money had changed hands. Topy

was snapping his watch back on its chain, and stuffing the bills into his pocket.

"Your money now, Treplin," laughed Reivers. "Until somebody takes it away from you."

But there was a new note in his laughter. He had been beaten, and his irritation showed in his laughter and in the manner in which, after he had taken another big drink of whiskey, he paused in the doorway as he made to leave.

"Great luck, Treplin; great luck with cards you have!" he said laughingly. "Too bad your luck ends there, isn't it? What's that paraphrase of the old saw? 'Lucky with cards, unlucky with women.' Good night, Treplin."

He went out, laughing as a man laughs when he has a joke on the other fellow.

"What did he mean by that?" asked Campbell, puzzled.

"I don't know," said Topsy. But he knew now that Tilly had told Reivers of his talk with Miss Pearson the first evening in camp, and that Reivers had saved it up against him.

CHAPTER XV—THE WAY OF THE SNOW-BURNER

In the morning, before the time for beginning the day's work, Topsy went to the stockade; and with one of his English-speaking Slavs acting an interpreter hunted up the Torta brothers and returned to them the stolen money which he had won from Reivers. He did not consider it necessary to go into the full details of how the money came to be in his possession, or attempt to explain the prejudice of his kind against keeping stolen goods.

"Just tell them that Sheedy gave up the money, and that it's theirs again; and they'd better hide it in their shoes so they won't lose it," he directed the interpreter.

Whereat the latter, a garrulous young man who had been telling the camp all about the wonderful new "bahss" in the quarry—a "bahss" who saved men's lives—whenever he could get any one to listen, broke forth into a wonderful tale of how the money came to be returned, and of the wonderful "bahss" that stood before them, whom they should all take off their caps to and worship.

For this was no ordinary man, this "bahss." No, he was far above all other men. It was an honour to work under him. For instance, as to this money: the "bahss" had heard how the red-haired one—Sheedy—had stolen, how he oppressed many poor men and broke the noses of those who dared to stand up against him.

The "bahss" had the interests of poor men at heart. What had he done? He had struck the red-haired one such a mighty blow in the stomach that the red-haired one had flown high in the air, and alighting on the ground had been moved by the fear of death and disgorged the stolen money that his conscience might be easy.

The story of how Topsy had propped up the roof of the stone quarry, and saved the limbs and possibly lives of his workmen; how he had driven the shotgun guard away, and how he had smitten Sheedy and laid him low before all men, had circulated through the camp by this time. Everybody knew that the new straw-boss, though fully as big and strong as the Snow-Burner himself, was a man who considered the men under him as something more than cattle and treated them accordingly. True, he drove men hard; but they went willingly for him, whereas under the Snow-Burner they hurried merely because of the chill fear that his eyes drove into their hearts. In short, Topsy was just such a boss as all men wished to work under—strong but just, firm but not inhuman.

Even Sheedy was loyal to him.

"He laid me out, all right," he grumbled to a group of "white men," "but, give him credit for it, he give me a chanct to get up me guard. There won't be any breaking yer bones when yuh ain't lookin' from him. And he wouldn't graft on yuh, either. He's right. That other —, he—he ain't human."

The fact that he had been humane enough, and daring enough, to prop up the roof of the quarry had no effect on the "white men" toward developing a respect for Topsy. They despised the Slavs too thoroughly to be conscious of any brotherhood with them. But that he could put Bill Sheedy away with a single punch, that he could warn Bill to put up his guard and then knock him out with one blow, that was something to wring respect even from that hard-bitten crew.

The Snow-Burner never had done anything like that. He had laid low the biggest men in camp, but it was usually with a kick or with a blow that was entirely unexpected. The Snow-Burner never warned any body. He smiled, threw them off their guard, then smote like a flash of lightning. He had whipped half a dozen men at once in a stand-up fight, but they had been poor Bohunks, fools who couldn't fight unless they had knives in their hands. But to tell a seasoned bruiser like Bill, the best man with his fists in camp, to put up his hands and then beat him to the knockout punch—that was something that not even the Snow-Burner had attempted to do.

That was taking a chance, that was; and the Snow-Burner never took chances. That was why these cruel-fierce "white men," though they admired and applauded him for his dominance and

his ruthlessness toward the Slavs, hated Reivers with a hatred that sprang from the Northern man's instinctive liking for fair play in a fight. They began naturally to compare him with Toppo, who had played fair and yet won. And, naturally, because such were the standards they lived and died by, they began to predict that some day the Snow-Burner and Toppo must fight, and they hoped that they might be there to see the battle.

So Toppo, this morning, as he came to the stockade, was in the position of something of a hero to most of the rough men who slouched past him in the gloom to their day's work. He had felt it before, this hero-worship, and he recognised it again. Though the surroundings were vastly different and the men about him of a strange breeding, the sense of it was much the same as that he had known at school when, a sweater thrown across his huge shoulders, he had ploughed his way through the groups of worshipping undergrads on to the gridiron. It was much the same here. Men looked up to him. They nudged one another as they passed, lowered their voices when he was near, studied him appraisingly. Toppo had felt it before, too often to be mistaken; and the youth in his veins responded warmly. The respect of these men was a harder thing to win than the other. He thought of how he had arrived in camp, shaky from Harvey Duncombe's champagne, with no purpose in life, no standing among men who were doing men's work. Grimly also he thought of how Miss Pearson, that first evening, had called him a "nice boy." Would she call him that now, he wondered, if she could see how these rough, tired men looked up to him? Would Reivers treat him as a thing to experiment with after this?

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Thus it was a considerably elated Toppo, though not a big-headed one, who led his men out of the stockade, to the quarry—to the blow that Reivers had waiting for him there. His first hint that something was wrong was when the foremost men, whistling and tool-laden, made for the pit in the first grey light of day and paused with exclamations and curses at its very mouth. Others crowded around them. They looked within. Then, with fallen jaws, they turned and looked to the "bahss" for an explanation, for help.

Toppo shouldered his way through the press and stepped inside. Then he saw what had halted his men and made their faces turn white. To the last stick the shoring-timbers had been removed from the pit, and the roof, threatening and sharp-edged, hung ready to drop on the workmen below, as it had before Toppo had wrought a change.

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The daylight came creeping up the river and a wind began to blow. So still was it there before the pit-mouth that Toppo was conscious of these things as he stepped outside. The men were standing about with their wheelbarrows and tools in their hands. They looked to him. His was the mind and will to determine what they should do. They depended upon him; they trusted him; they would obey his word confidently.

Toppo felt a cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. He wanted to take off his cap, to bare his head to the chill morning wind, to draw his hand across his eyes, to do something to ease himself and gather his wits. He did none of these things. The instinct of leadership arose strong within him. He could not show these men who looked up to him as their unquestioned leader that he had been dealt a blow that had taken the mastery from him.

For Toppo, in that agonised second when he glanced up at the unsupported roof and knew what those loose rocks meant to any men working beneath, realised that he could not drive his men in there to certain injury for many, possibly death for some. It wasn't in him. He wasn't bred that way. The unfeeling brute had been removed from his big body and spirit by generations of men and women who had played fair with inferiors, and by a lifetime of training and education.

He understood plainly the significance of the thing. Reivers had done it; no one else would have dared. He had lifted Toppo up to a tiny elevation above the other men in camp; now he was knocking him down. It was another way for Reivers to show his mastery. The men who had begun to look up to Toppo would now see how easily the Snow-Burner could show himself his superior. Miss Pearson would hear of it. He would appear in the light of a "nice boy" whom the Snow-Burner had played with.

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These thoughts ran through Toppo's mind as he stood outside the pit, with his white-faced men looking up to him, and groped for a way out of his dilemma. Within he was sickened with the sense of a catastrophe; outside he remained calm and confident to the eye. He stepped farther out, to where he could see the end of the dam where he had secured the props for the roof. It was as he had expected; the big pile of timbers that had lain there was gone to the last stick. He turned slowly back, and then in the grey light of coming day he looked into the playfully smiling face of Reivers, who had emerged, it seemed, from nowhere.

"Looking for your humanitarian props, Treplin?" laughed the Snow-Burner. "Oh, they're gone; they're valuable; they served a purpose which nothing else would fill—quite so conveniently. I used them for a corduroy road in the swamp. Between men and timbers, Treplin, always save your timbers." His manner changed like a flash to one hurried and business-like. "What're you waiting for?" he snarled. "Why don't you get 'em in there? Mean to say you're wasting company money because one of these cattle might get a broken back?"

They looked each other full in the eyes, but Toppo knew that for the time being Reivers had the whiphand.

"I mean to say just that," he said evenly. "I'm not sending any men in there until I get that roof propped up again."

"Bah!" Reivers' disgust was genuine. "I thought you were a man; I find you're a suit of clothes full of emotions, like all the rest!"

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He seemed to drive away his anger by sheer will-force and bring the cold, sneering smile back to his lips.

"So we're up against a situation that's too strong for us, are we, Mr. Humanitarian?" he laughed. "In spite of our developed intelligence, we lay down cold in the face of a little proposition like this! Good-bye to our dreams of learning how to handle men! It isn't in us to do it; we're a weak sister."

His bantering mood fled with the swiftness of all his changes. Topy and his aspirations as a leader—that was another incident of the day's work that was over and done with.

"Go back to the shop, to Scotty, Treplin," he said quietly. "You're not responsible for your limitations. Scotty says you make a pretty fair helper. Be consoled. He's waiting for you."

He turned instantly toward the men. Topy, with the hot blood rushing in his throat, but helpless as he was, swung away from the pit without a word. As he did so he saw that the hawk-faced shotgun guard had appeared and taken his position on the little rise where his gun bore slantwise on the huddled men before the pit, and he hurried to get out of sight of the scene. His tongue was dry and his temples throbbing with rage, but the cool section of his mind urged him away from the pit in silence.

Between clenched teeth he cursed his injured ankle. It was the ankle that made him accept without return the shame which Reivers had put upon him. The canny sense within him continued to whisper that until the ankle was sound he must bide his time. Reivers and he were too nearly a pair to give him the slightest chance for success if he essayed defiance at even the slightest disadvantage.

Choking back as well as he could the anger that welled up within him, he made his way swiftly to the blacksmith-shop. Campbell, bending over the anvil, greeted Topy cheerily as he heard the heavy tread behind him.

"The Snow-Burner promised he'd send you here, and—Losh, mon!" he gasped as he turned around and saw Topy's face. "What's come o'er ye? You look like you're ripe for murder."

"There'll probably be murder done in this camp before the day's over, but I won't do it," replied Topy.

As he threw off his mackinaw preparatory to starting work he snapped out the story of the situation at the quarry. Campbell, leaning on his hammer, grew grim of lips and eyes as he listened.

"Aye; I thought at the time it were better for you had ye lost at poker last night," he said slowly. "He's taking revenge. But they will put out his light for him. Human flesh and blood won't stand it. The Snow-Burner goes too far. He'll—Hark! Good Heavens! Hear that!"

For a moment they stood near the open doorway of the shop staring at one another in horrified, mute questioning. The crisp stillness of the morning rang and echoed with the sharp roar of a shotgun. The sound came from the direction of the quarry. Across the street they heard the door of the office-building open sharply. The girl, without hat or coat, her light hair flying about her head, came running like a deer to the door of the shop.

"Mr. Campbell, Mr. Campbell!" she called tremblingly, peering inside. Then she saw Topy.

"Oh!" she gasped. She started back a little. There were surprise and relief in her exclamation, in her eyes, in her movement.

"I was afraid—I thought maybe—" She drew away from the door in confusion. "I only wanted to know—to know—what that noise was."

But Topy had stepped outside the shop and followed closely after her.

"What did you think it was, Miss Pearson?" he asked. "What were you afraid of when you heard that shot? That something had happened between Reivers and myself?"

"I—I meant to warn you," she said, greatly flustered. "Tilly told me all about—a lot of things last night. She told me that she had told Reivers all she heard you say to me that first night here, and that he—Mr. Reivers, she said, was your enemy, and that he would—would surely hurt you."

"Yes?"

"I didn't want to see you get hurt, because I felt it was because of me that you came here. I—I don't want any one hurt because of me."

"That's all?" he asked.

She looked surprised.

"Why, yes."

Topy nodded curtly.

"Then Tilly told you that Mr. Reivers had a habit of hurting people?"

At this the red in her cheeks rose to a flush. Her blue eyes looked at him waveringly, then dropped to the ground.

"It isn't true! It can't be true!" she stammered.

"Did Tilly tell you—about herself?" he persisted mercilessly.

The next instant he wished the words unsaid, for she shrank as if he had struck her. She looked very small just then. Her proud, self-reliant bearing was gone. She was very much all alone.

"Yes." The word was scarcely more than a whisper and she did not look up. "But it—it can not be so; I know it can not."

Topsy was no student of feminine psychology, but he saw plainly that just then she was a woman who did not wish to believe, therefore would not believe, anything ill of the man who had fascinated her. He saw that Reivers had fascinated her; that in spite of herself she was drawn toward him, dominated by him. Her mind told her that what she had heard of the man was true, but her heart refused to let her believe. Topsy saw that she was very unhappy and troubled, and unselfishly he forgot himself and his enmity toward Reivers in a desire to help her.

"Miss Pearson!—Miss Pearson!" he cried eagerly. "Is there anything I can do for you—anything in the world?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Tell me that it isn't so—what Mr. Campbell and Tilly have said about Mr. Reivers."

"I——" He was about to say that he could do nothing of the sort, but something made him halt. "Has Reivers broken his word to you—about leaving you alone?"

"No, no! He's—he's left me alone. He's scarcely spoken to me half a dozen times."

Topsy looked down at her for several seconds.

"But you've begun to care for Reivers, haven't you?" he said.

The girl looked up at him uncertainly.

"I don't know. Oh, I don't know! I don't seem to have any will of my own toward him. I seem to see him as a different man. I know I shouldn't; but I can't help it, I can help it! He—he looks at me, and I feel as if—as if—" her voice died down to a horrified whisper—"I were nothing, and his wishes were the only things in the world."

Topsy bowed his head.

"Then I guess there's nothing for me to say."

"Don't!" she cried, stretching out her hand to restrain him as he turned away. "Don't leave me—like that. You're so rude to me lately. I feel so terribly alone when you—aren't nice to me."

"What difference can I make?" he said bitterly. "I'm not Reivers."

She looked up at him again.

"Oh!" she cried suddenly. "Won't you help me, Mr. Treplin? Can't you help me?"

"Help you?" gasped Topsy. "May I? Can I? What can I do?"

He leaned toward her eagerly.

"What can I do" he repeated.

"Oh, I don't know!" she murmured in anguish. "But if you—if you leave me—Oh! What was that?"

From the direction of the quarry had come a great scream of terror, as if many men suddenly had cried out in fear of their lives. Then, almost ere the echoes had died away, came another sound, of more sinister significance to Topsy. There was a sudden low rumble; the earth under their feet trembled; then the noise of a crash and a thud. Then it was still again.

A chill seemed to pass over the entire camp. Men began running toward the quarry with swift steps, their faces showing that they dreaded what they expected to see. Topsy and Campbell looked silently at one another.

"Go into the office," he said quietly to the girl. "Come on, Scotty; that roof's caved in." And without another word they ran swiftly toward the quarry. As they reached the river-bank they heard Reivers' voice quietly issuing orders.

"You guards pick those two fellows up and carry them to their bunks. You scum that's left, pick up your tools and dig into that fallen rock. Hustle now! Get right back to work!"

The first thing that Topsy saw as he turned the shoulder of the ledge was that two of the older Slavs were lying groaning on the ground to one side of where the pit mouth had been. Then he saw what was left of the pit. The entire side of the ledge had caved down, and where the pit had been was only a jumbled pile of jagged rock. Reivers stood in his old position before the pile. The hawk-nosed shotgun guard stood up on the little rise, his weapon ready. The remaining workmen were huddled together before the pile of fallen stone. The terror in their faces was unspeakable. They were like lost, driven cattle facing the butcher's hammer.

"Grab those tools there! Get at it! The rock's right in front of you now! Get busy!"

Reivers' voice in no way admitted that anything startling had occurred. He glared at the cowering men, and in terror they began hastily to resume their interrupted work, filling their wheelbarrows from the pile of stone before them. Reivers turned toward Topsy who had bent over the injured men. "Hello, Dr. Treplin," he laughed lightly. "A couple of jobs there for you to experiment on. Get 'em out of here—to their bunks; they're in the way. Patch 'em up if you can. If you can't they're not much loss, anyhow. They're rather older than I like 'em."

The last words came carelessly over his shoulder as he turned back toward the men who were toiling at the rock. A string of curses rolled coldly from his lips. They leaped to obey him. He smiled contemptuously.

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Toppy was relieved to see that the two men on the ground were apparently not fatally hurt. With the aid of Campbell and two guards who had run up he hurried to have the men placed in their bunks in the stockade. One of the guards produced a surgeon's kit. Toppy rolled up his sleeves. It wasn't as bad as he had feared it would be, apparently; only two injured, where he had looked for some surely to be killed. One of the men was growing faint from loss of blood from a wound in his right leg. Toppy, turning his attention to him first, swiftly slit open the trousers-leg and bared the injured limb.

"What—what the devil?" he cried aghast. The calf of the man's leg was half torn away, and from knee to ankle the flesh was sprinkled with buckshot-holes.

"They shot you?" he asked as he fashioned a tourniquet.

"Yes, bahass. Snow-Burner say, 'Get t' 'ell in there.' Rocks fall; we no go in. Snow-Burner hold up hand. Man with gun shoot. I fall. Other men go in. Pretty soon rocks fall. Other men come out. He shoot me. I no do anything; he shoot me."

Toppy choked back the curse that rose to his lips, dressed the man's wound to the best of his slight ability, and turned to the other, who had been caught in the cave-in of the quarry-roof. His right leg and arm were broken, and the side was crushed in a way that suggested broken ribs. Toppy filled a hypodermic syringe and went to work to make the two as comfortable as he knew how. That was all he could pretend to do. Yet when he left the stockade it was with a feeling of relief that he looked back over the morning. The worst had happened; the danger to the men was over; and, so far as Toppy knew, the consequences were represented in the two men whom he had treated and who, so far as he could see, were sure to live. It hadn't turned out as badly as he was afraid it would.

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As he passed the carpenter-shop he saw the "wood-butcher" sawing two boards to make a cover for a long, narrow box. Toppy looked at him idly, trying to think of what such a box could be used for around the camp. It was too narrow for its length to be of ordinary use as a box.

"What are you making there?" asked Toppy carelessly.

The "wood-butcher" looked up from his sawing.

"Didn't you ever see a logging-camp coffin?" he asked. "We always keep a few ready. This one is for that Bohunk that's down there under the rocks."

"Under the rocks!" cried Toppy. "You don't mean to say there was anybody under that cave-in!"

"Is yet," was the laconic reply. "One of 'em was caught 'way inside. Whole roof on top of him. Won't find him till the pit's emptied."

Toppy struggled a moment to speak quietly.

"Which one was it, do you know?" he asked.

"Oh, it was that old brown-complected fellow," said the carpenter. "That old Bohunk guy with the big rings in his ears."

Reivers came to the shop at his customary time in the evening, nothing in his manner containing a hint that anything unusual had happened during the day. He found a solemn and silent pair, for Campbell had sought relief from the day's tragedy in his customary manner and sat in the light of the student-lamp steadily reading his Bible, while Toppy, in a dark corner, sat with his great shoulders hunched forward, his folded hands before him, and stared at the floor. Reivers paused in the doorway, his cold smile broadening as he surveyed the pair.

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"Poker to-night—doctor?" he said softly, and the slur in his tones was like blasphemy toward all that men hold sacred.

"No, by —, no!" growled Toppy.

Laughing lightly, Reivers closed the door and came across the room.

"What? Aren't you going to give me my revenge—doctor?" The manner in which he accented "doctor" was worse than an open insult.

Old Campbell peered over his thick glasses.

"The sword of judgment is sharpening for you, Mr. Reivers," he said solemnly. "You ha' this day sealed your own doom. A life for a life; and you have taken a life to-day unnecessarily. It is the holy law; you will pay. It is so written."

"Yes, yes, yes!" laughed Reivers in great amusement. "But you've said that so many times before in just that same way, Scotty. Can't you evolve a new idea? Or at least sing it in a different key?"

The old Scot looked at him without wavering or changing his expression.

"You are the smartest man I have ever known, Mr. Reivers, and the domdest fool," he said in the same tone. "Do you fancy yourself more than mortal? Losh, man! A knife in the bowels, or a bullet or ax in the head will as readily make you a bit of poor clay as you've this day made yon poor old Bohunk."

Reivers listened courteously to the end, waiting even a moment to be sure that Campbell had had

his say.

"And you—doctor?" he said turning to Topsy. "What melancholy thoughts have you to utter?"

Topsy said nothing.

"Oh, come, Treplin!" said Reivers lightly. "Surely you're not letting a little thing like that quarry-incident give you a bad evening? Where's your philosophy, man? Consider the thing intelligently instead of sentimentally. There was so much rock to go into that dam in a day—and incidentally to-day finished the job. That was a useful, necessary work." 130

"For that old man to continue in this life was not useful or necessary. He was far down in the order of human development; centuries below you and me. Do you think it made the slightest difference whether he returned to the old cosmic mud whence he came, and from which he had not come far, in to-day's little cave-in, or in a dirty bed, say ten years from now?"

"He accomplished a tiny speck of useful work, through my direction. He has gone, as the wood will soon be gone that is heating that stove. There was no spirit there; only a body that has ceased to stand upright. And you grow moody over it! Well, well! I'm more and more disappointed in you—doctor."

Topsy said nothing. He was biding his time.

CHAPTER XVI—THE SCREWS TIGHTEN 131

That night came the heavy snow for which the loggers had been waiting, and a rush of activity followed in Hell Camp. The logs which had lain in the woods for want of sleighing now were accessible. Following the snow came hard, freezing nights, and the main ice-roads which Reivers had driven into the timber for miles became solid beds of ice over which a team could haul log loads to the extent of a carload weight. It was ideal logging-weather, and the big camp began to hum.

The mastery of Reivers once more showed itself in the way in which he drove his great crew at top speed and beyond. The feeling against him on the part of the men had risen to silent, tight-lipped heat as the news went around of how the old Magyar with the ear-rings had met his death. Each man in camp knew that he might have been in the old man's shoes; each knew that Reivers' anger might fall on him next. In the total of a hundred and fifty men in camp there was probably not one who did not curse Reivers and rage against his rule, and there were few who, if the opportunity had offered, would not cheerfully have taken his life.

The feeling against him had unified itself. Before, the men had been split into various groups on the subject of the boss. They remained divided now, but on one thing they were unanimous: the Snow-Burner had gone too far to bear. Men sat on the bunk-edges in the stockade and cursed as they thought of the boss and the shotgun guards that rendered them helpless. Reivers permitted no firearms of any kind in camp save those that were carried by his gunmen. 132

The gunmen when not on guard kept to their quarters, in the building just outside of the stockade gate, where Reivers also lived. When armed, they were ordered to permit no man to approach nearer than ten feet to them—this to prevent a possible rushing and wresting the weapons from their hands. So long as the guards were there in possession of their shotguns the men knew that they were helpless. Driven to desperation now, they prayed for the chance to get those guns into their own hands. After that they promised themselves that the score of brutality would be made even.

Then came the time for rush work, and under the lash of Reivers' will the outraged men, carried off their feet, were driven with a ferocity that told how completely Reivers ignored the spirit of revolt which he knew was fomenting against him. He quit playing with them, as he expressed it; he began to drive.

Long before daylight began to grey the sky above the eastern timber-line the men were out at their posts, waiting for sufficient light to begin the day's work. Once the work began it went ahead with a fury that seemed to carry all men with it. Reivers was everywhere that a man dared to pause for a moment to shirk his job. He used his hands now, for a broken leg or rib laid a man up, and he had use for the present for every man he could muster. He scarcely looked at the men he hit, breaking their faces with a sudden, treacherous blow, cursing them coldly until, despite their injuries, they leaped at their work, then whirling away to fall upon some other luckless one elsewhere. 133

He was a fury, a merciless elemental force, with no consideration for the strength and endurance of men; sparing no one any more than he spared himself, and rushing his whole force along at top speed by sheer power of the spirit of leadership that possessed him. Men ceased for the time being to growl and pray that the Snow-Burner would get his just due. They had no thought nor energies for anything but keeping pace in the whirlwind rush of work through which the Snow-Burner drove them.

In the blacksmith-shop the same condition prevailed as elsewhere in the camp. The extra hurry of the work in the timber meant extra accidents, which meant breakages. There were chain-links to

be forged and fitted to broken chains; sharp two-inch calks to be driven into the horses' shoes, peaveys and cant-hooks to be repaired. Besides the regular blacksmith-work of the camp, which was quite sufficient to keep Campbell and one helper comfortably employed, there was now added each day a bulk of extra work due to the strain under which men, horses and tools were working.

Old Campbell, grimly resolute that Reivers should have no excuse to fall foul of him, drove himself and his helper at a speed second only to that with which he had so roughly greeted Topy to the rough world of bodily labour. But the Topy who now hammered and toiled at Campbell's side was a different man from the champagne-softened youth who had come into camp a little while before. The puffiness was gone from under his eyes, the looseness from his lips and the fat from around the middle. Through his veins the blood now surged with no taint of cumbering poison; his tissues tingled with life and healthiness.

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Day by day he did his share and more in the shop-work, and instead of the old feeling of fatigue, which before had followed any prolonged exertion, felt his muscles spring with hardness and new life at each demand made upon them. The old joy of a strong man in his strength came back in him. Stripped to the waist he stretched himself and filled his great lungs with deep drafts, his arms like beams stretched out and above his head. Under the clean skin, rosy and moist from exertion, the muscles bunched and relaxed, tautened instantly to iron hardness or rippled softly as they were called upon, in the perfect co-ordination which results in great athletes. Old Campbell, similarly stripped, stared at the marvel of a giant's perfect torso, beside which his own work-wrought body was ugly in its unequal development.

"Losh, man! But you're full grown!" he growled in admiration. "I've seen but one man who could strip anywhere near to you."

"Who was he?" asked Topy.

"The Snow-Burner."

Day by day Topy hammered and laboured at Campbell's side, holding his end up against the grim old smith, and day by day he felt his muscles growing toward that iron condition in which there is no tiring. Presently, to Scotty's vexation, he was doing more than his share, ending the day with a laugh and waking up in the morning as fresh as if he had not taxed his energies the day before.

At first he continued to favour his injured ankle, lest a sudden strain delay its recovery. Each night he massaged and bandaged it scientifically. Later on, when he felt that it was stronger, he began to exercise it, slowly raising and lowering himself on the balls of his feet. In a couple of weeks the old spring and strength had largely come back, and Campbell snorted in disgust at the antics indulged in by his helper when the day's work was done.

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"Skipping a rope one, twa hundred times! What brand o' silliness do ye call that?" he grumbled. "Ha' ye nothing useful to do wi' them long legs of yourn, that you have to make a jumping-jack out o' yourself?"

At which Topy smiled grimly and continued his training.

The rush of work had its compensations. Reivers, driving his force like mad, had no time to waste either in bantering Topy and Campbell in the evening or in paying attention to Miss Pearson. All the power that was in the Snow-Burner was concentrated upon the problem of getting out every stick of timber possible while the favourable weather continued. He spent most of his time in the timber up-river where the heaviest logging was going on.

By day he raged in the thick of the men with only one thought or aim—to get out the logs as fast as human and horse-power could do it. At night the road-crews, repairing with pick and shovel and sprinkling-tanks the wear and tear of the day's hauling, worked under Reivers' compelling eyes. All night long the sprinkling-tanks went up and down the ice-coated roads, and the drivers, freezing on the seats, were afraid to stop or nod, not knowing when the Snow-Burner might step out from the shadows and catch them in the act.

The number of accidents, always too plentiful in logging-camps, multiplied, but Reivers permitted nothing short of broken bones to send a man to his bunk. Topy, besides his work in the shop, cared as best he could for the disabled. Reivers had no time to waste that way now. The two men hurt at the quarry were recovering rapidly. One day a tall, lean "white man," a Yankee top-loader, came hobbling out of the woods with his foot dangling at the ankle, and mumbling curses through a smashed jaw.

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"How did you get this?" asked Topy, as he dressed the cruelly crushed foot.

"Pinched between two logs," mumbled the man. "They let one come down the skids when I wasn't lookin'. No fault of mine; I didn't have time to jump. And then, when I'm standin' there leanin' against a tree, that devil Reivers comes up and hands me this." He pointed to his cracked jaw. "He'll teach me to get myself hurt, he says. —! That ain't no man; he's a devil! By —! I know what I'd ruther have than the wages comin' to me, and that's a rifle with one good catridge in it and that — standin' afore me."

Yet that evening, when Reivers came to the top-loader's bunk and demanded how long he expected to lie there eating his head off, the man cringed and whimpered that he would be back on the job as soon as his foot was fit to stand on. In Reivers' presence the men were afraid to call their thoughts their own, but behind his back the mumblings and grumbings of hatred were

growing to a volume which inevitably soon must break out in the hell-yelp of a mob ripe for murder.

Reivers knew it better than any man in camp. To indicate how it affected him he turned the screws on tighter than ever. Once, at least, "they had him dead," as they admitted, when he stood ankle-deep in the river with the saw-logs thundering over the rollways to the brink of the bluff above his head. One cunning twist of a peavey would have sent a dozen logs tumbling over the brink on his head. Reivers sensed his danger and looked up. He smiled. Then he turned and deliberately stood with his back to the men. And no man dared to give his peavey that one cunning twist. 137

During these strenuous days Topsy tried in vain to muster up sufficient courage to reopen the conversation with Miss Pearson which had been so suddenly interrupted by the cave-in at the quarry. He saw her every day. She had changed greatly from the high-spirited, self-reliant girl who had stood on the steps of the hotel back at Rail Head and told the whole world by her manner that she was accustomed and able to take care of herself. A stronger will than hers had entered her scheme of life.

Although she knew now that Reivers had tricked her into coming to Hell Camp because he was confident of winning her, the knowledge made no difference. The will of the man dominated and fascinated her. She feared him, yet she was drawn toward him despite her struggles. She fought hard against the inclination to yield to the stronger will, to let her feelings make her his willing slave, as she knew he wished. The pain of the struggle shone in her eyes. Her cheeks lost their bloom; there were lines about the little mouth.

Topsy saw it, but an unwonted shyness had come upon him. He could no longer speak to her with the frank friendliness of their previous conversations. Something which he could not place had, he felt, set them apart.

Perhaps it was the fact that he saw the fascinations which Reivers had for her. Reivers was his enemy. They had been enemies from the moment when they first had measured each other eye to eye. He felt that he had one aim in life now, and one only; that was to prove to himself and to Reivers that Reivers was not his master.

Beyond that he had no plans. He knew that this meant a grapple which must end with one of them broken and helpless. The unfortunate one might be himself. In that case there would be no need to think of the future, and it would be just as well not to have spoken any more with the girl. 138

It might be Reivers. Then he would be guilty in her eyes of having injured the man for whom the girl now obviously had feelings which Topsy could construe in but one way. She cared for Reivers, in spite of herself; and she would not be inclined to friendliness toward the man who had conquered him, if conquered he should be.

The more Topsy thought it over the less enviable, to his notion, became his standing with the girl. He ended by resolutely determining to put her out of his thoughts. After all, he was no girl's man. He had no business trying to be. For the present he saw one task laid out before him as inevitable as a revealed fate—to prove himself with Reivers, to get to grips with the cold-blooded master-man who had made him feel, with every man in camp, that the place veritably was a Hell Camp.

Reivers' brutal dominance lay like a tangible weight upon Topsy's spirit. He longed for only one thing—for the opportunity to stand up eye to eye with him and learn who was the better man. Beyond that he did not see, nor care. He had given up any thought that the girl might ever care for him.

CHAPTER XVII—TILLY'S WARNING 139

November passed, and the first half of December. The shortest days of the year were approaching, and still the cold, crisp weather, ideal for logging, continued without a break. Hell Camp continued to hum with its abnormal activity. A thaw which would spoil the sleighing and ice-roads for the time being was long over-due. With the coming of the thaw would come a temporary lull in the work of the camp.

The men prayed for the thaw; Reivers asked that the cold weather continue. It had continued now longer than he had expected or hoped, and the output of the camp already was double that of what would have been successful logging at that season. But Reivers was not satisfied. The record that he was setting served only to spur his ambition to desperation.

The longer the cold spell hung on the harder he drove. Each day, as he looked at the low, grey sky and saw that there were no signs of a break-up, he turned to and set the pace a little faster than the day before. The madness of achievement, the passion to use his powers to accomplish the impossible, the characteristics which had won him the name of Snow-Burner, were in possession. He was doing the impossible; he was accomplishing what no other man could do, what all men said was impossible; and the feat only created a hunger to do more. 140

The men were past grumbling now, too tired of body and too crushed of mind to give expression to their feelings. So long as the rush of work continued they were as harmless as harnessed and driven cattle, incapable of anything more than keeping step in the mad march that the Snow-

Burner was leading. But all men knew that with the coming of a thaw and the cessation of work would come an explosion of the murderous hatred which Reivers' tactics had driven into the hearts of the men. Now and then a man, driven to a state of desperation which excluded the possibility of fear, stopped and rebelled. One day a young swamper, a gangling lad of twenty, raging and weeping, threw himself upon Reivers like a cat upon a bear. Reivers, with a laugh, thrust him off and kicked him out of the way. Another time a huge Slav sprang at him with his razor-edged ax up-raised, and, quailing before Reivers' calm look, hurled the ax away with a scream and ran blindly away into the trackless woods. Three days later, starving and with frozen hands and feet, he came stumbling up to the stockade and fell in a lump.

"Feed him up," ordered Reivers, smiling. "I've got a little use for him when he's fixed up so he can feel. You see, Treplin," he continued to Topy, who had been called to bring the man back to life, "I'm not all cruelty. When I want to save a man to amuse myself with I'm almost as much of a humanitarian as you are."

He hurried on his way, but before he was out of hearing he flung back—

"You remember how carefully I had Tilly nurse you, don't you—doctor?"

It was only the guards that Reivers did not make enemies of. He knew that he had need of their loyalty. At night the "white men" sat on the edges of their bunks and tried to concoct feasible schemes for securing possession of the shotguns of the guards. 141

On the morning of the shortest day of the year Topy heard a scratching sound at the window near his bunk and sprang up. It was still pitch dark, long before any one should be stirring around camp save the cook and cookees.

"Who's there?" demanded Topy.

"Me. Want talk um with you," came the low response from without. "You no come out. No make noise. Hear through window. You can hear um when I talk huh?"

"Tilly!" gasped Topy. "What's up?"

"You hear um what I talk?" asked the squaw again.

"Yes, yes; I can hear you. What is it?"

"You like um li'l Miss Pearson, huh?" said Tilly bluntly.

"What?" Topy's heart was pounding with sudden excitement. "What—what's up, Tilly? There hasn't anything happened to Miss Pearson, has there?"

"Uh! You like um Miss Pearson? Tell um Tilly straight or Tilly go 'way and no talk um more with you. You like her? Huh?"

"Yes," said Topy breathlessly, after a long pause. "Yes, I like her. What is it?"

"You no like see um Miss Pearson get hurt?"

"No, no; of course not. Who's going to hurt her?"

"Snow-Burner," said Tilly. "Tilly tell you this before she go 'way. Tilly going 'way now. Tilly going 'way far off to father's tepee. Snow-Burner tell um me go. Snow-Burner tell um me go last night. Snow-Burner say he no want Tilly stay in camp longer. Tilly know why Snow-Burner no want her stay in camp. Snow-Burner through with Tilly. Snow-Burner now want um Miss Pearson. So." 142

"Tilly! Hold on!" She had already turned away, but she halted at his voice and came close to the window. "What is this? Are you going away at once—because the Snow-Burner says so?"

The squaw nodded, stoically submissive.

"Snow-Burner say 'go'; Tilly go," she said. "Snow-Burner say go before any one see um me this morning. I go now. Must go; Snow-Burner say so."

"And Miss Pearson?" whispered Topy frantically. "Did he say anything about her?"

Tilly nodded heavily.

"Tell um me long 'go. Tell um me before Miss Pearson come. Tell um me he going marry Miss Pearson for um Christmas present. Christmas Day come soon now. Snow-Burner no want Tilly here then. Send Tilly 'way."

The breath seemed to leave Topy's body for an instant. He swayed and caught at the window-frame.

"Marry her—Christmas Day?" he whispered, horrified.

"Yes. He no tell um Miss Pearson yet. He tell me no tell um her, no tell um anybody. I tell you. Now go."

Before Topy had sufficiently recovered his wits to speak again he heard the crunch of her moccasins on the snow dying away in the darkness as the cast-off squaw stolidly started on her journey into the woods.

"Tilly!" called Topy desperately, but there was no answer.

"What's matter?" murmured Campbell, disturbed in his deep slumber, and falling to sleep again before he received a reply.

Toppy stood for a long time with his face held close to the window through which he had heard Tilly's startling news. The shock had numbed him. Although he had been prepared to expect anything of Reivers, he now realised that this was something more than he had thought possible even from him. The Snow-Burner—marry Miss Pearson—for a Christmas present—Christmas Day! He seemed to hear Tilly repeating the words over and over again. And Reivers had not even so much as told Miss Pearson of what he intended to do. He had not even told her that he intended to marry her. So Tilly said, and Tilly knew. What did Reivers intend to do then? How did he know he was going to marry her? How did he know she would have him?

Toppy shivered a little as his wits began to work more clearly, and the full significance of the situation began to grow clear to him. He understood now. Reivers had good reason for making his plans so confidently. He had studied the girl until he had seen that his will had dominated hers; that though she might not love him, might even fear him, she had not the will-power against him to say nay to his wishes.

He knew that she was helplessly fascinated, that she was his for the taking. He had been too busy to take her until now; the serious duties of his position had allowed no time for dalliance. So the girl had been safe and unmolested—until now! And now Reivers was secretly preparing to make her his own!

A sudden thought struck Toppy, and he tiptoed to the door and looked out. Instead of the crisp coldness of recent mornings there was a warm mugginess in the air; and Toppy, bending down, placed his hand on the snow and felt that it had begun to soften. The thaw had come.

"I thought so," he said to himself. "The work will break up now, and he's going to amuse himself. Well, he made a mistake when he told Tilly. She's been civilised just enough to make her capable of jealousy."

He went back to his bunk and dressed.

"What are you stirring around so early for?" grumbled Campbell. "Dinna ye get work enough during the day, to be getting up in the dark?"

"The thaw's come," said Toppy, throwing on his cap. "There'll be something doing besides work now."

He went out into the dark morning, crossed the road and softly tried the door to the office. He felt much better when he had assured himself that the door was securely locked on the inside. Then he returned to the shop and waited for the daylight to appear.

CHAPTER XVIII—"CANNY BY NATURE"

Old Campbell arose at his usual time, surprised and pleased to find that Toppy had breakfast already cooked and on the table. Being a canny Scot, he did not express his surprise or pleasure, but proceeded to look about for signs to indicate the reason of Toppy's unwonted conduct. All that he could make out was that Toppy's eyes were bright with some sort of excitement, and that the grim set of his mouth had given way to an expression of relief. So the Scot sat down to eat, shaking his grey head in puzzled fashion.

"I dinna see that this thaw should be any reason for your parading around before the night's done," he grumbled. "Were you so tired of a little useful work that ye maun greet a let-down with such early rising?"

Toppy sat down and proceeded to breakfast without venturing a reply. When they had finished the meal he pushed back his chair and looked across at Campbell. Huge and careless, he sprawled in his chair, the tension and uncertainty gone now that he had made his resolution; and Campbell, studying his face, sensed that something was up and leaned forward eagerly.

"I want to lay off to-day, Scotty," said Toppy deliberately. "I've got a little business that I want to settle with Reivers."

Old Campbell did not start nor in any way indicate surprise.

"Aye!" he said quietly after a pause. "I ha' seen from the first it would have to be that in the end. Ye maun settle which is best man. But why to-day?"

"Because now that the thaw has spoiled the sleighing Reivers will have time for deviltry." And Toppy went on and told all that he had heard from Tilly's lips that morning. Campbell shook his head angrily as he heard.

"Many things has the Snow-Burner done ill," he said, "and his sins against men and women cry for punishment; but that—to yon little lass—gi'n he did that, that would be worst of all. What are your plans, lad?"

"Nothing," said Toppy. "I will go and find him, and we'll have it out."

"Not so," said Campbell swiftly. "Gi'n you did that 'twould cost you your life did you chance to win o'er him. Do you think those devils with the guns would not murder to win favour of the Snow-Burner, him holding the lives and liberty of all of them in his hands as he does? Nay, lad!

Fight ye must; you're both too big and spirited to meet without coming to grips; but you have aye the need of an old head on your side if you're to stand up with Reivers on even terms.

"What think you he would fancy, did you go to him with a confident bold challenge as you suggest? That you had a trick up your sleeve, with the men in on it, perhaps; and he'd have the guards there with their guns to see he won as sure as we're sitting here talking. No; I ha' seen for weeks 'twas coming on, and I ha' been using this auld head o' mine. I may even say I ha' been doing more than thinking; I ha' been talking. I have told Reivers that you were becoming unbearable in this shop, and that I could not stand you much longer as my helper."

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Toppy looked across the table, amazed and pained.

"Why—what's wrong, Scotty?" he stammered.

"Tush, lad!" snapped the old man. "Dinna think I meant it. I only told Reivers so for the effect."

Toppy was bewildered.

"I don't see what you're driving at, Scotty."

"Listen, then; I ha' told Reivers that you were getting the swell head so bad there was no working you. I ha' told him you were at heart nothing but a fresh young whiffet who needed taming, and gi'n he made me keep you here I mysel' would do the taming with an ax-handle. Do you begin to get my drift now, lad?"

"I confess I don't," admitted Toppy.

"Well, then—Reivers said: 'That's how I sized him up, too. But don't you do the taming, Campbell,' says he. 'I am saving him for mysel',' he says. 'But I will not put up with his lip longer,' said I. 'Man, Reivers,' I says, 'he thinks he's a fighter, and the other day I slammed him on his back mysel'; and gi'n I had my old wind,' I says, 'I would have whipped him then and there.'

"Oh, carried on strong, losing my temper and all. 'Five year ago I would ha' broken his back, the big young fool!' I says. 'An' he swaggers around me and thinks he's a boss man because he licked that bloat Sheedy. Ah!' I says. 'I'll stand it till he gives me lip again; then I'll lay him out with whatever I have in my hands,' says I.

"'Don't do it,' says Reivers, smiling to see me so worked up, and surmising, as I intended he should, that I was angry only because I'd discovered that you were a better man than mysel'. 'Save him for me,' says he. 'As soon as I have more time I will 'tend to him. In the meantime,' he says, 'let him go on thinking he is a good man.'

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"Lad, he swallowed it all, for it's four years since he knew me first, and that was the first lie I'd told him at all. 'I'll take him under my eye soon as I have more time,' says he. 'He'll not swagger after I've tamed him a little.'"

"But I don't just see——"

"Dolt! Dinna you see that noo he considers you as an overconfident young fool whom he's going to take the conceit out of? Dinna ye see that noo you're in the same category as the other men he's broken down? He'll not think it worth while to have his shotgun men handy noo when he starts in to do his breaking. He'll start it, ye understand; not you. 'Twill be proper so. I will go this morning and tell him that the end has come; that I can not stand you longer around me. He'll give you something to do—under him. Under him, do you see? Then you must e'en watch your chance, and—and happen I'll manage to be around in case the guards should show up."

"Better keep out of it altogether," said Toppy. "They won't use their guns in an even fight, and you couldn't do anything with your bare hands if they did."

"With my bare hands, no," said Campbell, going to his bunk. "But I am not so bare-handed as you think, lad." He dug under the blankets and held up a huge black revolver. "Canny by nature!" he said; thrusting the grim weapon under his trousers-band. "I made no idle threat when I told Reivers I would shoot his head off did he ever try to make a broken man out of me. I have had this utensil handy ever since."

"Scotty," cried Toppy, deeply moved at the old man's staunch friendship, "when did you begin to plan this scheme?"

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Campbell looked squarely into his eyes.

"The same day that I talked with yon lassie and learned how Reivers had fascinated her."

"Why?"

"Dinna ye know nothing about women, lad?"

"I——What do you mean?"

"Do you fancy Reivers could carry his will so strong with folks gi'n ye happen to make a beaten man out of him? And do you not think yon lass would come back to her right mind gi'n the Snow-Burner loses his power o'er her? You're no' so blind as not to see she's no liking for him, but the de'il has in a way mesmerised her."

"Then you mean——"

"That when you and the Snow-Burner put up your mitts ye'll be fighting for more than just to see who's best man. Now think that over, lad, while I go and complain to Reivers that I can not stand

you an hour longer, and arrange for him to give you your taming.”

CHAPTER XIX—THE FIGHT

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It was past sunrise now; the mugginess in the air had fled before the unclouded sun, and the day was pleasantly bright and warm. The sunlight coming in through the eastern window flooded the room. Outside could be heard the steady *drip-drip* from the melting icicles, and the chirp of the chickadees industriously seeking a breakfast around the door made the morning cheery.

Topy sat heaved forward in his chair after Campbell had gone on his errand, and looked out of the open door, and waited. From where he sat he could see the office across the way. Presently he saw Miss Pearson come out, stand for a moment in the doorway peering around in puzzled fashion, and go in again.

Topy did not move. He knew what that signified—that the girl was puzzled and perhaps frightened over the absence of the squaw, Tilly; but he had no impulse to cross the street and break the news to her. The girl, Tilly’s absence, such things were to him only incidentals now. He saw the girl as if far away, as if she were something that did not greatly concern him.

Through his mind there ran recollections of other moments like this—moments of waiting in the training-quarters back at school for the word of the coach to trot out on the field. The same ease of spirit after the tension of weeks of hard training; the same sinking of all worry and nervousness in the knowledge that now that the test was on he would do the best that was in him, and that beyond this there was nothing for a man to think or worry about.

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Back there at school there had also been that sense of dissociation from all things not involved in the contest before him. The roaring stands, the pretty girls waving the bright-hued banners, the sound of his name shouted far down the field—he had heard them, but they had not affected him. For the time being, then as now, he had become a wonderful human machine, completely concentrated, as machines must be, upon the accomplishment of one task. Then it had been to play a game; now it was to fight. But it was much the same, after all; it was all in the man-game.

A feeling of content was the only emotion that Topy was conscious of in the long minutes during which he waited for Campbell to return. The *drip-drip* from the eaves and the chirp of the chickadees came as music to his ears. The Snow-Burner and he were going to fight; in that knowledge there was relief after the weeks of tension.

Heavy, crunching steps sounded on the snow outside, and Campbell’s broad shoulders filled the doorway. Topy bent over and carefully tightened a shoe-lace.

“It’s all set,” said Campbell rapidly. “He says send you to him at once. You’re in luck. He’s in the stockade. Get you up and go to him. There is only one guard at the gate. I’ll follow and be handy in case he should interfere.”

That was all. Topy rose up and strode out without a word. He made his way to the stockade gate with a carelessness of manner that belied his purpose. He noted that the guard stood on the outside of the gate and that the snow already was squashy underfoot. The gate opened and admitted him and closed behind him. Then he was walking across the yard toward Reivers, who stood waiting before the camp kitchen at the far end of the yard.

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Here and there Topy saw men in the bunkhouses, perhaps fifty in all, and realised that the sudden thaw had at once enforced a period of idleness for some of the men. He nodded lightly in response to the greeting from one of the men whom he had doctored; then he was standing before Reivers, and Reivers was looking at him as he had looked at Rosky the day when he broke the Bohunk’s leg. Topy looked back, unmoved. For a moment the two stood silent, eye measuring eye. Then Reivers spoke savagely, enraged at finding a will that braved his own.

“What kind of a game are you trying to play, Treplin?”

“Game?” repeated Topy innocently.

“Come, come!” Reivers’ brows were drawing down over his eyes, and again Topy for some reason was reminded of a bear. “You don’t suppose I’m as innocent as Campbell, do you? You’ve been raising — in the shop, I hear. You’re doing that with an object. You’re trying some game. I don’t care what it is; it doesn’t go. There doesn’t anybody try any games in this place except myself.”

“How about poker-games?” suggested Topy quietly.

A man hidden in the darkness of the bunkhouse behind Reivers snickered audibly; for Campbell had told the story of how Topy had bested the boss at poker and the man understood Topy’s thrust. Reivers’ eyes flashed and his jaw shot out, but in an instant he had his anger under control again. He smiled.

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“Well, well; so we’re playing the wit, are we—doctor?” he sneered softly. “We’re trying to drive that trained mind of ours to be brilliant, are we? Well, I wouldn’t, Treplin; the strain on inferior machinery may be fatal.” Suddenly his whole face seemed to change, convulsed in a spasm of brute threatening. “Get over there in that corner and dig a slop-sink; you hear me?” Reivers’

voice was a snarl as he pointed to the corner near the kitchen, where a pick and shovel lay waiting. "That's what you're going to do, my fine buck, with your nerve to dare to come into my camp and think you're my equal. Dig slop-holes for my Dago cook; that's what you're going to do!"

"Do you hear? You're going to be the lowest scavenger in this gang of scum. I'm going to break you. I'm going to keep you here until I'm through with you. I'm going to send you out of here so low down that a saloon scrub-out would kick you on general principles. That's what's going to happen to you! I'm going to play with you. I'm going to show you how well it pays to think of yourself as my equal in my own camp. Get over there now—right over there where the whole camp can see you, and dig a hole for the Dago to throw his slops!"

Few men could have faced the sight of the Snow-Burner's face as the words shot from his iron-like lips without retreating, but Topy stood still. He began to smile.

"Pardon, Reivers," he said softly, "I never thought of myself as your equal."

"Don't whine now; it's too late! Go——"

"Because I know I'm a better man than you ever could be."

It grew very still with great suddenness there in the corner of the big yard. The men within hearing held their breaths. The *drip-drip* from the eaves sounded loud in the silence. And now Topy saw the wolf-craft creeping to its own far back in Reivers' eyes, and without moving he stood tensed for sudden, flash-like action.

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"So that's it?" said Reivers, smiling; and then he struck with serpent-tongue swiftness. And with that blow Topy knew how desperate would be the battle; for, skilled boxer and on the alert as he was, he had time only to snap his jaw to one side far enough to save himself from certain knockout, while the iron-like fist tore the skin off his cheek as it shot past.

Reivers had not thrown his body behind the blow. He stood upright and ready. He was a little surprised that his man did not go down. Topy, recovering like a flash, likewise was prepared. A tiny instant they faced each other. Then with simultaneous growls they hurled themselves breast to breast and the fight was on.

Topy had yielded to the impulse to answer in kind the challenge that had flared in Reivers' eyes. It wasn't science; it wasn't sense. It was the blind, primitive impulse to come into shock with a foe, to stop him, to force him back, to make him break ground. Breast upon breast Reivers and Topy came together and stopped short, two bodies of equal force suddenly meeting.

Neither gave ground; neither made a pretense at guarding. Toe to toe they stood, head to head, and drove their fists against one another's iron-strong bodies with a rapidity and a force that only giants like themselves could have withstood for a moment. It was madness, it was murder, and the group of men who were watching held their breaths and waited for one or the other to wilt and go down, the life knocked out of him by those pile-driver blows.

Then, as suddenly as they had come together, the pair leaped apart, rushed together again, gripped into a clinch, struggled in Titan fashion with futile heaving and tripping, flew apart once more, then volleyed each other with vicious punches—a kaleidoscope of springing legs, rushing bodies, and stiffly driven arms.

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It was a battle that drove the fear of Reivers from the heart of the men who witnessed and dragged them forth to form a ring around the two fighters. It was a battle to make men roar with frenzy; but not a sound came from the ring that expanded and closed as the battle raged here and there. The men were at first too shocked to cry out at the sight of any one daring to give the Snow-Burner fight; and after the shock had worn away they were too wary to give a sign that might bring the guards. Silently and tight-lipped the ring formed; and each pair of eyes that watched shot nothing but hatred for Reivers.

Topy was the first to recover from the initial frenzied impulse to strive to annihilate in one rush his hated enemy. He shook his head as he was wont to do after a hard scrimmage on the gridiron, and his fighting-wits were clear again. So far he knew he had held his own, but only held it. Perhaps he out-bulked Reivers slightly in body and was a trifle quicker on his feet, but Reivers' blows were enough heavier than his to even up this advantage.

He had driven his fist flush home on his foreman's neck under the ear, and the neck had not yielded any more than a column of wood. He had felt Reivers' fist drive home full on his cheekbone and it seemed that he had been struck by a handful of iron. When they had strained breast against breast in the first clash the fact that they were of equal strength had been apparent to both. Equally matched, and both equally determined to win, Topy knew that the fight would be long; and he began to circle scientifically, striking and guarding with all his cunning, saving himself while he watched for a slip or an opening that might offer an advantage.

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Suddenly the opening came, as Reivers for a second paused, deceived by Topy's tactics. Like a bullet to the mark Topy's right shot home on the exposed chin; but Reivers, felled to his knees as if shot, was up like a flash, staggering Topy with a left on the mouth and rushing him around and around in fury at the knockdown. An added grimness to Topy's expression told how he appreciated the significance of this incident. He had put all his force, from toes to knuckles, into that blow; and Reivers had merely been staggered. Again Topy began circling, deliberately saving himself for a drawn-out battle which now to him seemed uphill.

The ring of watchers around the pair grew more close, more eager. All of the men present in the bunkhouses had rushed out to see the fight. As Topy circled he saw in the foremost ranks the

Torta boys and most of the gang that had worked under him in the quarry; and by the looks in their eyes he knew that he was fighting in the presence of friends. In the next second their looks had turned to dismay as Reivers, swiftly feinting with his left, drove home the right against Toppo's jaw and knocked him to his haunches. But Toppo, rising slowly, caught Reivers as he closed in to follow up his advantage and with a heavy swing to the eye stopped him in his tracks. A low cry escaped the tight lips around the ring. The blood was spurting from a clean cut in Reivers' brow and a few men called—

"First blood!"

Then Toppo spat out the blood he had held in after Reivers' blow. The feel of the blood running down his face turned Reivers to a fury. He rushed with an impetuosity which nothing could withstand, his fists playing a tattoo on Toppo's head and body. Like a tiger Toppo fought back; but Reivers' rage for the moment had given him added strength. He fought as a man who intends to end a fight in a hurry; he rushed and struck with power to annihilate with one blow, and rushed and struck again.

Toppo was pressed back. A groan came from the crowd as they saw him stagger from a blow on the jaw and saw Reivers set himself for one last desperate effort. Reivers rushed, his face the face of a demon, his left ripping up for the body, his right looping overhand in a killing swing at the head; and then the crowd gasped, for Toppo, with his superior quickness of foot, side-stepped and as Reivers plunged past dealt him a left in the mouth that flung him half around and sent him staggering against the outheld hands of the crowd.

When Reivers turned around now he was bleeding from the mouth also, and in his eyes was a look of caution that Toppo had never seen there before.

The fight now became as dogged as it was furious. Each man had tried to end it with a single and, failing, knew that he must wear his opponent down. Neither had been seriously damaged by the blows struck and neither was in the least tired. The thud of blow followed blow. Back and forth the pair shuffled, first one driving the other with volleys of punches, then his antagonist suddenly turning the tables.

Toppo, feeling that he was fighting an uphill fight, saved himself more than Reivers. The latter, who felt himself the master, became more and more enraged as Toppo continued to stand up before him and give him back as good as he gave. Each time that Toppo reached face or body with a solid blow the savage fury flared in Reivers' eyes, and he lunged forward like a maddened bull. Always, however, he recovered himself and resumed the fight with brains as well as brawn.

Toppo never lost his head after the first wild spasm. He realised that they were so evenly matched that the loser would lose by a slip of the mind by letting some weak spot in his character master him; and he held himself in with an iron will. Reivers' blows goaded and tempted him to rush in madly, but he held back. The men about the ring thought he was losing, and their voices rose in growled encouragement.

Toppo was not losing. As he saw Reivers become more and more furious his hopes began to rise. At each opportunity he reached Reivers' face, cutting open his other eye, bringing the blood from his nose, stinging him into added furies. Toppo was knocked down several times in the rushes that invariably followed such blows, but each time he recovered himself before Reivers could rush upon him. Suddenly his fighting-instinct telegraphed him that Reivers was about to try something new. He drew back a little, Reivers following closely. Suddenly it came. Without warning Reivers kicked. The blow took Toppo in the groin and he stumbled backward from its force. A cry of rage went up from the watching men. But Toppo sprang erect in an instant.

"All right!" he called. "It didn't hurt me. Shut up, you fools."

Thanks to his training, his hard muscles had turned the kick and saved him from being disabled.

"What's the matter, Reivers?" he taunted as he circled carefully. "Losing confidence in your fists? Got to use your feet, eh? Lost your kick, too, haven't you? Well, well! Then you certainly are in for a fine trimming!"

Again Reivers kicked, this time aiming low at the shin-bone; but Toppo avoided it easily and danced back with a laugh.

"Can't even land it any more!" Treplin chuckled. "Show us some more tricks, Reivers!"

Reivers had thrown off all restraint now. He fought with lowered head, and Toppo once more, as he saw the eyes watching him through the thick brows, thought of a bear. The savagery at the root of Reivers' character was coming to the top. It was mastering, choking down his intelligence. He struck and kicked and gnashed his teeth; and curses rolled in a steady stream from his lips. One kick landed on Toppo's thigh with a thud.

"Here, bahass!" screamed a voice to Toppo, and from somewhere in the crowd an ax was pitched at his feet.

Laughingly Toppo kicked the weapon to one side, and, though in deep pain from the last kick, continued fighting as if nothing had happened.

The savage now dominating Reivers had seen and been caught by the sight of the flashing steel. A gleam of animal cunning showed in the depths of his ferocious eyes. To cripple, to kill, to destroy with one terrible stroke—that was his single passion. The axe opened the way.

Craftily he began rushing systematically. Little by little he drove Toppo back. Closer and closer

he came to the spot where the axe lay on the ground. Once more Toppo's instinct warned him that Reivers was after a terrible *coup*, and once more his whole mind and body responded with extra vigilance.

As he circled, presently he felt the axe under his feet and understood. He saw that Reivers was systematically working toward the weapon, though apparently unconscious of its existence. 160

It was in Toppo's mind to dance away, to call out to the men to remove the axe; but before he could do so something had whispered to him to hold his tongue. He continued to retreat slowly, fighting back at every inch.

Now he had stepped beyond the axe.

Now it lay between him and Reivers.

Now it lay beneath Reivers' feet, and now, as Reivers stooped to pick it up, Toppo, like a tiger, flung himself forward. It was what he had foreseen, what had made him hold his tongue.

The savage in Reivers had made him reach for the weapon; the calmly reasoning brain in Toppo's head had foreseen that in that lay his advantage. It was for only an instant, a few eye-winks, that Reivers paused and bent over for the axe; but as Toppo had flung himself forward at the psychological moment it was enough. Reivers was bent over with his hand on the axe, and for a flash he had left the spot behind his left ear exposed.

Toppo's fist, swung from far behind him, struck the spot with the sound of a pistol crack. Reivers, stooped as he was, rolled over and over and lay still. Toppo first picked up the axe and threw it far out of reach. Then he turned to Reivers, who was rising slowly, a string of foul curses on his lips.

Toppo set himself as the Snow-Burner came forward. His left lifted Reivers from his feet. Even while he was in the air, Toppo's right followed on the jaw. The Snow-Burner wavered. Then Toppo, drawing a long breath, called into play all the strength he had been saving. He struck and struck again so rapidly that the eye could not follow, and each blow found its mark; and each was of deadly power.

He drove Reivers backward. He drove him as he willed. He beat him till he saw Reivers' eyes grow glassy. Then he stepped back. The almost superhuman strength of Reivers had kept him on his feet until now in spite of the pitiless storm of blows. Now he swayed back and forth once. His breath came in gasps. His arms fell inert, his eyes closed slowly; and as a great tree falls—slowly at first, then with a sudden crash—the Snow-Burner toppled and fell face downward on the ground. 161

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Toppo stood and looked down at his vanquished foe. The convulsive rise and fall of his breast as he panted for breath told how desperately and savagely he had fought. Now as he stood victorious and looked down upon the man he had conquered, the chivalry innate in him began to stir with respect and even pity for the man whom he had beaten. He looked at Reivers' bloody face as, the head turned on one side, it lay nuzzled helplessly against the soft ground. A wave of revulsion, the aftermath of his fury, passed over him, and he drew his hand slowly across his eyes as if to shut out the sight of the havoc that his fists had wrought.

And now happened the inevitable. Toppo had not foreseen it, never had dreamed it possible. But now the men who had watched cried aloud their hatred of the big man who lay before them. The king-man, their master, was down! Upright, they would have quailed before his mere look. But now he was down! The man who had mastered them, broken them, tortured them, lay helpless there before them. The courage and hate of slaves suddenly in power over their master flamed through them. This was their chance; they had him now.

"We got him! Kill him! Come on! Finish him!" they roared, and threw themselves like a pack of wolves upon the prostrate man. Even as they rushed Reivers raised his head in returning consciousness; then he went down under a shower of heavily booted feet. 163

With a bellow of command Toppo flung himself forward. He knew quite well that this was what Reivers deserved; he had even at times hoped that the men some time would have the opportunity for such revenge. But now he discovered that he couldn't stand by and see it done. It wasn't in him. Reivers was down, fairly beaten in a hard fight. He was helpless. Toppo's rage suddenly swerved from Reivers to the men who were trying to kick the life out of him.

"Back! Get back there, I say!" he ordered.

He reached in and threw men right and left. He knocked others down. One he picked up and used as a battering-ram, and so he fought his way in and cleared the rabble away from Reivers. Reivers with more than human tenaciousness had retained a glimmer of consciousness. He saw Toppo standing astride of him fighting for his life. And in that beaten, desperate moment Reivers laughed once more.

"You're a — fool, Treplin," said he. "You'd better let them finish the job."

Toppy dragged him to his feet. A gleam of mastery flashed over the Snow-Burner as he felt himself standing upright. He swung to face the men.

"Out of the way there, you scum!" he ordered, in his old manner. The men laughed in reply. The spell had been broken. The men had seen the Snow-Burner knocked down and beaten. They had seen that Toppy was his master. They had kicked him; they had had him under them. No longer did he stand apart and above them. They cursed him and swarmed in, striking, kicking, hauling, and dragged him to the ground.

"Give him to us, bahss!" they cried. "Let us kill him, bahss!"

Some of them hung back. They did not wish to run contrary to the wishes of Toppy, their "bahss" and champion. Toppy once more got Reivers on his feet and dragged him toward the gate. A knife or two gleamed in the crowd.

"Run for the gate!" cried Toppy. Reivers tottered a few steps and fell. Over him Toppy stormed, fought, commanded, but the mob pressed constantly closer. Then, suddenly, they stopped striking. They began to break. Toppy, looking around for the reason, saw Campbell and a guard running toward them—Campbell with his big revolver, the guard with his gun at a ready. With a last tremendous effort he picked Reivers up in his arms and ran to meet them. He heard the guard fire once, heard Campbell ordering the men to stand back; then he staggered out of the stockade and dropped his heavy burden on the ground. Behind him Campbell and the guard slammed shut the gate, and within the cries and curses of the men rose in one awful wail, the cry of a blood-mob cheated of its prey.

Reivers rose slowly, first to his hands and knees, then to his feet. He looked at Toppy, and the only expression upon his face was a sneer.

"You — fool!" he laughed. "You poor weak sister! You'll be sorry before morning that you didn't let the men finish that job!"

He turned, and without another word went staggering away to the building where he and the guards lived.

CHAPTER XXI—THE END OF THE BOSS

Back in the shop Campbell went to work with a will to doctor up Toppy's battered face.

"I dunno, lad, I dunno," he muttered as he patched up the ragged cuts. "It was the poetry of justice that the men should have had him, but I dunno that I could ha' left him lie there myself."

"Of course you couldn't," said Toppy. "A man can't do that sort of thing. But, say, Campbell, what do you suppose he meant about being sorry before morning because I saved him?"

Although he had won in the contest which he had so longed for, although he had proved and knew that he was a better man than Reivers, Toppy for some reason experienced none of the elation which he had expected. The thing wasn't settled. Reivers was still fighting. He was still boss of Hell Camp. He was fighting with craft now. What had that final threat meant?

"It has to do with the lass; I'll wager on that," said Campbell. "He will aye be taking his revenge on her. I know the man; he has that way."

"The dog!"

"Aye.—Hold still wi' that ear now.—Aye; it's the way of the man, as I know him. But I'm thinking some one else will play dog, too. Watchdog, I mean. And I'm thinking the same will be mysel'."

"You don't think he'll try—"

"The Snow-Burner will try anything if his mind's set. Even force.—Hold still wi' your chin.—You licked him fair, lad. 'Twas a great fight. You're best man. But I'm glad I have my shooting-utensil handy, for if I'm any judge Hell Camp will aye deserve its name to-night."

"What do you think will happen?"

"'Tis hard to say. But 'tis sure Reivers means to do something desperate, and as I know the man 'tis something that concerns the lass. Then there are the men. They have tasted blood. They have seen the Snow-Burner beaten. His grip has been torn off them. They're no longer afraid. When the working gangs come in this noon and hear the story there'll be nothing can hold them from doing what they please. You know what that will be. They're wild to break loose. Gi'n they lay hands on Reivers they'll tear him and the camp to pieces. Aye, there'll be things stirring here before evening, or I'm a dolt."

True to Campbell's prediction, the stockade shook with cheers, roars and curses that noon when the working men came in and heard the tale of the Snow-Burner's downfall. The discipline of the camp vanished with those shouts. The men were no longer cowed. They were free and unafraid. After they had eaten, the straw-bosses and guards prepared to lead them back to their work.

The men laughed. The bosses joined them. The guards threatened. The men jeered. Reivers, the only force that had kept them cowed, was lying beaten and helpless in his bunk, and not even the

shotguns of the guards could cow the fierce spirit that had broken loose in the men when they heard this news.

"Shoot, — you, shoot!" they jeered at the guards.

The guards faltered. The whole camp was in revolt and they knew that as sure as one shot was fired the men would rush at no matter how great the cost to themselves. There were a hundred and fifty maddened, desperate men in the camp now, instead of a hundred and fifty cattle; and the guards, minus Reivers' leadership, retreated to their quarters and locked the door.

The men did not go back to work. Not an axe, peavey or cant-hook was touched; not a team was hitched up. The men swaggered and shouted for Reivers to come out and boss them. They begged him to come out. They wanted to talk with him. They had a lot to tell him. They wouldn't hurt him—no, they would only give him a little of his own medicine!

However, they gave the guards' house a wide berth, on account of the deadly shotguns. The short afternoon passed quickly and the darkness came on.

Topsy and Campbell were sitting down to supper when they noticed that it was unusually light in the direction of the stockade. Presently there was a roaring crackling; then a chorus of cries, demonlike in their ferocity. Topsy sprang to the window and staggered back at the sight that met his eyes.

"Great Scot, Campbell! Look, look!" he cried. "They've fired the camp!"

Together they rushed to the door. From the farther end of the stockade a billow of red, pitchy flame was sweeping up into the night, and the roar and crackle of the dried pine logs burning was drowned in the cries of the men as they cheered the results of their handiwork.

Topsy and Campbell ran toward the stockade gate. The gate had been chopped to pieces, but the guards, from the shelter of their building, were shooting at the opening and preventing the men from rushing out. The flames at the far end of the stockade rose higher and fiercer as they began to get their hold on the pitchy wood. The smoke, billowing low, came driving back into the faces of Campbell and Topsy.

"They've done it up brown now!" swore Campbell. "The wind's this way. The whole camp will go unless yon fire's checked."

Over the front of the stockade something flew through the darkness, its parabola marked by a string of sparks that spluttered behind it. It fell near one side of the guards' quarters. A second later it exploded with a noise and shock that shook the whole camp.

"Dynamite," said Scotty. "The men have been stealing it and saving it for this occasion. Gi'n one of those sticks lands on that building there'll be dead men inside."

But the men inside evidently had no mind to wait for such a catastrophe. They came rushing out in the darkness, slipping quickly out of sight, yet firing at the gate as they went. One of them rushed past Topsy in the direction of the office. Topsy scarcely noticed him. On second thought something about the man's great size, his broad shoulders, the hang of his arms, attracted him. He turned to look; the man had vanished in the dark. A vague uneasiness took possession of Topsy. For a moment he stood puzzled.

"My —!" he cried suddenly. "That was Reivers, and he was going to her!"

He started in pursuit. Reivers was pounding on the door of the office when Topsy reached him. The door was locked.

"Open up; open up at once!" he ordered. Beyond the door Topsy heard the voice of the girl.

"Oh, please, please, Mr. Reivers! I'm afraid!"

Reivers' tone changed.

"Nothing to be afraid of, Miss Pearson," he said blandly. "There's a fire in camp. I want to get in to save the books and papers."

"Is that why you sent Tilly away this morning?" said Topsy quietly, coming up behind him.

Reivers turned with a start.

"Hello, Treplin!" he said, recovering himself instantly. "No hard feelings, I hope." His manner was so at ease that Topsy was thrown off his guard.

"I won't make the mistake of fighting with you any more, Treplin," continued Reivers. "Look at the way you've spoiled my nose. You ought to fix that up for me. Look at it."

He came closer and pointed with two fingers to his broken nose. Topsy, unsuspecting, leaned forward. Before he could move head or arms Reivers' two hands had shot out and fastened like two iron claws upon his unprotected throat.

"Now, — you!" hissed Reivers. "Tear me loose or kiss your life good-by."

And Topsy tried to tear him loose—tried with a desperation born of the sudden knowledge that his life depended upon it; and failed. The Snow-Burner had got his death-hold. His arms were like bars of steel; his fingers yielded no more to Topsy's tugging than claws of moulded iron. "Struggle, — you! Fight, — you!" hissed Reivers. "That's right; die hard; for, by —, you're done now!"

The eyes seemed starting from Toppo's head. His brains seemed to be bursting. He felt a strange emptiness in his chest. Things went red, then they began to go black. He made one final futile attempt. He felt his legs sinking, felt his whole body sagging, felt that the end had come; then heard as if far away the office-door fly open, heard the girl crying—

"Stop, Mr. Reivers, or I'll shoot!"

Then the roar of a shot. He felt the hands loosen on his throat, swayed and fell sidewise as the whole world turned black.

He opened his eyes soon and saw by the light of the rising flames that Campbell was running toward him. In the doorway of the office stood the girl, her left hand over her eyes, Campbell's big black revolver in her right. Down the road, with strange, drunken steps, Reivers was running toward the river. Behind him ran half a dozen men armed with axes screaming his name in rage, but Reivers, despite his queer gait, was distancing his pursuers. It was some time before Toppo grasped the significance of these sights. Then he remembered.

"You—you saved me," he said clumsily, rising to his feet. The girl dropped the revolver and burst into a fit of sobbing.

"'Twas aye handy I thought of giving her the gun and telling her to keep the door locked," said Campbell. "Do you go in, lassie. All's well. Go in."

"Eh? What's this?" he cried, for in spite of her sobbing she drew sharply away from his sheltering arm as he tried to usher her indoors.

The smoke from the fire swept down into their faces in a choking cloud. Toppo looked toward the stockade. By this time the whole end of the great building was in flames. The men in pursuit of Reivers were howling as they gained on their quarry, and Toppo lurched after them.

"Bob! Mr. Treplin!"

Toppo stopped.

"I mean—Mr. Treplin—you—don't go down there—you're hurt—please!"

Toppo moved toward her. Was it true? Was it really there the note in her voice that he yearned to hear?

"What did you say—please?" he stammered.

And now it was her turn to be confused. The sobs came back to her. Toppo took a long breath and nerved himself to desperation.

"Helen!" he said hoarsely.

"Bob! Oh, Bob!" she whispered. "Don't leave me—don't leave me alone."

Once more Toppo filled his lungs with air and ground his teeth in desperate resolution. He tried to speak, but only a gurgling sound came from his throat; so he held out his big arms in mute appeal, and suddenly he found himself whispering incoherently at a little blonde head which lay snuggled in great content against his bosom.

A maddened yell came from the men who were after Reivers. But Toppo and the girl might have been a thousand miles away for all the attention they paid. One end of the stockade fell in with a great roar and a shower of flame and sparks; but the twain did not hear.

"Aye, aye!" Old Campbell moved swiftly away. "He's a grown man now, and so he's a right to have his woman.—Aye. A real man he had to be to take her away from the Snow-Burner."

Down by the river the pursuing men gave tongue to a cry with the note of the wolf in it.

Campbell turned from the young couple and stared with gleaming eyes in the direction whence came the cry.

"Ah, Reivers!" he murmured. "Ye great man gone wrong! How goes it with ye now, Reivers? Can ye win through? Can ye? I wonder—I wonder!"

And as Toppo and Helen, holding closely to one another, entered the office building, the old man hastened to join the throng by the river where the fate of the Snow-Burner was being spun.

PART TWO: THE SUPER MAN

CHAPTER XXII—THE CHEATING OF THE RIVER

"It's got him! The river's got him. He's drowned! 'Hell-Camp' Reivers—he's gone. He's done for. The 'Snow-Burner' is dead, dead dead!"

Like wolves in revolt the men of "Hell Camp" lined the bank of the rushing, ice-choked river and cursed and roared into the blackness of the night. Behind them the buildings of the camp, scene

of the Snow-Burner's inhuman brutality and dominance over the lives of men, were going up in seas of flame which they had started.

Before them the tumultuous river, the waters battling the ice which strove to cover it, tossed black and white under the red glow of tumbling fire. And somewhere out in the murderous current, whirled and sucked down by the rushing water, buffeted and crushed by the grinding ice, a bullet-hole through his shoulder, was all that was left of the man whose life they had cried for.

The river had cheated them. Like panting wolves, their hands outstretched claw-like to clutch and kill, they had pursued him closely to the river's edge. A cry of rage, short, sharp, unreasoning, had leaped from their throats as Reivers, staggering from his wound, had leaped unhesitatingly out on to the heaving cakes of ice.

Spellbound, open-mouthed and silent, they had stood and watched as their erstwhile oppressor ran zigzagging, leaping from cake to cake, out toward the black slip of open water which ran silently, swiftly in the river's middle. And then they had cried out again.

For the open water had caught him. Straight into it, without pausing or swerving, Reivers had run on. And the black water had taken him home. Like a stone dropped into its midst, it had taken him plump—a flirt of spray, a gurgle. Then the waters rushed on as before, silent, deadly, unconcerned.

And so the men of Hell Camp, drunk with the spirit and success of their revolt, cried out in triumph. Their cry rose over the roar of flame. It rang above the rumble of crunching ice. It reached, pæan-like, up through the star-filled northern night—a cry of victory, of gratification, the old, terrible cry of the kill.

For the Snow-Burner was gone. Wolf-like he had harried them and wolf-like he had died. No man, not even Hell-Camp Reivers, they knew, could live a minute in that black water. They had seen the waters close above him; a floe of ice swept serenely over the spot where he had gone down. He was gone. The world was rid of him.

And so the men of Cameron-Dam Camp, while their cry still echoed in the timber, turned to carry the news of the Snow-Burner's end back to the men who were milling about the burning camp. The Snow-Burner was dead!

Out in the deadly river, Hell-Camp Reivers stayed under water until he knew that the men on the bank counted him drowned. He had sought the open water deliberately, his giant lungs filling themselves with air as he plunged down to the superhuman test which was to spell life or death for him.

He realised that if he were to live he must appear to perish in the river, before the eyes of the men who pursued him. To have won through the open water, and over the ice beyond, and in their sight have reached the farther shore would have sealed his doom as surely as to have returned to the bank where stood the men.

The camp had revolted. Two hundred men had said that he must die; and had he been seen to cross the river and enter the timber beyond, half of the two hundred, properly armed, would have crossed the stringers of the dam, not to pause or rest until they had hunted him down. He was without weapons of any kind save his bare fists. He was bleeding heavily from the bullet-hole in his right shoulder. He would have died like a wounded wolf run to earth had he been seen to cross the river safely. His only chance for life was to appear to die in the river.

He made no fight as he went down. The swift waters sucked him under like a straw. They rolled him over the rocky bottom, whirled him around and around sunken piles of ice. Into the sluice-like current of the stream's middle they spewed him, and the current caught him and shot him into the darkness below the glare of the burning camp.

He lay inert in the water's grasp, recking not how the sharp ice gashed and tore face and hands, how the rocks crushed and bruised his body. A sweeping ice-floe caught him and held him down. Like some great river-beast he lay supine beneath it, conserving every atom of his giant's strength for the test that was to win him life.

Then, with the blood roaring in his temples, and his bursting lungs warning him that the next second must yield him air or death, he threw his body upward against the ice, felt it slip to one side, thrust his upturned face out of the water, caught a finger-hold on another floe that strove to thrust him down, gasped, clawed and—laughed.

He was a dead man, and he lived. Men had driven him into the jaws of death, and death had engulfed and apparently swallowed him. Men counted him now as one who had gone hence. Far and wide the word would be flung in a hurry: the Snow-Burner was no more; Hell-Camp Reivers had passed away.

The face of the Snow-Burner as it rode barely above the icy, lapping waters, bore but one single expression, a sardonic appreciation of the joke he had played upon men and Death. The loss of Cameron Camp, of his position, of all that he called his own did not trouble him.

As the current swept him down there, he was a beaten man, stripped of all the things that men struggle for to have and to hold, and with but a slippery finger-hold on life itself. Yet he was victorious, triumphant.

He had placed himself within the clammy fingers of the River Death. The fingers had closed upon him, and he had torn them apart, had thrust death away, had clutched life as it fled from him

and had drawn it back to hold for the time being. And Reivers laughed contemptuously, tauntingly, at the sucking waters cheated of their prey.

"Not yet, Nick, old boy," he muttered. "It doesn't please me to boss your stokers just yet."

The current tore the ice from his precarious grip and he was forced to swim for it. In the darkness he struck the grinding icefield on the far side of the open water, and like the claws of a bear his stiffening fingers sought for and found a crevice to afford a secure hold.

A pull, a heave and a wriggle, and he lay face-down on the jagged ice—heart, lungs and brain crying for the cold air which he sucked in avidly. The ice-cakes parted beneath his weight. Once more he fought through the water to a resting place on the ice; once more the treacherous ice parted and dropped him into the water.

Swimming, crawling, wriggling his way, he fought on. At last an outstretched hand groped to a hold on a snow-covered root on the far bank of the river.

"About time," he said and, slowly drawing himself up onto the bank, he rolled over in the snow and lay with his face turned back toward Cameron Camp.

The fire which the men had started in the long bunk-house when they had revolted against the inhumanity of Reivers now had gained full headway. In pitchy, red billows of flame the dried log walls were roaring upward into the night. Like the yipping of maddened demons, the bellowing shouts of the men came back to him as they danced and leaped around the fire in celebration of the passing of Reivers and of the camp for which his treatment of men had justly earned the title of Hell-Camp.

But louder and more poignant even than the roar of flame and the shouts of jubilant men, there came to Reivers' ears a sound which prompted him to drag himself to an elbow to listen. Somewhere out in the timber near the camp a man was crying for mercy. A rifle cracked; the pleading stopped. Reivers smiled contemptuously.

"One of the guards; they got him," he mused. "The fool! That's what he gets for being silly enough to be faithful to me."

But the fate of the guard, one of the "shot-gun artists" who had served him faithfully and brutally in the task of keeping the men of the camp helpless under his heel, roused Reivers to the need of quick action. If the guards had escaped into the woods and were being hunted down by the maddened crew, the hunt might easily lead across the dam and up the bank to where he lay. Once let it be known that he had not perished in the river, and the whole camp would come swarming across the dam, each man's hand against him, resolved to take his trail and hunt him down, no matter where the trail might lead or how long the hunt might take.

The fight through the river ice was but the preliminary to his flight for safety. Many miles of cold trail between him and the burning camp were his most urgent present needs, and with a curse he staggered to his feet and stood for a moment lowering back across the water to the scene of his overthrow.

To a lesser man—or a better man—there would have been deep humiliation in the situation. Reivers's mind flashed back over the incidents of the last few hours. Over there, across the river, he had been beaten for the first time in his life in a fair, stand-up fist fight. He had underestimated young Treplin, and Treplin had beaten him.

Following his defeat had come the revolt of the men. Following that had come flight. The power and leadership of the camp had been wrested from his hands by a better man; he himself had been driven out, helpless, beaten, yet Reivers only laughed as he stood now and looked back across the river. For in the river the Snow-Burner had died.

The past was dead. A new life was beginning for him. It had to be so, for if word went back that the Snow-Burner was still alive the men of Cameron-Dam Camp would come clamouring to the hunt. To die, and yet to live; to slough one life, as an old coat, and to take up another, not having the slightest notion of what it might hold—that was the great adventure, that was something so interesting that the humiliation of defeat never so much as reached beneath Reivers' skin.

He stood for a moment, looking back at the camp, and he smiled. He waved his left hand in a polished gesture of contemptuous farewell.

"Good-by, Mr. Hell-Camp Reivers," he growled. "Hello, Mr. New Man, whoever you are. Let's go and lay up till the puncture in your hide heals. Then we'll go out and see what you can do to this silly old world."

With his fingers clutching the hole in his shoulder, he turned and lurched drunkenly away into the blackness of the thick timber.

The icy waters of the river had been kind to him in more ways than one. They had congealed the warm blood-spurts from his wound into a solid red clot, and his thick woolen shirt and mackinaw were frozen stiff and tight against the clot.

He held to his staggering run for an hour, seeking bare spots in the timber, travelling on top of windfalls when he found them, hiding his trail in uncanny fashion, before his body grew warm enough to thaw the icy bandages. Then he halted and, by the light of the cold moon, bared his shoulder and took stock. It was a bad, ragged wound. He moved the shoulder and smiled sardonically as he noted that no bone was touched.

From the butt of a shattered windfall he tore a flat sliver of clean pine. With his teeth he worried

it down to a proper size, and with handkerchief and belt he bound it over the wound so tightly that it sunk deep into the muscles of the shoulder. It chafed and cut the skin and started the blood in half a dozen places, but he pulled the belt up another hole despite the inclination to grimace from pain.

"Suffer, Body," he muttered, "suffer all you please. You've nothing to say about this. Your job for the present is merely to serve life by keeping it going. Later on you may grow whole again. I shall need you."

He buttoned his mackinaw with difficulty and, finding an open space, turned and took his bearings. Far behind him a dull red glow on the sky marked the location of Cameron-Dam Camp. From this he turned, carefully scanning the heavens, until above the top of the timber he caught the weird glint of the northern lights. That way lay his course.

The white man's country stopped with the timber in which he stood. Beyond was Indian country, the bleak, barren Dead Lands, a wilderness too bare of timber to tempt the logger, a land of ridge upon ridge of ragged rock, unexplored by white man, save for a rare mining prospector, and uninhabited save for the half-starved camp of the people of Tillie, the Chippewa, Reivers' slave, by the power of the love she bore him.

White men shunned the white wastes of the Dead Lands as, in warmer climes, they shun the unwatered sands of the desert. That was why Reivers sought it. Out there in the camp of Tillie's people he could lie safe, well fed, well nursed, until his wound healed and the strength of his body came back to him. And then....

"Cheer up, Body!" he chuckled as he started northward. "We'll make the world pay bitterly for all of this when we're in shape again. For the present we're going north, going north, going north. You can't stop, Body; you can't lay down. Groan all you want to. You're going to be dragged just as far to-night as if you weren't shot up at all."

CHAPTER XXIII—THE GIRL WHO WAS NOT AFRAID

Break of day in Winter time comes to the Dead Lands slowly and without enthusiasm, as if the rosy morning sun wearied at the hopeless landscape which its rays must illumine. Aimless rock formation was a drug on the creation's market the day that the Bad Lands were made. Gigantic boulders, box-like bluffs, ragged rock-spires, cliffs and plateaus of bare rock were in oversupply.

Nature, so a glimpse of the place suggests, had resolved to get rid of a vast surplus of ugly, useless stone, and with one cast of its hands flung them solidly down and made the Dead Lands. There they lie, hog-back, ridge, gully and ravine, hopelessly and aimlessly jumbled and tumbled, a scene of desolate greyness by Summer; by Winter the raw, bleak ridges and spires, thrusting themselves through the covering of snow like unto the bones of a half concealed skeleton.

Daylight crept wearily over the timber belt and spread itself slowly over the barrenness, and struck the highest rise of ground, running crosswise through the barrens, which men called "Hog-Back Ridge." Little by little it lighted up the bleak peaks and tops of ridge and rock-spire.

A wind came with it, a bleak, morning Winter wind which whined as it whipped the dry snow from high places and sent it flying across coulée and valley in the grey light of dawn. Nothing stirred with the coming of daylight. No nocturnal animal, warned of the day's coming, slunk away to its cave; no beast or bird of daylight greeted the morning with movement or song. The grey half-light revealed no living thing of life upon the exposed hump of the ridge.

The sun came, a ball of dull red, rising over the timber line. It touched the topmost spires of rock, sought to gild them rosily, gave up as their sullen sides refused to take the colour, and turned its rays along the eastern slope. Then something moved. A single speck of life stirred in the vast scene of desolation.

On the bare ground in the lea of a boulder a man sat with his back to the stone and slept. His face was hollow and lined. The corners of his mouth were drawn down as if a weight were hung on each of them, and the thin cheeks, hugging the bones so tightly that the teeth showed through, told that the man had driven himself too far on an empty stomach. Yet, even in sleep, there was a hint of a sardonic smile on the misshapen lips, a smile that condemned and made naught the pain and cruelty of his fate.

The sun crept down the slope of Hog-Back Ridge and found him. It reached his eyes. Its rays had no more warmth than the rays of the cold Winter moon, but its light pierced through the tightly drawn lids. They twitched and finally parted. Reivers awoke without yawning or moving and looked around.

It was the second morning after his flight from Cameron-Dam Camp, and he had yet to reach the Winter camp of the people of Tillie the squaw. Somewhere to the west it lay. He would reach it and reach it in good time, he swore; but he had not had a bite of food in his mouth for two days, and the fever of his wound had sapped heavily his strength.

"Be still, Body," he growled, as with the return of consciousness his belly cried out for food. "You will be fed before life goes out of you."

He rose slowly and stiffly to his knees and looked down the ridge to where the rays of the sun now were illumining the snow-covered bottom of the valley below. The valley ran eastward for a mile or two, and at first glance it was empty and dead, save for the flurries of wind-swept snow, dropping down from the heights above. But Reivers, as he rose to his feet, swept the valley with a second glance, and suddenly he dropped and crouched down close to the ground.

Far down at the lower end of the valley a black speck showed on the frozen snow, and the speck was moving.

Reivers lay on the bare patch of ground, as silent and immovable as the rock above him. The speck was too large to be a single animal and too small to be a pack of travelling caribou.

For several minutes he lay, scarcely breathing, his eyes straining to bring the speck into comprehensible shape. His breath began to come rapidly. Presently he swore. The speck had become two specks now, a long narrow speck and a tiny one which moved beside it, and they were coming steadily up the valley toward where he lay.

"One man and a dog-team," mused Reivers. "He won't be travelling here without grub. Body, wake up! You are crying for food. Yonder it comes. Get ready to take it."

Slowly, with long pauses between each movement, and taking care not to place his dark body against the white snow, Reivers dragged himself around to a hiding-place behind the boulder against which he had slept. The sun had risen higher now. Its rays were lighting the valley, and as he peered avidly around one side of the stone, Reivers could make out some detail of the two specks that moved so steadily toward him.

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It was a four-dog team, travelling rapidly, and the man, on snow-shoes, travelled beside his team and plied his whip as he strode. Reivers' brows drew down in puzzled fashion. The sledge which whirled behind the running dogs seemed flat and unloaded; the dogs ran in a fashion that told they were strong and fresh. Why didn't the man ride?

Reivers drew back to take stock of the situation. The man might be a stranger, travelling hurriedly through the Dead Lands, or he might be one of the men from Cameron-Dam Camp. If the former, food might be had for a mere hail and the asking; if the latter—Reivers's nostrils widened and he smiled.

Yet a third possibility existed. The man was travelling in strange fashion, running beside an apparently empty sled, and whipping his dogs along. So did men travel when they were fleeing from various reasons, and men fleeing thus do not go unarmed nor take kindly to having the trail of their flight witnessed by casual though starving strangers. Thus there was one chance that a hail and plea for food would be met with a friendly response; two chances that they would be met with lead or steel.

Reivers, not being a careless man, looked about for ways and means to place the odds in his favour. A hundred yards to the north of him the valley narrowed into a mere slit between two straight walls of rock. Through this gap the traveller must pass.

When Reivers had crawled to a position on the rock directly above the narrow opening, he lay flat down and grinned in peace. He was securely hidden, and the dog-driver would pass unsuspectingly, unready, thirty feet beneath where he lay. Things were looking well.

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The driver and team came on at a steady pace. Even at a great distance, his stride betrayed his race and Reivers muttered, "White man," and pushed to the edge of the bluff a huge, jagged piece of rock. The man might not listen to reason, and Reivers was taking no chances of allowing an opportunity to feed to slip by.

The sleigh still puzzled him. As it came nearer and nearer he saw that it was not empty. Something long and flat lay upon it. Reivers ceased to watch the driver and turned his scrutiny entirely to the bundle upon the sleigh. Minute after minute he watched the sleigh to the exclusion of everything else.

He made out eventually that the bundle was the size and form of a human body. Soon he saw that it moved now and then, as if struggling to rise.

The sleigh came nearer, came into a space where the sunlight, streaming through a gap in the ridge, lighted it up brightly, and Reivers' whole body suddenly stiffened upon the ground and his teeth snapped shut barely in time to cut short an ejaculation of surprise.

The bundle on the sleigh was a woman—a white woman! And she was bound around from ankle to forehead with thongs passed under the sleigh.

"Food—and a woman—a white woman," he mused. "The new life becomes interesting. Body, get ready."

He held the rock balanced on the edge of the cliff, ready to hurl it down with one supreme effort of his waning strength. Hugging the cliff he lay, his head barely raised sufficiently to watch his approaching quarry. He could make out the face of the man by this time, a square face, mostly covered with hair, with the square-cut hair of the head hanging down below the ears. Two fang-like teeth glistened in the sunlight when the man opened his mouth to curse at the dogs, and he turned at times to leer back at the helpless burden on the sleigh.

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As he approached the narrow defile, where the rock walls hid a man and what he might do from the eyes of all but the sky above, the man turned to look more frequently, more leeringly at his victim. Reivers saw that the woman was gagged as well as bound.

The driver shouted a command at his dogs, and their lope became a walk, and even as Reivers, up on the cliff, arched his back to hurl his stone, the outfit came to a halt directly beneath where he lay. Reivers waited. He had no compunction about disabling or killing the man below; a crying belly knows no conscience. But he would wait and see what was to develop.

The man swiftly jerked his team back in the traces and turned toward his victim. Reivers, turning his eyes from the man to the woman, received a shock which caused him to hug closer to the cliff. The woman lay helpless on the sleigh, face up. A cloth gag covered her face up to the nose, and a cap, drawn down over the forehead, left only the eyes and nose visible. And the eyes were wide open—very wide open—and they were looking quite calmly and unafraid up at Reivers.

The driver came back and tore the gag from the woman's lips.

"I'll give you a chance," he exploded, and Reivers, up on the cliff, caught the passion-choked note in voice and again held the stone ready. "I'm stealing you for the chief—for Shanty Moir, the man who's got your father's mine, and who's determined to put shame on you, Red MacGregor's daughter. I'm taking you there to him—in his camp. You know what that means.

"Well, I've changed my mind. I—I'll give you a chance. I'll save you. Come with me. I won't take you up there. We'll go out of the country. You know what it'd mean to go up there. Well,—I'll marry you."

Many things happened in the next few seconds. The man threw himself like a wild beast beside the sledge, caught the woman's face in his hands and kissed her bestially upon the helpless lips.

The girl did not struggle or cry out. Only her wide eyes looked up to the top of the cliff, looked questioningly, speculatively, calmly. He of the hairy face caught the direction of her look and sprang up and whirled around, the glove flying from his right hand, and a six-shooter leaping into it apparently from nowhere.

His face was upturned, and he fired even as the big rock smote him on the forehead and crushed him shapelessly into the snow. Reivers dragged forward another stone and waited, but the man was too obviously dead to render caution necessary.

"He was experienced and quick," said Reivers to the woman, "but I was too hungry to miss him. Did you think I did it to save you? Oh, no! Just a minute, till I get down; you'll know me better."

He staggered and fell as he rose to pick his way down, for the cast with the heavy stone had tapped the last reservoirs of his depleted strength, had wrenched open the wounded shoulder and started the blood. Painfully he dragged himself on hands and knees to a snow-covered slope, and slipping and sliding made his way to the valley-bottom and came staggering up to the sledge. The woman to him for the time being did not exist.

"Steady, Body," he muttered, as he tore open the grub-bag on the sleigh. "Here's food."

His fingers fell first on a huge chunk of cooked venison, and he looked no farther. Down in the snow at the side of the helpless woman he squatted and proceeded to eat. Only when the pang in his stomach had been appeased did he look at the woman. Then, for a time, he forgot about eating.

It was not a woman but a girl. Her face was fair and her hair golden red. Her big eyes were looking at him appraisingly. There was no fear in them, no apprehension. She noted the hollowness of his cheeks, the fever in his eyes. Reivers almost dropped his meat in amazement. The girl actually was pitying him!

He stood up, thrust the meat back into the grub-bag and stood swaying and towering over her. The girl's eyes looked back unwaveringly.

"— you!" growled Reivers as he bent down and loosed the thongs. "What do you mean? Why aren't you afraid?"

"MacGregor Roy was my father," she said quietly. "I am not afraid." She sat up as the bonds fell from her and looked at the still figure in the snow. "He is dead, I suppose?"

"As dead as he tried to make me," sneered Reivers.

A look of annoyance crossed her face.

"Then you have spoiled it all," she broke out, leaping from the sledge. "Spoiled the fine chance I had to find the cave of Shanty Moir, murderer of my father."

Reivers' jaw dropped in amazement, and hot anger surged to his tongue. Many women of many kinds he had looked in the eyes and this was the first one—

"Spoiled it, you red-haired trull! What do you mean? Didn't I save you from our bearded friend yonder. Or—" his thin lips curled into their old contemptuous smile—"or perhaps—perhaps you are one of those to whom such attentions are not distasteful."

The sudden flare and flash of her anger breaking, like lightning out of a Winter's sky, checked his words. The contempt of his smile gave place to a grin of admiration. Tottering and wavering on his feet, he did not stir or raise his arms, though the thin-bladed knife which seemed to spring into her hands as claws protrude from a maddened cat's paws, slipped through his mackinaw and pricked the skin above his heart, before her hand stopped.

"'Trull' am I? The daughter of MacGregor Roy is a helpless squaw who takes kindly to such words from any man on the trail? Blood o' my father! Pray, you cowardly skulker! Pray!"

His grin grew broader.

"Pretty, very pretty!" he drawled. "But you can't make it good, can you? You thought you could. Your little flare of temper made you feel big. You were sure you were going to stick me. But you couldn't do it. You're a woman. See; your flash of bigness is dying out. You're growing tame. That's one of my specialties—taming spitfires like you. Oh, you needn't draw back. Have no fear. I never did have any taste for red hair."

A painter would have raved about the daughter of MacGregor Roy as she now stood back, facing her tormentor. The fair skin of her face was flushed red, the thin sharp lines of mouth and nostril were tremulous with rage, and her wide, grey eyes burned. Her head was thrown back in scorn, her cap was off; the glorious red-golden hair of her head seemed alive with fury. With one foot advanced, the knife held behind her, her breath coming in angry gasps, she stood, a figure passionately, terribly alive in the dead waste of the snows.

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"Oh, what a coward you are!" she panted. "You knew I couldn't avenge myself on a sick man. You coward!"

Reivers laughed drunkenly. The fever was blurring his sight, dulling his brain and filling him with an irresistible desire to lie down.

"Yes, I knew it," he mumbled. "I saw it in your eye. You couldn't do it—because I didn't want you to. I want you—I want you to fix me up—hole in the shoulder—fever—understand?"

"I understand that when Duncan Roy, my father's brother, catches up with us he will save me the trouble by putting a hole through your head."

"Plenty of time for that later on." Reivers fought off the stupor and held his senses clear for a moment. "Have you got my whisky?"

"And what if I have?"

"Answer me!" he said icily. "Have you?"

"Duncan Roy has whisky," she replied reluctantly. "He will be on our trail now."

"How long—how long before he'll get here?"

"Yon beast—" she nodded her head toward the still figure in the snow—"raided our camp, struck me down and stole me away with my team two hours before sundown, yestere'en. Duncan Roy was out meat-hunting, and would be back by dark. He'll be two hours behind us, and his dogs travel even with these."

"Two hours? Too long," groaned Reivers and pitched headlong into the snow.

CHAPTER XXIV—THE WOMAN'S WAY

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When he came to, it was from the bite and sting of the terrible white whisky of the North, being poured down his throat by a rude, generous hand.

"Aye; he's no' dead," rumbled a voice like unto a bear's growl. "He lappit the liquor though his eye's closed. Hoot, man! Ye take it in like mother's milk."

"Have done, Uncle Duncan," warned another voice—the bold, free voice of the girl, Reivers in his semi-consciousness made out. "'Tis a sick man. Don't give him the whole bottle."

"Let be, let be," grumbled the big voice, but nevertheless Reivers felt the bottle withdrawn from his lips. "'Tis no tender child that a good drink of liquor would hurt that we have here. Do you not note that mouth and jaw? I'm little more pleased with the look of him than with yon thing in the snow."

"'Tis a sick, helpless being," said the girl.

The big voice rumbled forth an oath.

"And what have we—you and I—to do with sick, helpless beings? Are we not on the trail to find Shanty Moir, who is working your father's mine, wherever it is, and there take vengeance on said Shanty for your father's murder, as well as recover your own property? Is this a trail on which 'tis fit and well we halted to nurse and care for sick, helpless beings? Blood of the de'il! An unlucky mess! What business has man to be sick and ailing on the Winter trail here in the North? 'Tis the law of Nature that such die!"

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"And do you think that law will be followed here?" demanded the girl.

"Were I alone, it would," retorted the man. "Our task is to find the place of Shanty Moir and do him justice."

"And the hospitality of the MacGregors? Is it like Duncan Roy to see beast or man needing or wanting help without stretching his hand to help it?"

The man was silent.

"Do you think any good could come to you or me if we turned our hearts to stones and let a sick

man perish after he had fallen helpless on our hands?"

"I tell you what I think, Hattie MacGregor," broke out the big voice. "I think there is trouble travelling as trail-fellow with this man. I see trouble in the cut of his jaw and the lines of his mouth. There is a fate written there; he's a fated man and no else, and nothing would please me better than to have him a thousand days mushing away from me and never to see him again. Trouble and trouble! It's written on him plain.

"Who is he? Whence came he? Why is he alone, dogless, foodless, weaponless, here in these Dead Lands! 'Tis uncanny. Blood o' the de'il! He might be dropped down from somewhere, or more like shot up from somewhere—from the black pit, for instance. It's no' proper for mere human being to be found in his condition out this far on the barrens, with no sign of how he came or why?"

"Have no fear, Uncle Duncan," laughed the girl. "He's only a common man."

Reivers opened his eyes, chuckling feverishly.

"You'll pay for that 'common,' you spitfire, when I've tamed you," he mumbled.

"Only a common man, Uncle Duncan," repeated the girl steadfastly, "and I've a bone to pick with him when he's on his feet, no longer helpless and pitiable as he is now."

Again Reivers laughed through the haze of fever. He did not have the strength to hold his eyes open, but his mind worked on.

"Helpless! Did you notice the incident of the rock?" he babbled. "Bare, primitive, two-handed man against a man with a gun. Who won?"

"Aye," said the man seriously, "we owe you thanks for that. For a helpless man, you deal stout knocks."

"And speak big words," snapped the girl. "Now, around with the teams, Uncle Duncan, and back to camp. There's been talk enough. We must take him in and shelter and care for him, since he has fallen helpless and pitiable on our hands. We owe him no thanks. Can you not lay his head easier—the boasting fool! There; that's better. Now, all that the dogs can stand, Uncle, for I misdoubt we'll be hard-pressed to keep the life in him till we get him back to camp."

Reivers heard and strove to reply. But the paralysis of fever and weakness was upon him, and all that came from his lips was an incoherent babbling. In the last vapoury stages of consciousness he realised that he was being placed more comfortably upon the sledge, that his head was being lifted and that blankets were being strapped about him.

He felt the sledge being turned, heard the runners grate on the snow; then ensued an easy, sliding movement through space, as the rested dogs started their lope back through the valley. The movement soothed him. It lulled him to a sensation of safety and comfort.

The phantasmagoria of fever pounded at his brain, his eyes and ears, but the steady, swishing rush of the sleigh drove them away. He slept, and awoke when a halt was called and more whisky forced down his throat. Then he slept again.

There were several halts. Once he realised that he was being fed thin soup, made from cooked venison and snow-water. That was the last impression made on remaining consciousness. After that the thread snapped.

The sledges went on. They left the valley. Through the jumbled ridges of the Dead Lands they hurried. They reached a stretch of stunted fir, and still they continued to go. At length they pulled up before a solid little cabin built in a cleft of rocks.

The Snow Burner was carried in and put to bed. After a rest Duncan Roy and the fresher of the dogteams took the trail again. They came, back after a day and a night, bringing with them a certain Père Batiste, skilled in treating fevers and wounds of the body as well as of the soul. The good curé gasped at the torso which revealed itself to his gaze as he stripped off the clothes to work at the wound.

"If *le bon Dieu* made him as well inside as outside, this is a very good man," he said simply; and Duncan MacGregor smiled grimly.

"God—or the de'il—made him to deal stout knocks, that's sure," he grunted. "'Tis a rare animal we have stripped before us."

"A rare human being—a soul," reproved Father Batiste. "And it is *le bon Dieu* who makes us all."

"But the de'il gets hold of some very young," insisted the Scotchman.

Father Batiste stayed in the cabin for two days.

"He was not meant to die this time," he said later. "It will be long—weeks perhaps—before he will be strong enough to take the trail. He will need care, such care as only a woman can give him. If he does not have this care he will die. If he does have it he will live. *Adieu*, my children; you have a sacred, human life in your hands."

And he got the care that only a woman could give him. For the next two weeks Duncan MacGregor watched his niece's devoted nursing and gnawed his red beard gloomily.

"Trouble—trouble—trouble!" he muttered over and over to himself. "It rides around the man's head like a storm-cap. Hattie MacGregor, take care. Yon man will be a different creature to handle when he has the strength back in his body."

At the end of a week Reivers awoke as a man wakes after a long, fever-breaking slumber, weak and wasted, yet with a grateful sense of comfort and well-being. Before he opened his eyes he sensed by the warmth and odours of the air that he was in a small, tight room, and in a haze he fancied that he had fallen in the tepee of Tillie, the squaw. Then he remembered. He opened his eyes.

He was lying in a bunk, raised high from the floor, and above the foot of the bed was a small window, shaded by a frilled white curtain. Reivers lay long and looked at the curtain before his eyes moved to further explore the room. For once, long, long ago, he had belonged in a world where white frilled curtains and frills of other kinds were not an exception.

In his physically washed-out condition his memory reached back and pictured that world with uncanny clearness, and he turned from the curtain with a frown of annoyance to look straight into the eyes of Duncan Roy, who sat by the fireplace across the room and studied him from beneath shaggy red brows.

Reivers looked the man over idly at first, then with a considerable interest and appreciation. Sitting crouched over on a low stone bench, with the light of the fire and of the sun upon him, MacGregor resembled nothing so much as an old red-haired bear. He was short of leg and bow-legged, but his torso and head were enormous. His arms, folded across the knees, were bear-like in length and size, and his hair and beard flamed golden red.

There was no friendliness in the small, grey eyes which regarded Reivers so steadily. Duncan MacGregor was no man to hide his true feelings. Reivers looked enquiringly around.

"She's stepped outside to feed the dogs," said MacGregor, interpreting the look. "You'll have to put up with my poor company for the time being."

"I accept your apology," said Reivers and turned comfortably toward the wall.

A deep, chesty chuckle came from the fireside.

"Man, whoever are you or whatever are you, to take it that Duncan MacGregor feels any need to apologise to you?"

The words were further balm to Reivers's new-found feeling of comfort and content.

"Say that again, please," he requested drowsily.

Laughingly the giant by the fire repeated his query.

"Good!" murmured Reivers. "I just wanted to be sure that you didn't know who I am—or, rather, who I was?"

"Blood o' the de'il!" laughed the Scotchman. "So it's that, is it? Tell me, how much reward is there offered for you, dead or alive? I'm a thrifty man, lad, and you hardly look like a man who'd have a small price on his head."

"Wrong, quite wrong, my suspicious friend," said Reivers. "I see you've the simple mind of the man who's spent much time in lone places. You jump at the natural conclusion. When you know me better you'll know that that won't apply to me."

"Well," drawled the Scotchman good-naturedly, "I do not say that it looks suspicious to be found a two-days' march out in the Dead Lands, without food, dog, or weapons, with an empty belly and a hole through the shoulder, but there are people who might draw the conclusion that a man so fixed was travelling because some place behind him was mighty bad for his health. But I have no doubt you have an explanation? No doubt 'tis quite the way you prefer to travel?"

"Under certain circumstances, it is," said Reivers.

"Aye; under certain circumstances. Such as an affair with a 'Redcoat,' for instance."

"Wrong again, my simple-minded friend. You're quite welcome to bring the whole Mounted Police here to look me over. I'm not on their lists, or the lists of any authority in the world, as 'wanted.'"

"For that insult—that I'm of the kind that bears tales to the police—I'll have an accounting with you later on," said MacGregor sharply. "For the rest—you'll admit that you're under some small obligation to us—will you be kind enough to explain what lay behind you that you should be out on the barrens in your condition? I'll have you know that I am no man to ask pay for succouring the sick or wounded. Neither am I the man to let any well man be near-speaking with my ward and niece, Hattie MacGregor, without I know what's the straight of him."

Reivers turned luxuriously in his bunk and regarded his inquisitor with a smile.

"Poor, dainty, helpless, little lady!" he mocked. "So weak and frail that she needs a protector. Never carries anything more than an eight-inch knife up her sleeve. You do right, MacGregor; your niece certainly needs looking after. She certainly doesn't know how to take care of herself."

"But about obligations, I don't quite agree with you. Didn't you owe me a little something for that turn with the bearded fellow? Not that I did it to save the girl," he continued loudly, as he heard the door open behind him and knew that Hattie MacGregor had entered. "What was she to me? Nothing! But I was hungry. I needed food. But for that our black-bearded friend might now have been wandering care-free over the snows, a red-haired woman still strapped to his sledge, his taste seeming to run to that colour, which mine does not."

Hattie MacGregor stilled her uncle's retort with a shake of her golden-red head, crossed to the fireplace and took up a bowl that was simmering there, and approached the bed. Reivers looked

at her closely, striving to catch her eye, but she seated herself beside him without apparently paying the slightest attention. She spoke no word, made no sign to welcome him back from his unconsciousness, but merely held a spoonful of the steaming broth up to his lips.

There was a certain dexterity in her movements which told that she had performed this action many, many times before, and there was nothing in her manner to indicate her sensibility of the change in his condition. Reivers opened his mouth to laugh, and the girl dexterously tilted the contents of the spoon down his throat.

"You fool!" he sputtered, half strangling.

He strove to rise, but her round, warm arm held him down. Over by the fireplace Duncan MacGregor slapped his thigh and chuckled deep down in his hairy throat, but on the face of his niece there was only the determined patience of the nurse dealing with a patient not yet entirely responsible for his behaviour.

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She was not surprised at his outbreak, Reivers saw. Apparently she had fed him many times just so—he utterly helpless and childish, she capable and calm. Apparently she was determined to sit there, firm and patient, until he was ready to take his broth quietly and without fuss.

Indignantly he raised his hands to take the bowl from her; then he opened his eyes wide in surprise. He was so weak that he could barely lift his arms, and when she offered him a second spoonful he swallowed it without further demur.

"Ah, well, we'll soon be able to take the trail again," drawled MacGregor mockingly. "We're getting strong now; soon we'll be able to eat with our own hands."

"Hold tongue, Uncle," snapped the girl, and continued to feed her patient.

"I suppose I must thank you?" taunted Reivers, when the bowl was empty.

Hattie MacGregor made no sign to indicate that she had heard. She put the bowl away, felt Reivers' pulse, laid her hand upon his forehead—never looking at him the while—arranged the pillows under his head, tucked him in and without speaking went out. Reivers' eyes followed her till the door closed behind her.

"The little spitfire!" he growled in grudging admiration; and Duncan MacGregor, by the fire, laughed till the room echoed.

CHAPTER XXV—GOLD!

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Next morning when she came to feed him Reivers angrily reached for the bowl. He was stronger than the day before, and he held his hands forth without trembling.

"There's no need of your feeding me by hand any longer," said he. "I assure you I'll enjoy my food much better alone than I do with you feeding me."

The girl seated herself at the bunk-side, holding the bowl out of his reach, and looked him quietly in the eyes. It was the first time she had appeared to notice his return to consciousness, and Reivers smiled quizzically at her scrutiny. She did not smile in return, merely studied him as if he were an interesting subject.

In the grey light of morning Reivers for the first time saw her with eyes cleared of the fever blur. His smile vanished, for he saw that this woman, to him, was different from any woman he ever had known before. And he had known many.

In her wide grey eyes there rode a sorrow that reached out and held the observer, despite her evident efforts to keep it hidden. But the mouth belied the eyes. It was set with an expression of determination, almost superhuman, almost savage. It was as if this girl, just rounding her twenties, had turned herself into a force for the accomplishment of an object. The mouth was harsh, almost lipless, in its set. Yet, beneath all this, the woman in Hattie MacGregor was obvious, soft, yearning.

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Many women had had a part in Reivers' life—far too many. None of them had held his interests longer than for a few months; none of them had he failed to tame and break. And none of them had reached below the hard husk of him and touched the better man as Hattie MacGregor did at this moment. His past experiences, his past attitude toward women, his past manner of life, flashed through his mind, each picture bringing with it a stab of remorse.

Remorse! The Snow Burner remorseful! He laughed his old laugh of contempt and defiance of all the world, but, though he refused to acknowledge it to himself, the old, invincible, self-assured ring was not in it. This girl was not to him what other women had been, and he saw that he could not tame her as he had tamed them.

Strange thoughts rose in his mind. He wished that the past had been different. He actually felt unworthy. Well, the past was past. It had died with him in the river. He was beginning a new life, a new name, a new man. Why couldn't he? He drove the weak thoughts away. What nonsense! He—Hell-Camp Reivers—getting soft over a woman? Pooh!

"I said I could feed myself," he snarled. "Give me that bowl. I don't want you around."

For reply she dipped the spoon into the food and held it ready.

"Lie down quietly, please," she said coldly. "This is no time for keeping up your play of being a big man."

"Give me that bowl," he commanded.

"Uncle," she called quietly.

Her big kinsman came lurching in from the other room of the cabin.

"Aye, lass?" said he.

"It looks as if we would have to obey Father Batiste's directions and feed him by force," said the girl quietly. "He has come out of the fever, but he hasn't got his senses back. He thinks of feeding himself. Do you get the straps, Uncle. You recollect Father Batiste's orders."

Duncan MacGregor scratched his hairy head in puzzled fashion.

"How now, stranger?" he growled. "Can you no take your food in peace?"

"I can take it without anybody's help," insisted Reivers. He knew that the situation was ridiculous, but he saw no way of getting the whip-hand.

"It was the word of the good Father, without whom you would now be resting out in the snow with a cairn of rock over you, that you should be fed so much and so little for some days after your senses come back," said MacGregor slowly. "I do not ken the right of it quite, but the lass does. The lass—she'll have her way, I suspect. I can do naught but obey her orders."

"Get the straps," commanded the girl curtly.

Reivers glared at her, but she looked back without the least losing her self-possession or determination.

"You'll pay for this!" he snorted.

"Will you take your food without the straps?" said she.

For a minute their eyes met in conflict.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous," snapped Reivers. "Have your silly way."

"Good. That's a good boy," she said softly; and Duncan Roy ran from the room choking.

"You see," she continued, as he swallowed the first spoonful, "it isn't always possible to have your own way, is it? I am doing this only for your own good."

"Hold your tongue," he growled. "I've got to eat this food, but I don't have to listen to your talk."

"Quite right," she agreed, and the meal was finished in silence.

At noon she fed him again, without speaking a word. Apparently she had given her uncle orders likewise to refrain from talking to Reivers, for not a word did he speak during the day.

In the evening the same silent feeding took place. After she and her uncle had supped, they drew up to the fireplace, where, in silence, Duncan repaired a dog-harness while the girl sewed busily at a fur coat. At short intervals the uncle cast a look toward Reivers' bunk, then choked a chuckle in his beard, each chuckle bringing a glance of reproof from his niece.

"No, Hattie," MacGregor broke out finally, "I cannot hold tongue any longer. Company is no' so plentiful in the North that we can sit by and have no speech. Do you keep still if you wish—I must talk. Stranger, are you going to tell me about yoursel', as I asked you yestereve?"

"Does her Royal Highness, the Red-Headed Chieftainess, permit me to speak?" queried Reivers sarcastically.

"'Twas your own sel' told me to hold tongue," said the girl evenly, without looking up. "I am glad to see you are reasonable enough to give in."

"Let be, Hattie," grumbled the old man. "He's our guest, and we in his debt. Stranger, who are you?"

"Nobody," said Reivers.

"Ah!" cried the girl. "Now he's come to his senses, sure enough."

"Hattie!" said the old man ominously. "I beg pardon for her uncivility, stranger."

"Never mind," said Reivers lightly. "Apparently she doesn't know any better. Speaking to you, sir, I am nobody. I'm as much nobody as a child born yesterday. My life—as far as you're concerned—began up there on the rocks in the Dead Lands.

"I died just a few days before that—died as effectively as if a dozen preachers had read the service over me. You don't understand that. You've got a simple mind. But I tell you I'm beginning a new life as completely as if there was no life behind me, and as you know all that's happened in this new life, you see there's nothing for me to tell you about myself."

"You died," repeated the old man slowly. "I'll warrant you had a good reason."

"A fair one. I wanted to live. I died to save my life."

"Speak plain!" growled MacGregor. "You were not fleeing from the law?"

"No—as I told you yesterday. The only law I was fleeing from was the good old one that cheap men make when they become a mob."

"I tak' it they had a fair reason for becoming a mob?"

"The best in the world," agreed Reivers. "They wanted to kill me. Now, why they wanted to do that is something that belongs to my other life—with the other man—has nothing at all to do with this man—with me—and therefore I am not going to tell you anything about it, except this: I didn't come away with anything that belonged to them, except possibly my life."

MacGregor nodded sagely as Reivers ended.

"And his own bare life a man has a right to get away with if he can, even though it's property forfeited to others," he said. "I suppose you have, or had, a name?"

"I did. I haven't now; I haven't thought of one that would please me."

"How would the 'Woman Tamer' suit you?" asked the girl, without pausing in her sewing. "You remember you told me one of your specialties was taming spitfires like me?"

Reivers smiled.

"I am glad to see that you've become sufficiently interested in me, Miss MacGregor, to select me a name."

"Interested!" she flared; then subsided and bent over her sewing. "I will speak no more, Uncle," she said meekly.

"Good!" sneered Reivers. "Your manners are improving. And now, Mr. MacGregor, what about yourselves, and your brother, and a mine, and a man named Moir that I've heard you speak of?"

Duncan MacGregor tossed a fresh birch chunk into the fire and carefully poked the coals around it. Outside, the dogs, burrowing in the snow, sent up to the sky their weird night-cry, a cry of prayer and protest, protest against the darkness and mystery of night, prayer for the return of the light of day. A wind sprang up and whipped dry snow against the cabin window, and to the sound of its swishing wail Duncan MacGregor began to speak.

"Little as you've seen fit to tell about yourself, stranger," he said, "'tis plain from your behaviour out on the rocks that you're no man of that foul Welsh cutthroat and thief, Shanty Moir. For the manner in which you dealt with yon man, we owe you a debt."

"We owe him nothing," interrupted the niece. "Had he not interfered, I would have found the way to Shanty Moir."

"But as how?"

"What matter as how? What matter what happens to me if I could find what has become of my father and bring justice to the head of Shanty Moir?"

MacGregor shook his head.

"We owe you a debt," he continued, speaking to Reivers, "and can not refuse to tell you how it is with us. It is no pleasant situation we are in, as you may have judged. My brother, father of Hattie, is—or was, we do not know which—James MacGregor, 'Red' MacGregor so-called in this land, therefore MacGregor Roy, as is all our breed. You would have heard of him did you belong in this country.

"Ten year ago we built this cabin, he and I, and settled down to trap the country, for the fur here is good. Five year ago a Cree half-breed gave James a sliver of rock to weight a net with, and the rock, curse it forever, was over half gold. The breed could not recall where the rock had come from, save that he had chucked it into his canoe some place up north.

"James MacGregor stopped trapping then. He began to look for the spot where the guilty rock came from. Three years he looked and did not find it. Two years ago Shanty Moir came down the river and bided here, and Moir was a prospector among other things. Together they found it, after nearly two years looking together; for James took this Moir into partnership, and that was the unlucky day of his life."

MacGregor kicked savagely at the fire and sat silent for several minutes.

"Six months gone they found it," he continued dully, "in the Summer time. They came in for provisions—for provisions for all Winter. A deposit for two men to work, they said. My brother would not even tell me where they found it. The gold had got into his brain. It was his life's blood to him. We only knew that it was somewhere up yonder."

He embraced the whole North with a despairing sweep of his long arms and continued:

"Then they went back, five months, two weeks gone, to dig out the gold, the two of them, my brother, James, and the foul Welsh thief, Shanty Moir. For foul he has proven. In three months my brother had promised he would be back to say all was well with him. We have had no word, no word in these many months.

"But Shanty Moir we have heard of. Aye, we have heard of him. At Fifty Mile, and at Dumont's Camp he had been, throwing dust and nuggets across the bars and to the painted women, boasting he is king of the richest deposit in the North, and offering to kill any man who offers to follow his trail to his holdings. Aye, that we have heard. And that must mean only one thing—the cut-throat Moir has done my brother to death and is flourishing on the gold that drew James

MacGregor to his doom.

"Well," he went on harshly, "what men have found others can find. We have sent word broadcast that we will find Shanty Moir and his holdings, and that I will have an accounting with him, aye, an accounting that will leave but one of us above ground, if it takes me the rest of my life."

"And mine," interjected the girl hotly. "Shanty Moir is mine, and I take toll for my father's life. It's no matter what comes to me, if I can bring justice to Shanty Moir for what he has done to my father. My hand—my own hand will take toll when we run the dog to earth."

In his bunk Reivers laughed scornfully.

"I've a good notion to go hunting this Moir and bring him to you just to see if you could make those words good," said he. "With your own hand, eh? You'd fail, of course, at the last moment, being a woman, but it would almost be worth while getting this Moir for you to see what you'd do. Yes, it would be an interesting experiment."

It was the girl's turn to laugh now, her laughter mocking his.

"'Twould be interesting to see what you would do did you stand face to face with Shanty Moir," she sneered. "Yes, 'twould be an interesting experiment—to see how you'd crawl. For this can be said of the villain, Shanty Moir, that he does not run from men to get help from women. You bring Shanty Moir in! How would you do it—with your mouth?"

"On second thought it would be cruel and unusual punishment to make any man listen to your tongue," concluded Reivers solemnly.

MacGregor growled and shook his head.

"There's no doubt that Shanty Moir of the black heart is a hard-grown, experienced man," said he. "Henchmen of his—three of them, Welshmen all—came through here while James and he were hunting the mine, and he treated them like dogs and they him like a chieftain. 'Twas one of them you slew with the rock out yon, and the matter is very plain: Shanty Moir has got word to them and they have come to the mine and overpowered my brother James. You may judge of the strong hand he holds over his men when a single one of them dares to raid my camp in my absence and steal the daughter of James MacGregor for his chieftain—a strong, big man. 'Twill make it all the sweeter when we get him. He will die hard."

"Also—being of a thrifty breed—you won't feel sorry at getting hold of whatever gold he's taken out," suggested Reivers.

"That's understood," said MacGregor, and put a fresh chunk on the fire for the night.

CHAPTER XXVI—THE LOOK IN A WOMAN'S EYES

Next morning Hattie MacGregor, after she had fed him his morning's meal, said casually to Reivers:

"You have about six days more to pump my uncle and get all he knows about my father's mine. In six days you should be strong enough to travel, and so long and no longer do I keep you."

"Six days?" repeated Reivers. "I may take it into my head to start before."

"And that's all the good that would do you," she replied promptly. "You don't go from here until you are firm on your feet, and that will be six days, about."

"Your interest flatters me," he mocked.

"Interest!" Her laugh was bitter. "No stray, wounded cur even goes from this camp till he's fit to rustle a living on the trail. I could do no less even for you."

"And if I should make up my mind and go?"

"I would shoot you if necessary to keep you here till my duty by you is done!"

"You spitfire!" laughed Reivers, hiding the admiration that leaped into his eyes. "And what makes you think I'm going hunting for this alleged mine when I depart from your too warm hospitality?"

"Pooh! 'Tis easy enough to see that you're that kind—you with your long, hungry nose! I was watching you when my uncle babbled away last night. You've naught a thing in the world but the clothes you stand in. What would you do but go snooping around when you hear of gold? I see it in your mean eyes. Well, seek all you please. You're welcome. You'll not interfere with our quest. In the first place, you have not the heart to stay on the trail long enough to succeed; in the second, you'd back-track quick enough did you once come face to face with Shanty Moir."

"And you—I suppose this bad man, Shanty Moir, will quail when he sees your red hair? Or perhaps you expect to charm him as you charmed the gentleman who had you tied on the sledge?"

"I do not know that," she said without irritation. "But I do know that my uncle and I will run Shanty Moir to earth, and that he will pay in full for the wrong he has done."

"You silly, childish fool!" he broke out. "Haven't you brains enough to realise what an impossible wild-goose chase you're on? Since it took your father five years to find the mine, you ought to realise that it's pretty hard to locate. Since he didn't find it until this Moir, a prospector, came to help him, you ought to understand that it takes a miner to find it.

"You're no miner. Your uncle is no miner. You've neither of you had the slightest experience in this sort of thing. You wouldn't know the signs if you saw them. You'll go wandering aimlessly around, maybe walking over Shanty Moir's head; because, since nobody has stumbled across his camp, it must be so well hidden that it can't be seen unless you know right where to look. Find it! You're a couple of children!"

"Mayhap. But we are not so aimless as you may think. We go to Fifty Mile and to Dumont's Camp and stay. Sooner or later Shanty Moir will come there, to throw my father's gold over the bars and to worse. It may be a month, a year—it doesn't make any difference. But I suppose a great man like you has a quicker and surer way of doing it?"

"I have," said Reivers.

"No doubt. I could see your eyes grow greedy when you heard my uncle tell of gold."

"Oh, no; not especially," taunted Reivers. "The gold is an incident. Shanty Moir is what interests me. He seems to be a gentleman of parts. I'm going to get him. I'm going to bring you face to face with him. I want to see if you could make good the strong talk you've been dealing out as to what you would do. You interest me that way, Miss MacGregor, and that way only. It will be an interesting experiment to get you Shanty Moir."

"Thank Heaven!" she said grimly. "We'll soon be rid of you and your big talk. Then I can forget that any man gave me the name you gave me and lived to brag about it afterward."

He laughed, as one laughs at a petulant child.

"You will never forget me," he said. "You know that you will not forget me, if you live a thousand years."

"I have forgotten better men than you," she said and went out, slamming the door.

That evening Reivers sat up by the fire and further plied old MacGregor with questions concerning the mine.

"You say that your brother claimed the mine lay to the north," he said. "I suppose you have searched the north first of all?"

"For a month I have done nothing else," was the reply. "I have not gone far enough north. My brother James said it lay north from here; and 'twas north he and Shanty Moir went when they started on their last trip together, from which my brother did not return or send word."

"Dumont's Camp and Fifty Mile, where Moir's been on sprees; lay to the west."

"Northwest, aye. Four days' hard mushing to Fifty Mile. Dumont's hell-hole's a day beyond."

"And you think the mine lies to the north of that?"

"Aye. More like in a direct line north of here, for 'twas so they went when they left here."

Reivers hid the smile of triumph that struggled on his lips. The Dead Lands were strange country to him, but in the land north of Fifty Mile he was at home. In his wanderings he had spent months in that country in company with many other deluded men who thought to dig gold out of the bare, frozen tundra. He had found no gold there, and neither had any one else. There was no gold up there, could be none there, and, what was more important to him just now, there was no rock formation, nothing but muskeg and tundra. The mine could not be up north.

It must, however, be within easy mushing distance of Fifty Mile and Dumont's Camp, say two or three days, else Shanty Moir would not have hied himself to these settlements when the need for riot and wassail overcame him.

"You know the ground between here and Fifty Mile, I suppose?" he said suddenly.

"'Tis my trapping-ground," replied MacGregor.

So the mine couldn't be east of the settlements. It was to the west or the south.

"Your brother was particularly careful to keep the location of his find secret even from you?"

"Aye," said MacGregor sorrowfully. "It had gone to his head, he had searched so long, and the find was so big. He took no chances that I might know it, or his daughter Hattie; only the thief, Shanty Moir."

And he said that the mine lay to the north. That might mean that it lay to the south—west or south of the settlements, there his search would lie. It was new country to him, and, as MacGregor well knew before he gave him his confidence, a man not knowing the land might wander aimlessly for years without covering those vast, broken reaches. But MacGregor did not know of the Chippewa squaw, Tillie, and her people.

"And now I suppose you will be able to find it soon," snapped Hattie MacGregor, "now that you have pumped my uncle dry?"

"I will," said Reivers. "I'll be there waiting for you when you come along." And Duncan MacGregor chuckled deeply.

For the remainder of his stay at the cabin, Reivers maintained a sullen silence toward the girl. Had she been different, had she affected him differently, he would have cursed her for daring to disturb him even to this slight extent. But he knew that if she had been different she would not have disturbed him at all. Well, he would soon be away, and then he would forget her.

He had an object again. His nature was such that he craved power and dominance over men, as another man craves food. He would not live at all unless he had power. He had used this power too ruthlessly at Cameron-Dam Camp, and it had been wrested from him. For the time being he was down among the herd. But not for long.

Shanty Moir had a mine some place south or west of the settlements, and the mine yielded gold nuggets and gold dust for Shanty Moir to fling across the bars. Gold spells power. Given gold, Reivers would have back his old-time power over men, aye, and over women. Not merely a power up there in the frozen North, but in the world to which he had long ago belonged: the world of men in dress clothes, of lights and soft rugs, or women, soft-speaking women, shimmery gowns and white shoulders, their eyes and apparel a constant invitation to the great adventure of love.

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After all, that was the world that he belonged in. And gold would give him power there, and in that whirl he would forget this red-haired, semi-savage who looked him in the eye as no other woman ever had dared. His fists clenched as his thoughts lighted up the future. The Snow-Burner had died, but he would live again, and he would forget, absolutely and completely, Hattie MacGregor.

On the morning of the sixth day Duncan MacGregor gravely placed before him outside the cabin door a pair of light snowshoes and a grub-bag filled with food for four days. Reivers strapped on the snowshoes and ran his arms through the bagstraps without a word.

"Stranger," said MacGregor, holding out his hand, "I did not like you when first I saw you. I do not say I like you now. But—shake hands."

Reivers hurriedly shook hands and tore himself away. He had resolved to go without seeing Hattie, and he was inwardly raging at himself because he found this resolution hard to keep. He laid his course for the nearest rise of land, half a mile away. Once over the rise the cabin would be shut out of sight, and even though he should weaken and look back there would be no danger of letting her see.

Bent far over, head down, lunging along with the cunning strides of the trained snowshoer, he topped the rise and dropped down on the farther side. There he paused to rest himself and draw breath, and as he stood there Hattie MacGregor and her dog-team swept at right angles across his trail.

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She was riding boy-fashion, half sitting, half lying, on the empty sledge, driving the dogs furiously for their daily exercise. She did not speak. She merely looked up at him as she went past. Then she was gone in a flurry of snow, and Reivers went forth on his quest of power with a curse on his lips and in his heart the determination that no weakening memories of a girl's wistful eyes should interfere with his aim.

CHAPTER XXVII—ON THE TRAIL OF FORTUNE

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Reivers travelled steadily for an hour at the best pace that was in him. It was not a good pace, for he was far from being in his old physical condition, and the lift and swing of a snowshoe will cramp the calves and ankle-tendons of a man grown soft from long bed-lying, no matter how cunning may be his stride.

He swore a little at first over his slow progress. He was like a wolf, suddenly released from a trap, who desires to travel far, swiftly and instantly, and who finds that the trap has made him lame.

Reivers wanted to put the MacGregor cabin, and the scenes about it, which might remind him of Hattie, behind him with a rush. But the rush, he soon found, threatened to cripple him, so he must perforce give it up. The trail that he had set out to make was not one that any man, least of all one recently convalescent, could hope to cover in a single burst of speed.

He was going to the Winter camp of the people of Tillie, the squaw. The camp lay somewhere in the northwest. How far away he did not know; and it was no part of his plans to arrive at the camp of the Chippewas depleted in energy and resource. The role he had set out to play now called for the character of the Snow-Burner at his best—dominant, unconquerable. Therefore, when he found that his first efforts at speed threatened to cripple him with the treacherous snowshoe cramp, he resigned himself to a pace which would have shamed him had he been in good condition. It was poor snow-shoeing, but at the end of an hour he had placed between himself and all possible sight of Hattie MacGregor the first ragged rock-ramparts of the Dead Lands, and he was content.

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On the western slope of a low ridge he unstrapped his snow-shoes and sat down on a bare boulder for a rest. His heart throbbed nervously from his exertion and his lungs gasped weakly. But with each breath of the crisp air his strength was coming back to him, and in his head the brains of the Snow-Burner worked as of old. He smiled with great self-satisfaction. He was not

considering his condition, was not counting the difficulties that lay in his path. He was merely picturing, with lightning-like play of that powerful mental machinery of his, the desperate nature of the adventure toward which he was travelling.

It was desperate enough even to thrill Hell-Camp Reivers. For probably never did born adventurer set forth of his own free will on a more deadly, more hopeless-looking trail. As he sat on the rock there in the Dead Lands, Reivers was in better condition than on his flight from Cameron-Dam Camp to this extent: the bullet-hole in his shoulder was healed, and, he had recuperated from the fever brought on by exposure and exhaustion. That was all. He was still the bare man with empty hands. He possessed nothing in the world but the clothes he stood in, the food on his back and the gift snow-shoes on his feet.

He had not even a knife that might be called a weapon, for the case-knife that old MacGregor had given him upon parting could scarcely be reckoned such. In this condition he was setting forth—first, to find a cunningly hidden mine; second, to take it and keep it for his own from one Shanty Moir, who treated his henchmen like dogs and was looked up to as a chieftain.

The Snow-Burner lived again as he contemplated the possibilities of a clash with Moir. If what the MacGregors had said was true, Shanty Moir was a boss man himself. And as instinctively and eagerly as one ten-pronged buck tears straight through timber, swamp and water to battle with another buck whose deep-voiced challenge proclaims him similarly a giant, so Reivers was going toward Shanty Moir.

He leaped to his feet, with flashing eyes, at the thought of what was coming. Then he remembered his weakened condition and sat down again. For the immediate present, until his full strength returned, he must make craft take the place of strength.

When he was ready to start again, Reivers took his bearings from the sun, it being a clear day, and laid his trail as straight toward the northwest as the formation of the Dead Lands would allow. He slept that night by a hot spring. A tiny rivulet ran unfrozen from the spring southward down into the maze of barren stone, a thread of dark, steaming water, wandering through the white, frozen snow.

Had he been a little less tired with the day's march Reivers might have paid more attention to this phenomenon that evening. In the morning he awoke with such eagerness to be on toward his adventure that he marched off without bestowing on the stream more than a casual glance. And later he came to curse his carelessness.

Bearing steadily toward the northwest, his course lay in the Dead Lands for the greater part of the day. Shortly before sundown he saw with relief that ahead the rocks and ridges gave way to the flat tundra, with small clumps of stunted willows dotting the flatness, like tiny islands in a sea of snow.

Reivers quickened his pace. Out on the tundra he hurried straight to the nearest bunch of willows. Even at a distance of several rods the chewed white branches of the willows told him their story, and he gave vent to a shout of relief. The caribou had been feeding there. The Chippewas lived on the caribou in winter. He had only to follow the trail of the animals and he would soon run across the moccasin tracks of his friends, the Indians.

Luck favoured him more than he hoped for. At his shout there was a crash in a clump of willows a hundred yards ahead and a bull caribou lumbered clumsily into the open. At the sight of him the beast snorted loudly and turned and ran. From right and left came other crashes, and in the gathering dusk the herd which had been stripping the willows fled in the wake of the sentinel bull, their ungainly gait whipping them out of sight and hearing in uncanny fashion.

Reivers smiled. The camp of Tillie's people would not be far from the feeding ground of the caribou. He ate his cold supper, crawled into the shelter of the willows and went to sleep.

Dry, drifting snow half hid the tracks of the caribou during the night, and in the morning he was forced to wait for the late-coming daylight before picking up the trail. The herd had gone straight westward, and Reivers followed the signs, his eyes constantly scanning the snow for moccasin tracks or other evidence of human beings.

In the middle of the forenoon, in a birch and willow swamp, he jumped the animals again. They caught his scent at a mile's distance, and Reivers crouched down and watched avidly as they streaked from the swamp to security.

To the north of the swamp lay the open, snow-covered tundra, where even the knife-like fore-hoof of the caribou would have hard time to dig out a living in the dead of winter. To the south lay clumps of brush and stunted trees, ideal shelter and feed.

The animals went north. Reivers nodded in great satisfaction. There were wolves or Indians to the south, probably the latter. Accordingly he turned southward. Toward noon he found his first moccasin track, evidently the trail of a single hunter who had come northward, but not quite far enough, on a hunt for caribou.

The track looped back southward and Reivers trailed it. Soon a set of snow-shoe tracks joined the moccasins, and Reivers, after a close scrutiny had revealed the Chippewa pattern in the snow, knew that he was on the right track. The tracks dropped down on to the bed of a solidly frozen river and continued on to the south.

Other tracks became visible. When they gathered together and made a hard-packed trail down the middle of the river, Reivers knew that a camp was not far away, and grew cautious.

He found the camp as the swift Winter darkness came on, a group of half a dozen tepees set snugly in a bend of the river, one large tepee in the middle easily recognisable as that of Tillie, the squaw, chief of the band.

Reivers sat down to wait. Presently he heard the camp-dogs growling and fighting over their evening meal and knew that they would be too occupied to notice and announce the approach of a stranger. Also, at this time the people of the camp would be in their tepees, supping heavily if the hunter's god had been favourably inclined, and gnawing the cold bones of yesterday if that irrational deity had been unkind.

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By the whining note in the growls of the dogs, Reivers judged that the latter was the case this evening; and when he moved forward and stood listening outside the flap of the big tepee he knew that it was so. Within, an old squaw's treble rose faintly in a whining chant, of which Reivers caught the despairing motif:

Black is the face of the sun, Ah wo!
The time has come for the old to die. Ah wo, ah wo!
There is meat only to keep alive the young. Ah wo!
We who are old must die. Ah wo! Ah wo! Ah wo!

Any other white man but Reivers would have shuddered at the terrible, primitive story which the wail told. Reivers smiled. His old luck was with him. The camp was short of meat and the hunters had given up hopes of making a kill.

With deft, experienced fingers he unloosed the flap of the tepee. There was no noise. Suddenly the old squaw's wail ceased; those in the tepee looked up from their scanty supper. The Snow-Burner was standing inside the tepee, the flap closed behind him.

There were six people in the tepee, the old squaw, an old man, two young hunters, a young girl, and Tillie. They were gathered around the fire-stone in the centre, making a scant meal of frozen fish. Tillie, by virtue of her position, had the warmest place and the most fish.

No one spoke a word as they became aware of his presence. Only on Tillie's face there came a look in which the traces of hunger vanished. Reivers stood looking down at the group for a moment in silence. Then he strode forward, thrust Tillie to one side and sat down in her place. For Reivers knew Indians.

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"Feed me," he commanded, tossing his grub-bag to her.

He did not look at her as she placed before him the entire contents of the bag. Having served him she retired and sat down behind him, awaiting his pleasure. Reivers ate leisurely of the bountiful supply of cold meat that remained of his supply. When he had his fill he tossed small portions to the old squaw, the old man and the young girl.

"Hunters are mighty," he mocked in the Chippewa tongue, as the young men avidly eyed the meat. "They kill what they eat. The meat they do not kill would stick in their mighty throats."

Last of all he beckoned Tillie to come to his side and eat what remained.

"Men eat meat," he continued, looking over the heads of the two hunters. "Old people and children are content with frozen fish. When I was here before there were men in this camp. There was meat in the tepees. The dogs had meat. Now I see the men are all gone."

One of the hunters raised his arms above his head, a gesture indicating strength, and let them fall resignedly to his side, a sign of despair.

"The caribou are gone, Snow-Burner," he said dully. "That is why there is no meat. All gone. The god of good kills has turned his face from us. Little Bear—" to the old man—"how long have our people hunted the caribou here?"

Little Bear lifted his head, his wizened, smoked face more a black, carved mask than a human countenance.

"Big Bear, my father, was an old man when I was born," he said slowly. "When he was a boy so small that he slept with the women, our people came here for the Winter hunt."

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"Oh, Little Bear," chanted the hunter, "great was your father, the hunter; great were you as a hunter in your young days. Was there ever a Winter before when the caribou were not found here in plenty?"

The old man shook his head.

"Oh, Snow-Burner," said the hunter, "these are the words of Little Bear, whose age no one knows. Always the caribou have been plenty here along this river in the Winter. Longer than any old man's tales reach back have they fed upon the willows. They are not here this Winter. The gods are angry with us. We hunt. We hunt till we lie flat on the snow. We find no signs. There are men still here, Snow-Burner, but the caribou have gone."

"Have gone, have gone, have gone. Ah wo!" chanted the old squaw.

"Where do you hunt?" asked Reivers tersely.

"Where we have always hunted; where our fathers hunted before us," was the reply. "Along the river in the muskeg and bush to the south we hunt. The caribou are not there. They are nowhere. The gods have taken them away. We must die and go where they are."

"We must go," wailed the old squaw. "The gods refuse us meat. We must go."

Her chant of despair was heard beyond the tepee. In the smaller tents other voices took up the wail. The women were singing the death song, their primitive protest and acquiescence to what they considered the irrevocable pleasure of their dark gods.

Reivers waited until the last squaw had whined herself into silence. Even then he did not speak at once. He knew that these simple people, who for his deeds had given him the expressive name of Snow-Burner, were waiting for him to speak, and he knew the value of silence upon their primitive souls. He sat with folded arms, looking above the heads of the two hunters.

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"You have done well," he said, nodding impressively, but not looking at the two young men. "You have hunted as men who have the true hunter's heart. But what can man do when the gods are against him? The gods are against you. They are not against me. To-morrow I slay you your fill of caribou."

"Snow-Burner," whispered one of the hunters in the awe-stricken silence that followed this announcement, "there are no caribou here. Are you greater than the gods?"

Reivers looked at him, and at the light in his eyes the young man drew back in fright.

"To-morrow I give you your fill of meat," he said slowly. "Not only enough for one day, but enough for all Winter. Each tepee shall be piled high with meat. Even the dogs shall eat till they want no more. I have promised. I alone. Do you—" he pointed at the hunters—"bring me to-night the two best rifles in the camp. If they do not shoot true to-morrow, do not let me find you here when I return from the hunt. And now the rest of you—all of you—go from here. Go, I will be alone."

They rose and went out obediently, except Tillie who watched Reivers's face with avid eyes as the young girl left the tepee. Then she crawled forward and touched her forehead to his hand, for Reivers had not bestowed upon the girl a glance.

Presently the hunters came back and placed their Winchesters at his feet. He examined each weapon carefully, found them in perfect order and fully loaded, and dismissed the men with a wave of his arm. Tillie sat with bowed head, humbly waiting his pleasure, but Reivers rolled himself in his blanket and lay down alone by the fire.

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"I wish to sleep warm," he said. "See that the fire does not go out till the night is half gone. Be ready to go with me in the hour before daylight. Have the swiftest and strongest team of dogs and the largest sledge hitched and waiting to bear us to the hunt. Go! Now I sleep."

CHAPTER XXVIII—THE SNOW-BURNER HUNTS

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The snarling of dogs being put into harness awoke him in the morning, but he lay pretending to sleep until Tillie, having overseen the hitching-up, came in, prepared food over the fire, which had not gone out all night, and came timidly and laid a hand on his shoulder.

It was pitch dark when they went from the tepee. The dogs whined at the prospect of a dark trail, and the hunter who held them plied his whip savagely. With the rifles carefully stowed in their buckskin cases on the sledge, and a big camp-axe, as their whole burden, Reivers immediately took command of the dogs and headed down the river.

"Oh, Snow-Burner!" chattered the frozen hunter in disappointment. "There are no caribou to the south. It is a waste of strength to hunt there."

"There are no caribou anywhere for you," retorted Reivers. "For me it does not make any difference where I hunt; the spirits are with me. Stay close to the tepees to-day. If any one follows my trail the spirits will refuse their help. Hi-yah! Mush!"

Under the sting of his skilfully wielded whip the big team whirled down the river, Reivers riding in front, Tillie behind. But they did not go south for long. A few miles below the camp Reivers abruptly swung the dogs off the river-bed and bore westward.

Half a mile of this and he shifted and changed his course to right angles, straight toward the north.

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"And now, mush! — you! Mush for all that's in you!" he cried, plying the whip. "You've got many miles to cover before daylight. Mush, mush!"

He held straight northward until he left the bush and reached the open tundra at the spot where the caribou the day before had swung away farther north. He knew that the herd, being in a country undisturbed by man, would not travel far from the willows where he had jumped them the day before, and he held cautiously on their trail until the first grey of daylight showed a rise in the land ahead. Here he halted the dogs and crept forward on foot.

It was as he expected. The caribou had halted on the other side of the height of land, feeling secure in that region where no man ever came. Below him he could see them moving, and he realised that he must act at once, before they began their travels of the day.

"Tillie," he whispered, coming back to the sledge, "as soon as you can see the snow on the knoll ahead do you drive the dogs around there, to the right, and swing to the left along the other side

of the knoll. Drive fast and shout loud. Shout as if the wolves had you. There are caribou over the knoll. When the dogs see them let them go straight for the herd. But wait till the snow shows white in the daylight."

Snatching both rifles from their covers, he ran around the left shoulder of the knoll and ambushed in a trifling hollow. He waited patiently, one rifle cocked and in his hand, the other lying ready at his side. The light grew broader; the herd, just out of safe rifle shot, began milling restlessly.

Suddenly, from around the right of the knoll, came the sharp yelp of a dog as Tillie's leader, rounding the ridge, caught scent and sight of living meat ahead. The caribou stopped dead. Then bedlam broke loose as the dogs saw what was before them. And the caribou, trembling at the wolf-yells of the dogs, broke into their swift, lumbering run and came streaking straight past Reivers at fifty yards' distance.

Reivers waited until the maddened beasts were running four deep before him. Then the slaughter began. No need to watch the sights here. The crash of shot upon shot followed as quickly as he could pump the lever. There were ten shots in each rifle, and he fired them all before the herd was out of range. Then only the hideous yelps of the maddened dogs tore the morning quiet. A dozen caribou, some dead, some kicking, some trying to crawl away, were scattered over the snow, and Reivers nodded and knew that his hold on Tillie's people was complete.

The dogs were on the first caribou now, snarling, yelping, fighting, eating, for the time being as wild and savage as any of their wolf forebears. Tillie, spilled from the sledge in the first mad rush of the team, came waddling up to Reivers and bowed down before him humbly.

"Snow-Burner, I know you are only a man, because I alone of my people have seen you among other white men," she said. "Yet you are more than other men. Snow-Burner, I have lived among white people and know that the talk of spirits is only for children. But how knew you that the caribou were here?"

"The meat is there," said Reivers, pointing at his kill. "Your work is to take care of it. The axe is on the sledge. Cut off as many saddles and hind-quarters as the dogs can drag back to camp. The rest we will cache here. To your work. Do not ask questions."

He reloaded and put the wounded animals out of their misery, each with a shot through the head, and sat down and watched her as she slaved at her butcher's task. Tillie had lived among white people, had been to the white man's school even, but Reivers knew he would slacken his hold on her if he demeaned himself by assisting her in her toil.

When the dogs had stayed their hunger he leaped into their midst with clubbed rifle and knocked them yelping away from their prey. When they turned and attacked him he coolly struck and kicked till they had enough. Then with the driving whip he beat them till they lay flat in the snow and whined for mercy.

By the time Tillie had the sledge loaded and the rest of the kill cached under a huge heap of snow, it was noon, and the dogs started back with their heavy load, open-mouthed and panting, their excitement divided between fear of the man who had mastered them and the odour of fresh blood that reeked in their avid nostrils.

CHAPTER XXIX—THE WHITE MAN'S WILL

That night in the camp at the river bend the Indians feasted ravenously, and Reivers, sitting in Tillie's place as new-made chief, looked on without smiling.

"Oh, Snow-Burner!" said the oldest man at last. "What is it you want with us? Our furs? Speak. We obey your will."

"Furs are good," replied Reivers, "when a man has nothing else, but gold is better, and the gold that another man has is best of all."

The old man cackled respectfully.

"Oh, Snow-Burner! Do you come to us for gold? Do you think we would sit here without meat if we had gold? No, Snow-Burner. What we have you can have. Your will with the tribe from the oldest to the youngest is our law. We owe you our lives. The strength of our young men is yours; the wisdom of our old heads is yours. But gold we have not. Do not turn your frown upon us, Snow-Burner; you must know it is the truth."

"Since when," said Reivers sternly, "has my friend, old Little Bear, dared say that the Snow-Burner has the foolishness of a woman in his head? Do you think I come seeking gold from you? No. It is the strength of your young men and the wisdom of your old heads that I want. I seek gold. You shall help me find it."

Little Bear raised his arms and let them fall in the eloquent Indian gesture of helplessness.

"White men have been here often to seek for gold. The great Snow-Burner once was one of them. They have digged holes in the ground. They have taken the sand from creek bottoms. Did the Snow-Burner, who finds caribou where there are none, find any gold here? No. It is an old story.

There is no gold here."

Reivers leaned forward and spoke harshly.

"Listen, Little Bear; listen all you people. There is gold within three days' march from here. Much gold. Another man digs it. You will find it for me. I have spoken."

Silence fell on the tepee. The Indians looked at one another. Little Bear finally spoke with bowed head.

"We do the Snow-Burner's will."

Nawa, the youngest and strongest of the hunters, turned to Reivers respectfully.

"Oh, Snow-Burner, Nawa serves you with the strength of his leg and the keenness of his eyes. Nawa knows that the Snow-Burner sees things that are hidden to us. Our oldest men say there is no gold here. Other white men say there is no gold here. The Snow-Burner says there is gold near here.

"The Snow-Burner sees what is hidden to others. Nawa does not doubt. Nawa waits only the Snow-Burner's commands. But Nawa has been to the settlements at Fifty Mile and Dumont's Camp. He has heard the white men talk. They talk there of a man who carries gold like gunpowder and gold like bullets, instead of the white man's money.

"Nawa has talked with Indians who have seen this man. They call him 'Iron Hair,' because his hair is black and stiff like the quills of a porcupine. Oh, Snow-Burner, Nawa knows nothing. He merely tells what he has heard. Is this the man the Snow-Burner, too, has heard of!"

Reivers looked around the circle of smoke-blackened faces about the fire. No expression betrayed what was going on behind those wood-like masks, but Reivers knew Indians and sensed that they were all waiting excitedly for his answer.

"That is the man," he said, and by the complete silence that followed he knew that his reply had caused a sensation that would have made white men swear. "What know you of Iron Hair, Nawa?"

"Oh, Snow-Burner," said Nawa dolefully, "our tribe knows of Iron Hair to its sorrow. Two moons ago the big man with the hair like a porcupine was at Fifty Mile for whisky and food. He hired Small Eyes and Broken Wing of our tribe to haul the food to his camp, a day's travelling each way, so he said. The pay was to be big. Small Eyes and Broken Wing went. So much people know. Nothing more. The sledges did not come back. Small Eyes and Broken Wing did not come back. So much do we know of Iron Hair. Nawa has spoken."

"Once there were men in these tepees," said Reivers, looking high above Nawa's head. "Once there were men who would have gone from their tepees to follow to the end the trail of their brothers who go and do not come back. Now there are no men. They sit in the tepees with the women and keep warm. Perhaps Small Eyes and Broken Wing were men and did not care to come back to people who sit by their fires and do not seek to find their brothers who disappear."

"We have sought, oh, Snow-Burner," said Nawa hopelessly. "Do not think we have only sat by our fires. We sought to follow the trail of Iron Hair out of Fifty Mile——"

"How ran the trail?" interrupted Reivers.

"Between the north and the west. We went to hunt our brothers. But a storm had blotted out the trail. Iron Hair had gone out in the storm. Who can follow when there is no trail to see?"

"Once," resumed Reivers in the tone of contempt, "there were strong dog-drivers and sharp eyes here. They would have found the camp of Iron Hair in those days."

"Our dogs still are strong, our young men drive well, our eyes are sharp even now, Snow-Burner," came Nawa's weary reply. "We searched. Even as we searched for the caribou we searched for the camp of Iron Hair. We found no camp. There is no white man's camp in this country. There is no camp at all. We searched till nothing the size of a man's cap could be hidden. The white men from Dumont's Camp and Fifty Mile have searched for the gold which white men are mad for. They found nothing. At the settlements the white men say, 'This man must be the devil himself and go to hell for his gold, because his camp certainly is not in this world where men can see it with their eyes.'"

"And the caribou were not in this world, either?" mocked Reivers.

Nawa shook his head.

"White men, too, have looked for the camp of Iron Hair."

"Many white men," supplemented old Little Bear. "White men always look when they hear of gold. They find gold if it is to be found. The earth gives up its secrets to them. Snow-Burner, they could not find the place where Iron Hair digs his gold."

"Nawa and his hunters could not find the caribou," said Reivers.

There was no reply. He had driven his will home.

"Oh, Snow-Burner," said Nawa, at last, "as Little Bear has said, we do your will."

"Good;" Reivers rose and towered over them. "My will at present is that you go to your tepees. Sleep soundly. I have work for you in the morning."

He stood and watched while they filed, stooped over, through the low opening in the tepee wall. They went without question, without will of their own. A stronger will than theirs had caught them and held them. From hence on they were wholly subservient to the superior mentality which was to direct their actions. Reivers smiled. Old MacGregor had felt safe in telling about the mine; a strange man had no chance to find it. But MacGregor did not know of Tillie's people.

Reivers suddenly turned toward the fire. Tillie was standing there, arrayed in buckskin so white that she must have kept it protected from the tepee smoke in hope of his coming. At the sight of her there came before Reivers' eyes the picture of Hattie MacGregor's face as she had looked up at him when he was leaving the MacGregor cabin. The look that came over his face then was new even to Tillie.

"You, too, get out!" he roared, and Tillie fled from the tepee in terror.

CHAPTER XXX—ANY MEANS TO AN END

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In the big tepee Reivers rolled on his blankets and cursed himself for his weakness. What had happened to him? Was he getting to be like other men, that he would let the memory of an impudent, red-haired girl interfere with his plans or pleasures? Had he not sworn to forget? And yet here came the memory of her—the wide grey eyes, the suffering mouth, the purity of the look of her—rising before his eyes like a vision to shame him.

To shame him! To shame the Snow-Burner! He understood the significance of the look she had given him, and which had stood between him and Tillie. Womanhood, pure, noble womanhood, was appealing to his better self.

His better self! Reivers laughed a laugh so ghastly that it might have come from a bare skull. His better self! If a man believed in things like that he had to believe in the human race—had to believe in goodness and badness, virtue and sin, right and wrong, and all that silly, effeminate rot. Reivers didn't believe in that stuff. He knew only one life-law, that of strength over weakness, and that was the law he would live and die with, and Miss Hattie MacGregor could not interfere.

With his terrible will-power he erased the memory of her from his mind. He did not erase the resentment at his own weakness. On the contrary, the resentment grew. He would revenge himself for that moment of weakness.

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There were two ways of finding Moir and the mysterious mine. One—the way he had first planned to follow—was to scatter his Indians, and as many others as he could bribe with caribou meat, over the country lying to the south of Fifty Mile, where he knew the mine must be. Moir, or his men, must show themselves sooner or later. In time the Indians would find Moir's camp.

But there was also a shorter and surer way—a shameful way. Moir, by the talk he had heard of him, came to Fifty Mile and Dumont's Camp for such whisky and feminine company as might be found. He had even sent one of his henchmen to steal Hattie MacGregor. Such a move proved that Moir was desperate, and by this time, by the non-appearance of the would-be-kidnapper, the chief would know that his man was either killed or captured, and that no hope for a woman lay in that quarter. Moir's next move would be to come to Fifty Mile and Dumont's, or to send a man there, to procure the means of salving his disappointment. And Reivers had two attractive women at his disposal, Tillie, and the young girl who was nearly beautiful. Thus did Reivers overcome his momentary weakness. The black shamefulness of his scheme he laughed at. Then he went to sleep.

He gave his orders to Tillie early next morning.

"Have this tepee and another one loaded on one sledge," he directed. "Have a second sledge loaded with caribou meat. Do you and the young girl prepare to come with me. We are going on a long journey. You will both take your brightest clothes."

He waited with set jaws while his orders were obeyed. No weakness any more. There was only one law, the strong over the weak, and he was the strong one.

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A call from Tillie apprised him that all was ready, and he strode forth to find Nawa, the young hunter, waiting with the two women ready for the trail.

"How so?" he demanded. "Did I say aught about Nawa?"

"Oh, Snow-Burner," whispered Tillie, "Neopa is to be Nawa's squaw with the coming of Spring. They wish to go together."

"And I do not wish them to go together," said Reivers harshly. "Give me that rifle." He took the weapon from Nawa's hands. "Do you stay here and eat caribou meat and grow fat against the coming of Spring, Nawa."

"Snow-Burner," said Nawa, a flash of will lighting his eyes for the moment, "does Neopa come back to me?"

"Perhaps," said Reivers, cocking the rifle. "But if you try to follow you will never come back. Is it understood?"

Nawa bowed his head and turned away. Neopa made as if to run to him, but Reivers caught her brutally and threw her upon the lead sledge. He had resolved to travel the way of shame, no matter what the cost to others.

"Mush! Get on!" he roared at the dogs, and with the rifle ready and with a backward glance at Nawa, he drove away for Fifty Mile and Dumont's Camp.

CHAPTER XXXI—THE SQUAW-MAN

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A day after Reivers drove out of the Indian camp, Dumont's Camp had something to talk about. A half-witted, crippled-up squaw-man went through with a couple of squaws, and the youngest of the squaws was a beaut'! The old bum hadn't stopped long, just long enough to trade a chunk of caribou meat for a bottle of hooch, but long enough, nevertheless, to let the gang get a peek at the squaws.

Dumont's Camp opined that it was a good thing for the old cripple that he hadn't stayed longer, else he might have found himself minus his squaws, especially the young one. But Dumont's Camp would have been mightily puzzled had it seen how the limp and stoop went out of the squaw-man's body the moment he had left their camp behind, how the foolish leer and stuttering speech disappeared from his mouth, and how, straight-backed and stern-visaged, he threw the bottle of hooch away in contempt and hurried on toward Fifty Mile.

Reivers had played many strange parts in his tumultuous life, and his squaw-man was a masterpiece. Fifty Mile had its sensation early next morning. The half-witted, crippled-up squaw-man with the two extremely desirable squaws came through, stopped for another bottle of hooch, and drove on and made camp just outside the settlement.

"He certainly was one soft-headed old bum," said Jack Raftery, leaning on the packing-case that served as bar in his logcabin saloon. "Yes, men, he certainly is bumped in the bean and locoed in his arms. Gimme that chunk o' meat there for a bottle o' hooch. 'Bout fifty pounds, it'll weigh. I'd give 'im a gallon, but he grins foolish and says: 'Bottle. One bottle.' 'Drag your meat in,' says I. Well, gents, will you b'lieve he couldn't make it. No, sir; paralysed in the arms or something." 242

"That young squaw o' his did the toting. A beaut'? Gents, there never was anything put up in a brown hide to touch it. An' that locoed ol' bum running 'round loose with it. Tempting providence, that's what he is, when he comes parading 'round real men-folks with skirts like them. Shouldn't wonder if something'd happen to him one o' these cold days. Looks like he might 'a' been an awful good man in his day, too. Well built. Reckon he's been used mighty rough to be locoed and crippled up the way he is."

"I reckon," drawled Black Pete, who ran the games at Raftery's when there was any money in sight. "I reckon too mebbe he get handle more rough some tam ef he's hang 'round long wid dem two squaw. Tha' small squaw's too chic, she, to b'long to ol' bum lak heem."

The assembled gents laughed. Had they seen the "ol' bum" at that moment their laughter would have been cut short. Reivers, in a gully out of sight of the settlement, had thrown away his hooch, pitched camp, tethered the dogs and made all secure with a swiftness and efficiency that belied the characterisation Black Pete had applied to him. He had the two tepees set up far apart, the dogs tied between them, and Tillie and Neopa had one tepee, and Reivers the other, alone.

Having made camp, Reivers knew what the boys would expect of him in his character of sodden squaw-man. Having resolved to use the most shameful means in the world to achieve his end, he played his base part to perfection. 243

"Do you take this chunk of meat," he directed Tillie, "and go down to the saloon and get another bottle of hooch. Yes, yes; I know I have destroyed one bottle. You are not to ask questions but to obey my commands. Go down and trade the meat for hooch. Do not stop to speak to the white men. Come, back at once. Go!"

But down in Raftery's the assemblage had no hint of these swift changes, and they laughed merrily at Black Pete's remarks.

"What d'you reckon his lay is, Jack?" asked one.

"Booze," replied Raftery instantly. "Nothing else. When you see a man who's sure been as good a man in his day as this relic, trailing 'round with squaw folks, you can jest nacherlly whittle a little marker for him and paint on it, 'Nother white man as the hooch hez got.' Sabbe? I trace him out as some prospector who's got crippled up and been laying out 'mongst the Indians with a good supply of the ol' frost-bite cure 'longside of 'im. Nothin' to do but tuh hit the jug offen enough to keep from gettin' sober and remembering what he used to was. Sabbe? Been layin' out sucking the neck of a jug till his ol' thinker's got twisted."

"I've seen dozens of 'em. You can't fool me when I see one, and I saw him when he was comin' through the door. Ran out o' hooch and was afraid he'd get sober, so he comes down here to get soaked up some more. Brings his load o' meat 'long to trade in, an' these two brown dolls to make sure in case the caribou have been down this way, which they ain't. Bet the drinks against two bits that he'll be chasin' one o' the squaws down here for another bottle before an hour's 244

gone. They all do. I've seen his kind before."

Black Pete took the bet.

"Because I'm onlucky, *moi*, lately, an' I want to lose this bet," he explained.

Raftery laughed homerically.

"What's on you' chest, Jack?" demanded one of his friends.

"I was just thinking," gurgled the saloonist, "what 'ud happen in case this stiff gent, Iron Hair, was to run in 'bout this time."

"By Gar!" laughed Pete. "An' Iron Hair, he's just 'bout due."

At that moment Tillie came waddling in, laid down her bundle of meat before Raftery and said—

"One bottle."

"What'd I tell you?" chuckled Raftery, handing over the liquor. "Boss him get laid out, eh?" he said to Tillie.

But Tillie did not pause for conversation. She whipped the bottle under her blanket and waddled out without a word.

"Well, I'm a son-of-a-gun!" proclaimed Raftery. "That ol' bum has got 'em well trained, anyhow."

Black Pete pulled his beard reflectively.

"Come to theenk," he mused aloud, "dere was wan rifle on those sledge. I theenk mebbe I no go viseet thees ol' bum, he's camp, teel she's leetle better acquaint' weeth *moi*."

CHAPTER XXXII—THE SCORN OF A PURE WOMAN

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And Fifty Mile talked. It talked to all who came in from the white wastes of the country around. It talked in its tents. It talked while trifling with Black Pete's games of no-chance. It talked around Raftery's bar. It talked so loudly that men heard it up at Dumont's Camp.

From Fifty Mile and Dumont's the talk spread up and down the trails, and even out to solitary cabins and dugouts where there were no trails. Wherever men were to be found in that desolate region the talk of Fifty Mile soon made its way. And the talk was mainly of the young squaw, of the old crippled-up squaw-man, and that she was of a beauty to set men's heads a-whirling and make them murder each other for her possession.

Men meeting each other on the trails asked three questions in order:

"Where you traveling? How's your tobacco? Heard about the beaut' of a little squaw down to Fifty Mile?"

Men travelling in the direction of the settlements bent their steps toward Fifty Mile, even though it lay far out of their course. Men travelling in the opposite direction passed the news to all whom they bespoke. Of those who came to the settlement, many strolled casually up the gully where the squaw-man had his camp. And all of them strolled down again with nothing to brag about but a drink of hooch and a mouthful of talk with the squaw-man.

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"I don't quite follow that gent's curves," summed up Jack Raftery, speaking for the gang. "He gets enough hooch here to keep any human gent laid out twenty-six hours out of the twenty-four, but somehow whenever you come moseying up to his camp he's on his pins, ready to give you a drink and a lot of locoed talk. Yessir, he sure is locoed until he needs a guardian, but for one I don't go to do no rushing of his lady-folks, not while he's able to stand on his pins and keep his eyes moving. Gents, there's been one awful stiff man in his day, and his condition goes to show what booze'll do to the best of 'em, and ought to be a warning to us all. Line up, men; 'bout third drink time for me."

"There is sometheeng about heem," agreed Black Pete, "I don't know what 'tees, but there is sometheeng that whispairs to me, 'Look out!'"

While Fifty Mile thus debated his character, Reivers lay in his tepee, carefully playing the shameful part he had assumed. He knew that by now the news of his arrival, or rather the arrival of Neopa and Tillie, had been bruited far and wide around the settlements. Soon the news must come to the ears of the man for whose benefit the scheme had been arranged.

Shanty Moir, being what he was, would become interested when he heard the descriptions of Neopa, and, also because he was what he was, he would waste no time, falter at no risks, stop at nothing when his interest had been aroused. Reivers had only to wait. Moir would come. The only danger was that Hattie and her uncle might come before him.

On the third day after the squaw-man's arrival, Fifty Mile had a second sensation. That morning, as Reivers, staggering artistically, came out of Raftery's house of poison, he all but stumbled over a sledge before the door. With his assumed grin of idiocy growing wider, he examined the sledge carefully, next the team which was hitched to it, then lifted his eyes to the man and woman that stood beside the outfit. At the first glance he had recognised the sledge, and he needed the time

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thus gained to recover from the shock.

"Hello, Mac, ol' timer!" he bellowed drunkenly at Duncan MacGregor. "Come have a drink with me."

MacGregor looked at him dourly, disgust and anger on his big red face. Hattie, at his side, looked away, her lips pressed tightly together to control the anger rising within her. She had gone deadly pale at the first sight of Reivers; now the red of shame was burning in her cheeks.

"I shook hands with you, stranger, when you left our roof," said MacGregor gruffly. "I do not do so now. I thought you were a man."

"I never did!" snapped Hattie, still looking away. "I knew it was not a man." Something like a sob seemed to wrench itself from her chest in spite of her firm lips. "I knew it was—just what it is."

Suddenly she flared around on Reivers, her face wan with mingled pain, shame and anger.

"Now you are doing just what you are fit for. I've heard. Living on your squaws! And you dared to talk big to me—to a decent woman. Blood of my father! You dared to talk to me at all! Drive on, Uncle. We'll go on to Dumont's. We'll get away from this thing; it pollutes the air. Hi-yah, Bones! Mush, mush, mush!"

Reivers leered and grinned foolishly—for the benefit of the onlookers—as the sledge went on out of sight.

"See?" he said boastfully. "I used to know white folks once. Yes sir; used to know lot of 'em. Don't now. Only know Indians. S'long, boys; got to go home."

All that day he sat alone in his tepee. Tillie came to him at noon with food and he cursed her and drove her away. In the evening she came to him again, and again Reivers ordered her not to lift the flap on his tepee.

Tillie by this time was fully convinced that the Snow-Burner had gone mad. Else why had he repulsed all her advances? Why had he refused to look at the young and attractive Neopa? And now he even spurned food. Yes, the Snow-Burner had gone mad, as white men sometimes go mad in the North; but she was still his slave. That was her fate.

Reivers sat alone in his tepee, once more fighting to put away the face of Hattie MacGregor as it rode before his eyes, a burning, searing memory. He was not faltering. The shame for him, because he was a white man, because she had once had him under her roof, that Hattie MacGregor had suffered as she saw him now, did not swerve him in the least from the way he was going.

He had decided to do it this way. That was settled. The shame and degradation of his assumed position he had reckoned and counted as naught in the game he was playing. Any means to an end. These same men who were despising him for a sodden squaw-man would bow their heads to him when the game was won. And he would win it, the memory of the face of Hattie MacGregor would not halt him in the least. Rather it would spur him on. For when the game was won, he would laugh at her—and forget.

For the present it was a little hard to forget. That was why he sat alone in the tepee and swore at Tillie when she timidly offered to bring him food.

So the red-headed girl thought that of him, did she—that he was living on his squaws? Well, let her think it. What difference did it make? She thought he was that base, did she? All right. She would pay for it all when the time came.

Reivers roused himself and strode outdoors. His thoughts persisted in including Hattie MacGregor in their ramblings as he sat in the tepee, and he felt oppressed. What he needed was to mingle with other men. He'd forget, then. He condemned the company that was to be found at Raftery's, but his need for distraction drove him and, assuming the stoop, limp and leer of the sodden squaw-man, he slumped off down the gully to the settlement.

It was a clear, starlit night, and as he slumped along he mused on what a fine night it would be for picking out a trail by the stars. As he approached Raftery's he saw and heard evidences of unusual activity in the bar. A team of eight dogs, hitched to an empty sledge, was tied before the door. Within there was sound of riot and wassail. Over the sound of laughter and shuffling feet rose a voice which drowned the other noises as the roar of a lion drowns the chirping of birds, a voice that rattled the windows in a terrifying rendition of "Jack Hall."

Oh, I killed a man 'tis said, so 'tis said;
I killed a man 'tis said, so 'tis said.
I kicked 'is bloody head, an' I left 'im lyin' dead;
Yes, I left 'im lyin' dead — 'is eyes!

Reivers opened the door and strode in silently and unobserved. He made a base, contemptible figure as, stooped and shuffling, a foolish leer on his face, he stood listening apologetically to the song. The broad back of the singer was turned toward him. As the song ended Raftery's roaming eye caught sight of Reivers.

"Ah, there he is; here he is, Iron Hair. There's the man with the squaws I was telling you about."

The man swung around, and Reivers was face to face with the man he sought, Shanty Moir.

Reivers' tumultuous scheme of life often had led him into situations where his life had hung on his ability to play artistically the part he had assumed. But never had his self-control been put to such a test as now, when he faced Shanty Moir.

Had he not prepared himself for a shock, his surprise must surely have betrayed him, for even the Snow-Burner could not look upon Shanty Moir without amazement. To Reivers, the first impression that came was that he was looking at something as raw and primitive as the sources of life itself.

Shanty Moir had little or nothing in common with the other men in the room. He was even shaped differently. He belonged, so it seemed to Reivers, to the age of the saber-tooth tiger, the long-haired mammoth, and a diet of roots and raw flesh.

There was about him the suggestion of man just risen to the dignity of an upright position. His body was enormous—longer, wider, denser than a man's body should be; the legs beneath it short and bowed. There was no neck that could be seen. His arms seemed to begin close up to the ears, and ran downward in curves, like giant calipers, the hands even with the knees.

The head fitted the body, squat and enormous, the forehead running abruptly back from the brows, and the face so flat and bony that the features seemed merely to dent it. The brow-bones came down and half hid the small eyes; the nose was small, but a pair of great nostrils ran back in the skull; the mouth was huge, yet it seemed small, and there was more of the head below it than above.

Iron Hair was well nicknamed. His hair was probably three inches long, and it stood out straight from his head—black, wiry, menacing. Reivers, with his foolish grin growing larger on his face, appraised Moir with considerable admiration. Here was the real thing, the pure, unadulterated man-animal, unweakened, untouched by effeminising civilisation. This man knew no more law or conscience than the ancient cave-tiger, whose only dictates sprang from appetite.

Reivers had rejected morals because it pleased him to run contrary to all the rest of the world; this man never knew that right or wrong existed. What his appetites told him to take he took as a matter of course. And it was written in his face that his appetites were as abnormally powerful as was he.

Reivers had been a leader of men because his mind was stronger than the minds of the men with whom he had dealt. This man was a leader because of the blind, unintelligent force that was in him. And inwardly the fighting man in Reivers glowed at the prospects of the Titanic clash that would come between them.

Shanty Moir as he looked from under his bony brows saw exactly what Reivers wished him to see: a drunken broken squaw-man, so weak that he could not possibly be the slightest source of trouble. Being primitive of mind he listed Reivers at once as helpless. Having done this, nothing could alter his opinion; and Reivers had gained the vantage that he sought.

Moir threw back his head and laughed, softly and behind set teeth, when his quick inspection of Reivers was ended.

"So that's tuh waster who's got tuh squaws 'at hass tuh camp upset," he said languidly. "Eh, sonnies! Art no men among ye that ye have not gone woman-stealing by this? Tuh waster does not look hard to take a young woman from."

Reivers broke into an apologetic snigger.

"Don't you try to steal my two kids, mister," he whined. "You'd be mighty sorry for your bargain if you did."

"How so, old son?" demanded Moir with a tolerant laugh.

"Them kids—if you was to steal them without my permission—one or both of 'em—they'd make you wish you'd never seen 'em—'less I was along," chuckled Reivers.

"Speak it up, old son," said Moir sharply. "What's behind thy fool's words?"

"Them kids—they'd die if they was took away from me," replied Reivers seriously. "And they'd take the man who stole 'em to the happy hunting ground along with 'em." He winked prodigiously. "Lots of funny things in this ol' world, mister. You wouldn't think to look at me that those two kids wouldn't want to live if I wasn't with 'em, but that's the fact. I wasn't always what I'm now, mister. Once—well, I was different once—and them kids will just nacherlly manage to poison the first man who touches 'em—unless I give the word."

The men of Fifty Mile looked at one another, and Black Pete shuddered.

"The ol' moocher sure has got 'em trained, Iron Hair," said Raftery. "He's locoed, but those squaws look up to him like a little tin god, and that's no lie."

"Poison?" repeated Moir doubtingly. "Art a medicine man, old son?"

Reivers shook his head loosely.

"Not me, mister, not me," he chuckled. "It's something Indian that I don't sabbe. But there's a couple graves 'way up where we came from, and they hold what's left of a couple of bad men who

raided my camp and stole my kids. I don't know how it happened, mister. The kids come back to me the same night, and the two bad men were stiff and black—as black as your hair, mister, after the first kiss.”

“The kiss of Death,” chimed in Black Pete, crossing himself. “I have heard of eet. *Sacré!* I am the lucky dog, *moi.*”

Shanty Moir nodded. He, too, had heard of the method by which Indian women of the North on rare occasions revenge themselves upon the brutal white men who steal them from their people. Having often indulged in that thrilling sport himself, Moir was well versed in the obstacles and dangers to be met in its pursuit. Being crafty, with the craft of the lynx that eschews the poisoned deer carcass, he had thus far managed to select his victims from the breed of squaws that do not seriously object to playing a Sabine part; and he had no intention of decreasing his caution now, although what men had spoken of Neopa had fired his blood.

“Ho, ho! I see how 'tis, old son,” he said with a grin of appreciation. “Dost manage well for a waster.”

He suddenly drew his hand from his mackinaw pocket and held it out, opened, toward Reivers. Two jagged nuggets of dull gold the size of big buckshot jiggled on his palm, and Moir laughed uproariously as Reivers, at the sight of them, bent forward, rubbing his hands together, apparently frantic with avarice.

“Eh—hey!” drawled Moir, closing his fist as Reivers' fingers reached for the gold. “I thought so. 'Tis tub gold thy wants, eh, old sonny? Well, do thee bring me tuh cattle to look at and we'll try to bargain.”

“Come up to my camp,” chattered Reivers, eyeing the fist that contained the nuggets. He was anxious to get out of the bar. He had no fear that the primitive Moir would be able to see any flaw in his acting, but Black Pete and Jack Raftery were less primitive, and he knew that they had not quite accepted him for the weakling that he pretended to be. “Come and visit me. Buy a bottle of hooch and we go up to my camp.”

Moir tossed one of the nuggets across the bar to Raftery.

“Is't good for a round, lad?” he laughed.

Raftery cunningly hefted the nugget and set out the bottles.

“Good for two,” he replied.

Moir tossed over the second nugget.

“Then that's good for four,” said he. “Do ye boys drink it up while I'm away to tuh camp of old sonny here. A bottle, Raftery. Now, sonny, do thee lead on, and if I'm not satisfied I'll wring thy neck to let thee know my displeasure.”

CHAPTER XXXIV—THE BARGAIN

Reivers led the way to his tepee and bade Moir wait a moment by the fire, while he spoke to Tillie. “Dress yourself and Neopa in your newest,” he commanded. “Then do you both come in to me, bringing food for two men.”

“What's wrong, sonny?” laughed Moir, seeing Reivers come under the door flap alone. “Hast lost the whip over thy cattle?”

“They're getting some grub ready,” replied Reivers fawningly. “They'll be here in a minute. Let's have a drink out of that bottle, mister. That's the stuff.”

He tipped the bottle to his lips and lowered the burning liquor in a fashion that made even Moir open his eyes in admiration.

“Takest a man-sized nip for a broken waster, sonny,” he chuckled, and measuring with his fingers on the bottle a drink larger than Reivers' he tossed it gurgling down his hairy throat. Reivers took the bottle from his hand.

“I always take an eye-opener before my real drink,” said Reivers, and, measuring off twice the amount that Moir had taken, he drank it off like so much water.

The fiercest liquor made was to Reivers only a mild stimulant. On his abnormal organisation it merely had the effect of intensifying his characteristics. When he wished to drink whisky he drank—out of full-sized water tumblers. When he did not wish to drink he put liquor from him with contempt. Now he handed the bottle back to Moir. The latter looked at him and at the bottle, a trifle puzzled but not dismayed. Reivers had apparently unconsciously passed the challenge to him, and it was not in his nature to play second to any man in a drinking bout.

“Shouldst have taken all thee wanted that time, sonny,” said Moir, and finished the bottle.

“No more?” muttered Reivers vacantly.

“Gallons!” replied Moir. “Whisky enough to drown you dead—if your women satisfy.”

"Look at them," said Reivers as the door-flap was flung back. "Here they are."

Tillie came in first. She was dressed in white buckskin, her hair hanging in two thick braids down her shoulders. Neopa followed, and the wistfulness that had come into her face from thinking of Nawa made her the more interesting in Shanty Moir's eyes.

A glance from Neopa's fawn-like eyes at the big man whom Reivers had brought home with him, and then her eyes sought the ground and she trembled. Tillie looked at Moir with interest. Save for the Snow-Burner, she had never seen so masterful a man. She looked at Reivers and saw that he was not watching her. So she smiled upon Moir slyly. She was the Snow-Burner's slave; his will was her law. But since he refused to notice her smiles it would do no harm to smile upon a man like this Iron Hair—just a little, when the Snow-Burner was not looking.

Moir read the smile wrong and spoke sharply to Reivers.

"Take the young one outside for two minutes. I've a word to say to this one."

To his surprise Reivers rose without demur, thrust Neopa out before him, and dropped the flap.

"Listen," whispered Moir swiftly in her own tongue to Tillie, "we will put his man out of the way. It is easily done. Then you will go with me, you and the young one, and you will be first in my tepee and the young one your slave. Speak quickly. We will be on the trail in an hour."

Still smiling invitingly, Tillie shook her head.

"The Snow-Burner is the master," she said seriously. "I will slay the man who does him harm. I can not do what he does not wish. I can not go away from him."

"But when he is dead, fool, he can have no wish."

The smile went from Tillie's full lips and she took a step toward the opening.

"Stop," laughed Moir softly. "I merely wished to know if you are a true woman. All right, old sonny!" he called. "Come on in."

"I takest off cap to you, lad," he continued as Reivers and Neopa re-entered. "Hast got thy squaws fair buffaloeed." His eyes ran over the shrinking Neopa in cruel appraisal. "Now, old sonny, out with it. What's thy idea of tuh bargain?"

Reivers looked longingly toward the empty whisky bottle.

"Said enough," laughed Moir. "Shall have all tuh hooch thy guts can hold."

Reivers shook his head, a sly grin appearing on his lips.

"Hooch is good," said he, "but gold is better."

"Go on," said Moir sullenly.

"You've got gold," continued Reivers. "I saw it. You've got lots of gold; I've heard them talk about you down at Raftery's. You want us to go with you when you go back to your camp, don't you?"

Moir nodded angrily.

"I want the women," he said brutally. "I might be able to use you, too."

Reivers cackled and rubbed his hands.

"You've got to use me if you're going to have the women," he chuckled. "You know that by this time, don't you, mister?"

Again Moir's black head nodded in grudging assent.

"What then?" he demanded.

"I'm a handy man around a camp, mister," whined Reivers. "You got to take me along if you take the women, but I can be a help—"

"Canst cook?" snapped Moir suddenly.

"Heh, heh! Can I cook?" Reivers rubbed his hands. "I'm an old—I used to be an old sour-dough, mister. Did you ever see one of the old-timers who couldn't cook?"

"Might use thee then," said Moir. "My fool of a cook has gone. Sent him after a woman for me, and he hasn't come back. Happen he got himself killed, tuh fool. Wilt kill him myself if he ever shows up without tuh woman. Well, then, if that's settled—what's tuh bargain?"

Reivers appeared to struggle with indecision. In reality the situation was very clear to him. Moir had listed him as a weakling; therefore he had no fear of taking him to the mine. Once there, Moir would be confident of winning the loyalty of the two women from their apparently helpless master. And as it was apparent that the man whom Reivers had slain with a rock had been Moir's cook, it was probable that he was sincere in his offer to use Reivers in that capacity.

"In the Spring," said Reivers in reply to Moir's question, "me and my two kids go north again, back among their own people."

"In the Spring," growled Moir, "canst go to — for all of me. I'll be travelling then myself. Speak out, sonny. How much?"

"Plenty of hooch for me all Winter," Reivers leered with drunken cunning.

"I said plenty," retorted Moir. "What else?"

"Gold," said Reivers, rubbing his hands. "Gold enough to buy me hooch for all next Summer."

Moir smiled at the miserable request of the man he was dealing with. His eyes ran over the plump Tillie, over Neopa, the supple child-woman.

"Done," he laughed. "And now, old son, break up thy camp while I load my sledge with hooch. Be ready to travel when I come back. I'll bring plenty of liquor, but none to be drunked till we're on the trail. Wilt travel fast and far to-night, I warn thee. But wilt have a snug berth in my camp when we get there. Yes," he laughed as he hurried out, "wilt not be able to tear thyself away."

CHAPTER XXXV—THE TEST OF THE BOTTLE

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Under Reivers' sharp orders—given in a way that would have startled Moir had he heard—Tillie and Neopa hurriedly packed the dog-sledges with their belongings, harnessed the dogs and hooked them to the traces.

"Oh, Snow-Burner," said Neopa timidly, "do we go back to Nawa?"

"In good time," said Reivers. "For the present, you have only to obey my wishes. Get on the first sledge."

With bowed head the girl took the place directed, and Reivers turned to find Tillie smiling craftily at his elbow.

"Snow-Burner," she said softly, "this is the man, Iron Hair, who digs the gold which you want. We go to rob him. I understand. You play at drinking to fool Iron Hair. It is well. Tillie will help the Snow-Burner. We will kill Iron Hair and take his gold. Then the Snow-Burner will come with Tillie to her tepee?"

Reivers looked at her, and for the first time he felt a revulsion against the base part he was playing. Would he return with Tillie to her tepee when this affair was over? Would he go on with his old way of living, the base part of him triumphant over the better self? The strange questions rapped like trip-hammers on Reivers' conscience.

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"Get on the sledge!" he growled, choked with anger.

She did not stir. He struck her cruelly. Tillie smiled. That was like the Snow-Burner of old; and she waddled to her appointed place without further question.

Up the gulch from Raftery's came Moir quietly leading his dogs, the sledge well loaded with cases of liquor.

"Wilt have a kiss first of all," he laughed excitedly, and catching Neopa in his arms tossed her in the air, kissed her loudly on her averted cheeks and set her back on the sledge. "Now, old son, follow and follow quietly. When Iron Hair travels he wants no Fifty Mile gang on his trail. Say nothing, but keep me in sight. Heyah, mush, mush!"

Out of the gully he led the way swiftly and silently to the open country beyond the settlement. There he circled in a confusing way, bearing northward. After an hour he began circling again, doubling on his trail to make it hard for any one to follow, but finally Reivers knew by the stars that the course lay to the south. Another series of false twists in the trail, then Moir struck out in determined fashion on a straight course, east and a trifle south from Fifty Mile.

Reivers, silently guiding his dogs in the tracks made by Moir, breathed hard as he read the stars. By the pace that Moir was setting it seemed certain that he now was making for his camp in a direct line. But if so, if this trail were held, it would take them back toward the Dead Lands, straight into the country that was Duncan MacGregor's trapping-ground. Could the mine be in that region. If so, how could it have escaped the notice of the old trapper?

It was well past midnight when Reivers saw the team ahead disappear in a depression in the ground and heard Moir's voice loudly calling a halt. By the time Reivers came up with his two sledges Moir had unhitched his dogs on the flat of a frozen river-bed and was hurriedly dragging a bottle from one of the cases on his sledge.

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"Hell's fire, old son; unhook and camp. The liquor's dying in me, and I had just begun to feel good."

"I was wondering," gasped Reivers in assumed exhaustion. "I was wondering how much farther you were going before you opened a bottle."

"Have your squaws get out tuh grub," ordered Moir, jamming down the cork. "And now you 'n' me, wilt see who drinks t'other off his feet."

For reply Reivers promptly gulped down a drink that would have strangled most men.

"Good enough," admitted Moir. "Here's better, though." And he instantly improved on Reivers' record.

The first bottle was soon emptied—a quart of raw, fiery hooch—and a second instantly broached.

The food was forgotten by Moir; the women were forgotten. His primitive mind was obsessed

with the idea of pouring more burning poison down his throat than this broken-down waster who dared to drink up to him. Bolt upright he sat, laughing and singing, never taking his eyes off Reivers, while drink after drink disappeared down their throats.

No movement of Reivers escaped Moir's vigilant watch for signs of weakness. As Reivers gave no apparent sign of toppling over he grew enraged.

"Hell's fire! Wilt sit here till daylight if thou wilt," he roared. "Drink on there! 'Tis thy turn."

Tillie and Neopa got food ready from the grub-bag and sat waiting patiently; the dogs ceased moving, bedded down in the snow and went to sleep; and still the contest went on.

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Finally Reivers discerned the slight thickening of speech and the glassy stare in his opponent's eyes that he had been waiting for. Then, and not until then, did he begin to betray apparent signs of failing.

"Sh-sh-shtrong liquor, m-m-mishter," he stuttered. "Awful sh-sh-shtrong liquor."

Moir cackled in drunken triumph.

"'Tish bear's milk, old shon. 'Tish made for men. Drink, — ye, drink again!"

Reivers drank, drank longer and heavier than he had yet done.

"There; take the mate of that, mister, and you'll know you been drinking," he stammered.

Moir's throat by this time had been burned too raw to taste, and his sight was too dulled to measure quantities. He tipped the bottle up and drained it. The dose would have killed a normal man. To Shanty Moir it brought only an inclination to slumber. His head fell forward on his breast.

With a thick-tongued snarl he sat up straight and looked at Reivers. Reivers hiccupped, swayed in his seat, and collapsed with a drunken clatter.

Moir smiled. He winked in unobserved triumph. Then the superhuman strength with which he had fought off the effects of the liquor snapped like a broken wire, and he pitched forward on his face into the snow.

CHAPTER XXXVI—THE SNOW-BURNER BEGINS TO WEAKEN

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Reivers stood up, looked down at his fallen rival and yawned.

"Body," he mused, "but for a hard head, there lies you."

He bent cautiously over Moir. The Welshman lay with his face half buried in the crusted snow, his lungs pumping like huge bellows, and the snow flying in gusts from around his nostrils at every expulsion of breath. Reivers laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. There was no movement.

"Hey, mister," he called.

The undisturbed breathing showed that the words had not penetrated to the clouded consciousness. Deliberately Reivers turned the big man over on his back. Moir lay as stiff and dead as a log. With swift, deft hands Reivers searched him to the skin, looking for a trail-map, a mark or a sign of any kind that might indicate the location of Moir's mine. He was not greatly disappointed when he failed to find anything of the sort; he had hardly expected that an experienced pirate like Shanty Moir would travel with his secrets on his person.

Next he considered the dogs. It was barely possible that the dogs knew the way to the mine. If they had travelled the way before, they would know when they were on the home-trail, and if so they would travel thither if given their heads, even though their master lay helplessly bound on the sledge. Then at the mine, a sudden surprise, and probably a second of sharp work with the rifle on Moir's henchmen.

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Reivers stepped eagerly over to where Moir's team lay sleeping. He swore softly when he saw them. Moir had traded his tired team for a fresh outfit at Fifty Mile, and the new dogs were as strange to this trail as Reivers himself.

His triumph over Moir in the drinking bout had been in vain. There was no march to be stolen, even with Moir lying helpless on the snow. He would have to go through with it as he had planned. Tillie and Neopa must be the means by which he would obtain his ends.

He suddenly looked over to the sledge where the two women were patiently waiting with the food they had prepared. Tillie, squat and stolid, was sitting as impassive and content as a bronze figure at the door of the shelter tepee which she had erected, but Neopa sat bowed over on the end of the sledge, her head on her folded arms, her slim figure shaking with silent sobs.

"Put back the food and go to your blankets," he commanded harshly. "Stop that whining, girl, or you will have something to whine for."

He waited until his orders had been obeyed and the women were in the tepee. Then he unrolled his blanket and lay down on the snow.

He did not sleep. He knew that he would not. For all through the day, during his dealing with Moir, on the night trail under the clean stars, his mind had been fighting to shut out a picture that persisted in running before his eyes. Now, alone in the star-lit night, with nothing to occupy him, the picture rushed into being, vivid and living. He could not shut it out. He could not escape it. It was the picture of Hattie MacGregor as he had seen her that morning with the pain and scorn upon her young, fine face. Her voice rang in his ears, the burning words as clear as if she stood by his side:

"I knew it was not a man. Living on your squaws! And you dared to talk to me—a decent woman!"

Reivers cursed and lay looking straight up at the white stars. From the tepee there came a sound that brought him up sitting. He listened, amazed and puzzled. It was Neopa sobbing because she had been torn from her young lover, Nawa, and in the plaint of her pain-racked tones there was something which recalled with accursed clearness the rich voice of Hattie MacGregor.

It was probably an hour after he had lain down that Reivers rose up and quietly hooked his strongest dogs to a sledge.

"Tillie! Neopa! Come out!" he whispered, throwing open the flap of the little tepee.

Neopa came, wet-faced and haggard, her wide-open eyes showing plainly that there had been no sleep for her that night. Tillie was rubbing her eyes sleepily, protesting against being wakened from comfortable slumber.

Reivers pointed northward up the river bed.

"Up there, on this river, one day's march away, is the camp of your people, which we came from," he whispered. "Do you both take this team and drive rapidly thither. Hold to the river-bed and keep away from the black spots where the water shows through the snow. Do not stop to rest or feed. You should reach your people in the middle of the afternoon. Then do you give Nawa this rifle. Tell him to shoot any white man who comes after you. Now go swiftly."

Neopa looked at him with her fawn-like eyes large with incredibility and hope.

"Snow-Burner! Do you let me go back to Nawa?" she whispered.

"Get on the sledge," he commanded. "Do as I've told you, or you'll hear from me."

As emotion had all but paralysed the young girl he forced her to a seat on the sledge and thrust the whip into her hand, then turned to Tillie. Tillie was making no move to approach the sledge.

"Did you hear what I said?" he demanded.

Tillie smiled strangely.

"Has the Snow-Burner become afraid of Iron Hair?" she asked.

"So little afraid that I no longer need you to help me in this matter," retorted Reivers.

The shrewd squaw shook her head.

"How will the Snow-Burner find Iron Hair's gold how? Iron Hair will not take the Snow-Burner to his camp alone. It is not the Snow-Burner that Iron Hair wants. It is a woman. Has the Snow-Burner given up the fight to get the gold which he wants so much? He knows he can not reach Iron Hair's camp—alone."

"Then I will not reach it at all. Get on the sledge."

Tillie smiled but did not move.

"The Snow-Burner at last has become like other white men. He wishes to do what is right." She pointed at the snoring Moir. "He would not be so weak."

While Reivers looked at her in amazement the squaw stepped forward, straightened out the dogs, kicked them viciously and sent the sledge, bearing Neopa alone, flying up the river-bed.

"To send Neopa back to Nawa is well and good," she said, returning to Reivers. "She would weep for Nawa all day and night, and would grow sick and die on our hands. But there is no Nawa waiting for Tillie. Tillie is tired of her tepee with no man in it. Iron Hair has smiled upon me, Snow-Burner. I will smile upon him. His smile will answer mine as the dry pine lights up when the match is touched to it. I have looked in his eyes and know. He will forget Neopa. Tillie will help the Snow-Burner rob Iron Hair. Is it well?"

"Get back to your blankets," commanded Reivers. "If you wish it, we will let it be so. Sleep long. Do not stir until you hear that Iron Hair has awakened."

CHAPTER XXXVII—INTO THE JAWS OF THE BEAR

Shanty Moir stirred when the first rays of the morning sun, glancing off the snow, struck his eyes. He rose like a musk-ox lifting itself from its snow wallow, with mighty heaves and grunts, and looked around.

He was bleary-eyed and puffed of face, his throat was raw and burning from the unbelievable

amount of hooch he had swallowed in the night, but his abnormal organisation had thrown off the effects of the alcohol and he was cold sober. His first move was to cool his throat with handfuls of snow, his second to step over and regard the apparently paralysed Reivers with a look of mingled triumph and contempt.

"Eh, old sonny! Would a drincked with Shanty Moir, wouldst 'ee?" he chuckled. "Happen thee got thy old soak's skin filled to overflow that time. Get up, you waster!" he commanded, stirring the prostrate form with a heavy foot "Up with you!"

Reivers did not stir, but he put that touch of the foot down as something extra that Moir would have to pay for. He was apparently lying steeped in the depths of drunken slumber, and he wished to drive the impression firmly into Shanty Moir's mind that he had been dead to the world all night. Hence he did not interrupt his snoring as Moir's foot touched him.

"Laid out stiff!" laughed Moir.

He reached down, lifted Reivers' head from the snow and let it fall heavily. Still Reivers made no sign of awakening. Moir looked at him for a moment, then slyly tiptoed toward the shelter tepee and threw up the flap. The next instant a bellow of rage shattered the morning quiet. Like a maddened bear Moir was back at Reivers, cuffing, kicking, cursing, commanding that he wake up.

Reivers awoke only in degree. Not until Moir had opened a new bottle of hooch and poured a drink down his throat did he essay to sit up and open his eyes.

"Wha' smatter? Can't a man shleep?" he protested. "Wha' smatter with you?"

"Matter!" bellowed Moir. "Plenty of matter, you old waster. Where's the young lass, eh? Where's the girl gone? Look in the tepee and see what's the matter. You told me you had the trulls buffaloed. What's become of the young girl?"

It was some time before Reivers appeared to understand. Finally he stumbled to his feet and started toward the tent, met Tillie as she stepped out rubbing her eyes, and recoiled drunkenly.

"Neopa? Where is she?" muttered Tillie. "She slept near the door. Now she is gone."

She had let her shiny black hair fall loosely over her shoulders and now she threw it back, looked straight at Moir and smiled.

"Neopa gone?" demanded Reivers thickly. "She can't be; she wouldn't dare."

"Dare, you fool? Look there." Moir pointed to the hollows where the missing dog team had lain and to the tracks that ran straight and true up the river bed. "She's run away. Been gone half a night. Well, what have you got to say?"

Reivers turned with a scowl on Tillie, but Tillie was comfortably plaiting her thick hair.

"Neopa has run away—back to our people," she said with a smile, as she turned back into the tepee. "Tillie does not run away," she added as she disappeared.

Moir sat down on a sledge and cursed Reivers steadily for five minutes, but at every few words his eyes would stray back to the tepee which hid Tillie.

"We'll go after her," said Reivers. "We'll bring her back."

"Go after her!" snorted Moir. "She has half a night's start on us. She'll reach her people before we could get her. Do you think I want half the country following my trail?"

"I'll go after her alone then," insisted Reivers.

"Will you?" Moir's eyes narrowed to slits. "I think not. Let me tell thee something, old son: he who goes this far on the home trail with Shanty Moir goes all the way. Understand? You'll come with me or you'll be wolf-meat out here on the snow. No; there'll be no following of that kid. She's gone. The other one's here. There is no telling what tale the kid will spin when she meets people, or who will be down here looking for our trail. Therefore we are going to travel and travel quick. Have the squaw get food in a hurry. Get your dogs together. We'll be on the trail in half an hour."

Moir was masterful and dominant now. It was evident that he was more worried over the possibility of some one hearing of his whereabouts through Neopa than he was over the girl's escape. He gave Reivers a second drink of liquor, since he seemed to need it to fully awaken him, and set about making ready for the trail.

"Eat plenty," he commanded, when Tilly served the cold meat and tea. "The next meal you have will be about sundown."

He tore down the tepee, packed the sledges and had the outfit ready for the start in an amazingly short while.

"Now, old son," he said quietly, pointing to the rifle that lay uncovered on top of his sledge, "do 'ee take good look at her. She's a good old Betsy and I've knocked o'er smaller men than you at the half mile. Do you keep well up with me on the trail I'll be making this day and there'll be no trouble. Try any tricks and the wolves will have whiskey-soaked meat to feed on. There's no turning back now. He who comes this far with Shanty Moir goes all the way."

"You can't lose me, mister," stammered Reivers. "I want that money for hooch for next Summer like you promised."

"Wilt get more than you bargained for, old son," laughed Moir. "Yes, more than you ever dreamed of. Hi-yah! Buck! Bugle! Mush; mush up!"

Moir made no pretence at hiding his trail when he started this time. Apparently he reasoned that the damage was done. If any one wished to trail him after hearing Neopa's story they would have no trouble in finding his tracks, despite any subterfuge he might attempt. He went straight forward, as a man who has nothing to fear if he can but reach his fastness, and Reivers' wonderment grew as the trail held straight toward the rising sun.

The course was parallel to the one he had taken westward from MacGregor's cabin to Tillie's encampment. If it held on as it was going it would lead straight into the heart of the Dead Lands, and within half a day's travel of the MacGregor home. Was it possible that the mine lay in the Dead Lands? Duncan MacGregor made this territory his trapping-ground. How could his brother's find have escaped his trained outdoor eyes?

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The next instant Reivers was cursing himself for a blind fool. There was no trapping in the Dead Lands. There was no feed there. Except for a stray wolf-cave, fur-bearing beasts would shun those barren rocks as a desert, and Duncan MacGregor, being a knowing trapper, might trap around it twenty years without venturing through after a first fruitless search for signs.

The mine was in the Dead Lands, of course. It was as safely hidden there as if within the bowels of the earth. And he, Reivers, had probably been within shooting distance of it during his two days' wandering in that district. The man whom he had killed with the rock had undoubtedly been hurrying with Hattie MacGregor straight to his chief's fastness.

It was noon when the ragged ground on the horizonhead told Reivers that his surmises were correct and that they were hurrying straight for the Dead Lands. An hour of travel and the jagged formation of the rock country was plainly distinguishable a little over a mile ahead. Then Moir for the first time that day called a halt. When Reivers caught up with him he saw that Moir held in each hand a small pouch-like contrivance of buckskin, pierced near the middle with tiny holes and equipped with draw-strings at the bottom.

"Come here, lass," he beckoned to Tillie. "Must hide that smiling mouth of thine for the present."

With a laugh he threw the pouch over the squaw's head, pulled the bottom tightly around her neck, and tied the strings securely.

"The same with thee, old son," he said, and treated Reivers in the same summary manner. "You see, I do not wish to have to put you away," he explained genially, "and that I would do if by chance thy eyes should see the way to Shanty Moir's mine. One or two men have been unlucky enough to see it. They will never be able to tell the tale." He skilfully searched the pair for hidden weapons, but Reivers had expected this and carried not so much as a knife. "All right. Keep in my steps, old son. Presently thou'll get wet. Do not fear. Wilt not let 'ee come to harm. Neither thee nor tuh squaw. I have use for you both. Come now; I'll go slow."

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The buckskin pouch pierced only by the tiny air-holes, masked Reivers' eyes in a fashion that precluded any possible chance of sight. He knew instinctively that Moir was turning. First the turn was to the left. Then back to the right. Then in a circle, and after that straight ahead.

Presently the feel of a sharp rock underfoot told him that they had entered the Dead Lands. He stumbled purposely to one side of the trail and bumped squarely against a solid wall of stone. Next he tried it on the opposite side with the same result. Moir was leading the way through a narrow defile in the rocks.

Suddenly there came to Reivers' ears the sound of running water, the lazy murmur of a small brook. Almost at the same instant came the splash of Moir and his dogs going into the stream and Moir's laughing:

"Wilt get a little wet here, old son. But follow on."

Fumbling with his feet Reivers found the stream and stepped in. To his surprise the water was warm. Warm water? Where had he seen warm water recently in this country? His thoughts leaped back with a snap. There was only one open stream to be found thereabouts, and that was the brook that came from the warm springs by which he had camped on his way to Tillie's.

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"Warm water!" laughed Moir. "Wilt find all snug in my camp. Aye, as snug as in a well-kept jail."

The stream was knee-deep, and by the pressure of the water against the back of his legs Reivers knew that they were going down-stream. Presently Moir spoke again.

"Now, if you value the tops of your heads, do you duck as low as you can. Duck now, quick; and do you keep that position till I tell you to straighten up."

Reivers and Tillie ducked obediently. Suddenly the tiny light that had come through the air-holes of their masks was shut out. The darkness was complete. Reivers thrust his hand above his bowed head and came in contact with cold, clammy rock. No wonder it had taken MacGregor and Moir two years to find the mine, since the way to it lay by a subterranean river!

The light reappeared, but it was not the sunny light that had come through the air-holes before they had entered the river tunnel. It was grey and dead, as the light in a room where the sunshine does not enter.

"Now you can lift your heads," laughed Moir. "Come to the right. Up the bank. Here we are."

He jerked Reivers out of the water roughly, and roughly pulled the sack from his head. Reivers

blinked as the light struck his eyes. Moir treated him to a generous kick.

"Welcome," he hissed menacingly. "Welcome to the camp of Shanty Moir."

CHAPTER XXXVIII—MACGREGOR ROY

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Reivers' first impression was that he was standing in a gigantic stockade. The second that he was on the floor of a great quarry-pit. Then, when the situation grew clear to him, he stood dumfounded.

The camp of Shanty Moir lay in what would have been a solid rock cave but for the lack of a roof. It was an irregular hollow in the strange formation of the Dead Lands, perhaps fifty yards long and thirty yards wide at its greatest breadth. The hollow was surrounded completely by ragged stone walls about fifty feet in height. These walls slanted inward to a startling degree. Thus while the floor of the strange spot was thirty yards wide, the opening above, through which showed the far-away sky, could scarcely have been more than half that width. The brook ran through the middle of the chasm, entering the upper end by a tunnel five feet in height and disappearing in the solid wall of rock at the lower end by a similar opening.

On each side of the narrow stream, and running back to the rock walls, was a floor of smooth river-sand. Beneath an overhanging ledge on the side where Reivers stood were the rude skin fronts of two dugouts. A tin smoke-stack protruded from the larger of the two habitations; the other, which was high enough only to admit a man stooping far over, was merely a flap of hide hanging down from the rock.

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On the beach at the other side of the creek a fire burned beneath a great iron pan, the wood smoke filling the chasm with its pungent odour. Behind the fire a series of tunnels ran down in the sand under the cliffs. From the tunnel immediately behind the fire came a thin spiral of sluggish smoke, and Reivers knew that this tunnel was being worked and that the fire was being used to thaw the frozen earth.

A man who resembled Moir on a small scale was at work at the thawing-pan, breaking the hard earth with his fingers and tossing it into a washing-pan at his side. He stood now with a chunk of frozen sand in his hand, and at sight of Reivers and Tillie he tossed the sand recklessly into the air and whooped.

"Ha! Hast done well this time, Shanty," he cried in an accent similar to theirs. "Hast made tuh life endurable. A new horse for me and a woman for 'ee. 'Tis high time. Since Blacky went off and did not come back, and tuh two Indians tried to flee, we've had but one horse to do with. Now wilt have two. Wilt clean up in a hurry now, and live in tuh meanwhile."

Shanty Moir laughed harshly.

"How works tuh old Scot jackass to-day?" he called.

The man across the creek shook his head.

"He's never tuh horse he was when we first put him in harness," he chuckled. "Fell twice in his tracks to-day, he did, and lay there till Joey gave him an inch of tuh prod. Has been a good beastie, the Scot has, Shanty, but 'tis in my mind tuh climate does not 'gree with him. Scarce able to pull his load. In tuh mines at home we knocked such worn beasties in the head and sent them up o' tuh pit."

Moir laughed again.

"Hast a quaint way o' putting things, Tammy," he said. "But I mind when ponies were scarce we used them till they crawled their knees raw. 'Tis plenty o' time to knock old horse-flesh in tuh head when tuh job's done."

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They laughed together. Evidently this was a well-liked camp joke.

"'Tis a well-coupled animal 'ee have there, Shanty," said the humourist across the water, with a jerk of the head at Reivers. "Big in tuh bone and solid around tuh withers. Yon squaw is a solid piece, too. Happen they're broke to pull double?"

"Unbroke stock, Tammy," drawled Moir leisurely. "Gentleman, squaw-man, waster. But breaking stock's our specialty, eh, Tammy?"

A muffled shout floated up from the mouth of the smoking pit before Tammy could reply. Instantly there followed a dull moan of pain: Moir and Tommy laughed knowingly.

"Here comes sample of our work," said Tammy, nodding toward the tunnel. "Poor Joey! Has to use tuh prod to start him with each load now."

A grating, shuffling sound now came from the mouth of the tunnel. Following it appeared the head of a man. And Reivers needed only one glance at the emaciated countenance to know that he was looking upon the father of Hattie MacGregor.

"Giddap, Scotch jackass!" roared Moir in great good humour. "Pull it out o' there. That's tuh horse. Pull!"

The man came painfully, an inch at a time, out of the pit, and looked across the creek at Shanty Moir. Behind him there dragged a rough wooden sledge loaded with lumps of earth. The man was hitched to this load by a harness of straps that held his arms helpless against his sides. No strait-jacket ever held its victim more utterly helpless than the contrivance which now held James MacGregor in toils as a beast of burden. A contrivance of straps about the ankles held his legs close together.

So short were the traces by which the sledge was drawn that MacGregor could not have stood upright without having lifted the heavy load a foot or more from the ground. He made no attempt to stand so, but hung half-bowed against the harness, his eyes gleaming through the matted red hair over his brows straight at Shanty Moir.

It was the eyes that drew and held Reivers' attention to the face, rather than to the man's terrible situation. James MacGregor, helpless beast of burden to his tormentors that he was, was not beaten. The same clean-cut nose, mouth and chin that Reivers remembered so well in the daughter were apparent in the father's pain-marked face. The eyes gleamed defiance. And they were wide and grey, Reivers saw, the same as the eyes that haunted him in memory's pictures of the girl who had not feared his glance.

"Shanty Moir," spoke MacGregor in a voice weak but firm, "when the devil made you he cursed his own work. He cursed you as a misbegotten thing not fit for hell. The gut-eating wolverine is a brave beast compared to you. Skunks would run from your company. You think you have done big work. You fool! You cannot rob me of what belongs to me and mine; you cannot kill me. As sure as there is a God in Heaven, He will let me or mine kill you with bare hands."

Moir and his man laughed in weary fashion, as if this speech were old to them, and Reivers was amazed at an impulse within him to throw himself at Shanty Moir's throat. He joined foolishly in the laughter to hide his confusion. What had he to do with such impulses? What business had he having any feeling for the poor enslaved man before him? He had come to Moir's camp for one purpose: to get the gold mined there, to get a new start in life. Was it possible that he was growing weak enough to experience the feeling of pity, the impulse to help the helpless? Nonsense! He laughed loudly. His plan was one in which silly impulses of this nature had no part, and he would go through with it to the end.

"Well brayed, Scots jackass," said the man at the thawing-pan casually. "Now pull tuh load over here. Giddap-pull!"

MacGregor leaned weakly against the harness, but the sledge had lodged and his depleted strength was insufficient to budge it.

"Oh ho! Getting lazy, eh?" came from the tunnel, and a thin-faced man came out, a short stick with a sharp brad in his hands. "Want help, eh? Well, here 'tis," he chuckled, and drove the brad into MacGregor's leg.

Again the strange impulse to leap to the tortured man's rescue, to kill his tormentor without reckoning the price or what might come after, stirred itself in Reivers' breast, and again he joined in the laughter to pass it off.

MacGregor started as the iron entered his flesh and the movement loosened the sledge. With weak, faltering steps he drew the load alongside the fire, where Tammy proceeded to transfer the frozen chunks of earth to the thawing-pan.

"Eh, hah! New cattle?" said the man with the prod when he espied Reivers and Tillie. "Cow and bull."

"Cow—and an old ox, Joey," laughed Moir. "Has even burnt his horns off with hooch, and wilt go well in the harness when he's broke."

"'Tis time," said Joey. "Tuh Scots jackass'll soon drop in his tracks."

"Not until I've paid you out in full, you devils," said MacGregor quietly. "I'll give you an hour of living hell for every prod you've given me, you poor cur."

Joey approached him and unhooked the traces from his harness with an air that told how well he was accustomed to such threats.

"Must call it a day, Shanty," he said, loosening the straps that bound MacGregor's hands so the forearms were free while the upper arms remained bound tightly to his sides. "Old pit's full o' smoke." In bored sort of fashion he kicked MacGregor into the creek. "To your stable, jackass. Day's done."

MacGregor, tripped by the traps about his ankles, fell full length in the water, floundered across, and crawled miserably out of sight behind the skin front of the smaller dugout. Moir and his two henchmen watched him, jeering and laughing. At a sign the two on the other side of the creek came across and drew close to their chief.

"And now, old son," snarled Moir, swinging around on Reivers like a flash, "now, you slick waster—now we'll attend to 'ee."

The three men moved forward until they were within arm's reach of Reivers, and stood regarding him with open grins on their hairy faces. Reivers, reading the import of their grins, knew that they were bent upon enjoying themselves at his expense, and tried swiftly to guess what form their amusement might take. If it were only horse-play he would be able to continue in the helpless character he had assumed. If it were to be rougher than that, if they set out to break him in real earnest, he feared that his acting was at an end.

Even for the sake of the gold that he was after he would hardly be able to submit, humbly and helplessly as became a drunken squaw-man, to their efforts to make a wreck of him. He calculated his chances of coming through alive if the situation developed to this extreme, and decided that the odds were a trifle too heavy against him.

The element of surprise would be on his side, but his right shoulder still was weak from the old bullet-wound. With his terrible ability to use his feet he calculated that he could drop Moir and Tammy with broken bones as they rushed him. To do that he would have to drop to his back, and Joey, the third man, wore a long skinning-knife on his hip. No, if he began to fight he would never get what he had come after. He wiped his mouth furtively and swayed from the knees up.

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"I want some hooch, mister, that's what I want," he whined shakily. "You promised you'd give me a drink when we got here, you know you did. Haven't had a drop since morning. I wouldn't 'a' come if I'd known you were going to treat me like this."

Then he did the best acting of his life. He jumped sideways and shuddered; he frantically plucked imaginary bugs off his coat sleeve; he stepped high as if stepping over something on the ground; his eyes and face muscles worked spasmodically.

"O-ooh! Gimme a drink," he begged. "Please gimme a drink. I gotta have it."

The grins faded from the faces before him. They knew full well the signs of incipient delirium tremens. Tammy laughed dryly.

"Hast brought home more than an old ox and a cow, Shanty," he said. "Hast brought a whole menagerie. Yon stick'll have tuh Wullies in a minute if he's not liquored."

Reivers dropped to his knees, shuddering, his arms shielding his eyes from imaginary beasts of the bottle.

"Take 'em away, boys," he pleaded. "Kill the big ones, let the little ones go."

With a snarl Moir leaped to his sledge and knocked the neck off a bottle of hooch.

"Drink, you scut!" he growled. "I'll have dealings with you when you're sobered up."

Reivers drank and began to doze. Moir kicked him upright.

"Get into the shed with t'other jackass," he commanded, propelling him toward the dugout into which MacGregor had crawled. "And in tuh morning you go to work, e'en though snakes be crawling all o'er 'ee."

A faintly muttered curse greeted Reivers as he crawled into the dugout.

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"You poor curs! What do you want with me now?" came MacGregor's voice from a corner of the tiny room. "You skunk—"

"Easy, MacGregor Roy," whispered Reivers quietly. "It's not one of the 'skunks.'"

"MacGregor Roy!" By the light that entered by a slit in the skin-flap Reivers could see the Scotchman painfully lifting his head from his miserable bunk, as he hoarsely repeated his own name. "MacGregor Roy! Who are you, stranger, to call James MacGregor by his family name?"

"I'm the man that Shanty Moir brought in this afternoon," whispered Reivers.

"I know, I know," gasped MacGregor weakly. "But men do not call me MacGregor Roy. James MacGregor they call me, unless—unless—"

"Unless they have the 'Roy' straight from the lips of your daughter, Hattie."

For a full minute MacGregor sat stricken speechless.

"Man, man! Speak!" The unfortunate man came wriggling over and laid his hands pleadingly on Reivers. "Don't play with me. Is my daughter Hattie alive and well?"

"Very much alive," replied Reivers, "and as well as can be expected of a girl who is worrying her heart out over why her father doesn't return or send her word."

"Have they no' guessed—has no' my brother Duncan guessed by this time?" gasped MacGregor. "Can not they understand that I must be dead or held captive since I do not return? Speak, man, tell me how 'tis with them!"

Reivers waited until the poor man had become more quiet before replying to him.

"You'd better quiet down a little MacGregor," he whispered then. "You can't tell when your friends might be listening, and it wouldn't do either of us any good if they heard what we're saying."

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"True," said the old man more quietly. "I'm acting like an old woman. But for three months I've been trapped like this, and my head fairly swims when I hear you speak of Hattie. How come you to know of her?"

Reivers related briefly that he had been ill and had been cared for at the MacGregor cabin.

"And my little Hattie is well? No harm came to her from the black devil they sent to steal her? You must know, man, they taunted me by sending——"

"I know," interrupted Reivers; and he told how he had disposed of the kidnapper.

"You—you did that?" MacGregor clutched Reivers's hand. "You saved my little Hattie?"

"None of that," snapped Reivers, snatching away his hand. "I did nothing for your little Hattie. Why should I? What is your Hattie to me? I simply put that black-beard out of business because I needed food and he had it on the sledge."

"Yet you're not one of the gang here—now? You are no' anything but a friend of me and mine?"

"A friend?" sneered Reivers. "I'll tell you, Mac: I'm here as my own friend, absolutely nothing else."

"But Hattie—and my brother Duncan—they understand about me now."

"They know you're either dead or worse," was the reply. "And they're at Dumont's Camp now, waiting for Moir to come there on a spree, when they expect to trail him back to this camp."

MacGregor nodded his head weakly.

"Aye. Taken the trail for revenge. No less could be expected. Please Heaven, they'll soon win here. And James MacGregor will not forget what he owes you, stranger, for the help you gave his daughter, when the time of reckoning comes with Moir and his poor curs."

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Reivers laughed coldly under his breath.

"You speak pretty confidently, old-times, for a man who's trussed up the way you are."

"God willna let this dog of a Moir have his will with me much longer," said the Scot firmly. "It isna posseeble."

"This dog of a Moir' must be a better man than you are," taunted Reivers. "He fooled you and trapped you as soon as you'd found this mine."

"Did he?" MacGregor flared up. "Shanty Moir a better man than me? Hoot, no! He fooled me, yes, for I didna know that he'd got word to these three hellions of his that the mine was here. I trusted him; he was my pardner. And when we returned with proveesions for the Winter the three devils were waiting for us, just inside the wall, where the creek comes through. Shanty Moir alone never could ha' done it. The three of them jumped on me from above. I had no chance. Then they strapped me.

"They've kept me strapped ever since. I'm draft beast for them. Twice a day they feed me. And between whiles Shanty Moir taunts me by playing before my eyes with the dust and nuggets that are half mine."

"Oh, well, it doesn't look to me as if there'd be enough gold here to bother about," said Reivers casually. "It's nothing but a little freak pocket by the looks of it."

"So it is. A freak pocket. It could be nothing else in this district. 'Twas only by chance we found it, exploring the creek in here out of curiosity. 'Twas in the bowels of the warm spring up yon, where the creek starts, that the pocket was originally. The spring boiled it out into the creek, and the creek washed it down here in its bed of sand. The sand lodged here, against these rock walls. There's about a hundred feet of the sand, running down under the cliffs, and it's all pocket. Not a rich pocket, as you say, but Shanty Moir is filthy with nuggets and dust now, and there'll be some more in the sand that's left to work over.

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"Not a bonanza, man, but a good-sized fortune. 'Twould be enough to send my Hattie to school. 'Twould give her all the comforts of the world. 'Twould make folk look up to her. And Shanty Moir, the devil's spawn, has it in his keeping."

"And he'll probably see that it continues in his keeping, too," yawned Reivers.

"Never!" swore MacGregor, rising to the bait. "Shanty Moir did me dirt too foul to prosper by it, and I'm a better man than he is, besides. The stuff will come into my hands, where it belongs, some way. I dinna see just how for the present. But the stuff, and my revenge I will have. E'en shackled as I am I'll have my revenge, though it's only to bite the windpipe out of Shanty Moir's throat like a mad dog."

"Huh!" Reivers was lying face down on some blankets, apparently but little interested. "And suppose you do get Shanty Moir? What good will that do you? I'll bet Shanty's got the gold hid where nobody could find it without getting directions from him. Suppose you get him. Suppose you get all three of 'em. Shanty Moir being dead, the nuggets and dust probably'd be as completely lost as they were before you two boys found the pocket in the first place."

For a long time MacGregor sat in his corner of the dugout without replying. Reivers could see that at times he raised his head, even opened his mouth as if to speak, then sank back undecided. At last he hunched himself forward inch by inch to the front of the dugout and lifted the flap.

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The light of day had gone from the cavern. On the sand before the larger dugout blazed a brisk cooking-fire. In the confined space the light from its flames was magnified, reflecting from rock-wall and running water, and illuminating brightly the miserable hole in which Reivers and MacGregor lay.

MacGregor held up the flap for several minutes, studying Reivers, and though Reivers looked back with the look in his eyes that made most men quail, the old man's sharp grey eyes studied him unruffled, even as the eyes of his daughter had done before.

"By the Big Nail, 'tis a man's man!" muttered MacGregor, dropping the flap at last. "How in the name of self-respect did the likes of you fall prey to the cur, Shanty Moir?"

"Self-respect?" sniggered Reivers. "Did you notice me out there when you were laying your curse on Moir?"

"Aye. You were far gone in liquor then—by the looks of you. You'll mind I say 'by the looks of you.' You are not in liquor now. That's what puzzled. A man does not throw off a load of hooch so quickly. You were playing at being drunk. Now, why might that be?"

"To enable me to get into his hole and leave Moir thinking I'm a drunken squaw-man without brains or nerve enough to do anything but sponge for hooch."

"Aye? And your reason for that?"

"My reason for that?" Reivers laughed under his breath. "Why, did you ever hear of a more popular reason for a man risking his throat than gold? I heard the story of this deal from your brother Duncan and your daughter. I need—or rather, I want money. Shanty Moir had won over you and had gold. I came to win over Moir and get the gold away from him. Isn't that simple?"

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"Simple and spoken well," said MacGregor calmly. "Will you answer me one question: Did you serve notice on my brother Duncan that you were out on this hunt?"

"I did."

"Fair enough again. A man has a right to take trail and do what he can if he speaks out fair. I take it you hardly calculated to find me here alive?"

"No, I didn't think Moir was such an amateur as to take any chances."

"Ah, he needed a draft beast, lad; that's why I'm alive, and no other reason. And finding me here alive, does it alter your plans any?"

"Only a trifle. You see, I'd made up my mind to bring Moir and your daughter Hattie face to face to see if she could make good on her big talk of taking revenge for putting you out of business. Now that I see you're still alive—well, I won't let any little foolishness like that interfere with the business I've come on."

"I mean about the gold, man?"

Reivers looked at his questioner in surprise.

"About the gold?" he repeated.

"Yes. Finding me, the rightful owner of half of the gold, here, alive and hoping to win back with my share to my daughter Hattie—does it make any change in your plans?"

Reivers chuckled softly.

"Not in the slightest," he replied. "I came to get the stuff that's come out of this mine. Take a look at me. Do I look like a soft fool who'd let anything interfere with my plans?"

MacGregor looked and shook his head, puzzled.

"I dinna understand ye, mon," he said. "I canna make you out. By the look of you I'd be wishful to strike hands with you as one good man to another; but your talk, man, is all wrong, all wrong. Half of the stuff that's been taken out of this mine—Shanty Moir's half—I have made up my mind shall be yours for the strong blow you dealt to save my Hattie from black shame. Will you na' strike hands on a partnership like that between us?"

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Reivers yawned.

"Why should I? You're 'all in.' You can't help me any. I'll have to do the job of getting the gold away from Moir. I came here to get it all. I don't want any help, and I certainly won't make any unnecessary split."

"Man," whispered MacGregor in horror, "is there naught but a piece of ice where your heart should be? Do you not understand it's for a poor, unprovided girl I'm talking? A man you might rob; but have you the coldness in your heart to rob my little, unfortunate Hattie?"

"'Little, unfortunate Hattie!'" mocked Reivers. "Consider her robbed already. What then?"

"A word to Shanty Moir and you're as good as dead," retorted MacGregor hotly.

Reivers' long right arm shot out and terrible fingers clutched MacGregor's throat. The old man wriggled and gasped and tried to cry out, but Reivers held him voiceless and helpless and smiled.

"One word to Shanty Moir, and—you see?" he said, releasing his hold. "Then your little, unfortunate Hattie would be robbed for sure."

"Man—man—what are you, man or devil?" gasped MacGregor.

"Devil, if it suits you," said Reivers. "But, remember, I'll manage to be within reach of you when Shanty Moir's about, and I rather fancy Moir would be glad to have me put you out of business. Now listen to me. I've no objection to your getting out of here alive—if you can. I've no objection to your getting your revenge on Moir, if you can, provided that none of this interferes with my

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getting what I came after. You know now what I can and will do if necessary. Your life lies right there." He opened and closed his right hand significantly. "Well, I'll trade you your life for a little information. Where does Shanty keep his gold?"

MacGregor ceased gasping. He began to laugh. He leaned over and laughed. He rocked from side to side.

"Man, man! Do you not know that? That proves you're only human!" he chuckled. "You came out here, like a lamb led to slaughter, to find where Shanty Moir keeps his gold. You were on the trail with Shanty. You had him where it was only one man to one. Well—well, the joke is too good to keep: Shanty Moir, day and night, wears a big buckskin belt about the middle of him, and the gold—the gold is in the belt!"

CHAPTER XL—THE WHITE MAN'S SENTIMENT

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It was very still in the dugout. Suddenly Reivers leaned forward to see if MacGregor were telling the truth. Satisfied with his scrutiny he sat back and laughed softly.

"In a belt, around his middle, eh?" he said. "Good work. Mr. Moir is cautious enough to be interesting."

"Cautious!" MacGregor threw up the flap of the dugout. "Look out there, man."

Reivers looked. On the sand directly before the door lay chained a huge, husky dog, an ugly, starved brute with mad eyes.

"Try but to crawl outside the shack," suggested MacGregor.

Reivers tried. His head had no more than appeared outside when the dog sprang. The chain jerked him back as his teeth clashed where Reivers' head had been. He leaped thrice more, striving to hurl himself into the dugout, then returned to his place and lay down, growling.

"Very cautious," agreed Reivers.

He peered carefully out toward the cooking-fire. The fire had died down now and was deserted. By the sounds coming from the larger dugout Reivers knew that Moir and his men were occupied with their supper, supplemented by occasional drafts of liquor, and once more he crawled out upon the sand.

With a snarl the great dog leaped again, his bared fangs flashing in the night. The snarl died in a choke. Reivers' long arms flashed out and his fingers caught the dog by the throat so swiftly and surely that not another sound came from between its teeth. It was a big, strong dog and it died hard, but out there on the sand Reivers sat, silently keeping his hold till the last sign of life had gone from the brute's body. Not a sound rose to attract attention from the larger dugout.

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When the animal was quite dead Reivers crawled forward and untied the chain that held it to a rock. Noiselessly he crawled farther on and noiselessly slipped the carcass into the brook. The brisk current caught it and dragged it down. Reivers waited until he saw the thing disappear into the dark tunnel at the lower end of the cavern, then returned to the dugout and quietly lay down on his blankets.

"God's blood!" gasped MacGregor and sat silent.

"Well," yawned Reivers, "our friend Moir is short one dog."

"You crazy fool!" MacGregor was grinding his teeth. "Ha' you no' thought of what Shanty Moir will do when he finds what you've done to his watch-dog?"

"What I have done?" Reivers laughed his idiotic squaw-man's laugh. "D'you suppose a poor old bum like me could throttle a man-eater like that beast? You'll be the one to be blamed for it. Why should I touch Moir's dog? Moir and I came here together, chummy as a couple of thieves."

"You would not—you could not do that? You could not put it on me? Man, they'd drop me in the river after the beast, if you got them to believe it."

"Well?" said Reivers gently.

The Scot bit his lip and grew crafty.

"Well," he said, "there'd be only you left then to do the dirt-hauling for Shanty Moir."

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Reivers nodded appreciatively.

"You deserve something for that, Mac," said he.

He lay silent for a few minutes. Then he chuckled suddenly as if he had thought of a good joke.

"Watch me closely now, Mac," he ordered, "and if you ever feel like speaking that word to Moir, I'll holler at you worse than this."

He rolled himself to the front of the dugout, and suddenly there rang out in the cavern such a shriek of terror as stopped the blood in the veins of all who heard. Twice Reivers uttered his horrible cry. Then he began to shout drunkenly:

"Take him off, take him away! Oh, oh, oh! Big dog coming out of the river. Take him away. Big dog swimming in the river. Take him away. Help, help!"

Shanty Moir got to the front of the little dugout in advance of the others. He came with a six-shooter in his hand, and the gun covered Reivers, huddled up on the sand, as steadily as if held in a vise. But Reivers observed that Moir stopped well out of reach.

"What tuh —!" roared Muir, as he noted the absence of the watch-dog. "What devil's work——"

"The dog!" chattered Reivers. "Big dog; big as a house. Came out of the river. Tried to jump on me. Jumped back into the river. Swimming—swimming out there."

Shanty Moir swung the muzzle of his six-shooter till it pointed straight at Reivers's forehead. He did not step forward, but remained well out of reach.

"Steady, old son," he said quietly, "steady, or this'll go off."

Under the influence of the threat Reivers pretended to come back to his senses.

"Gimme a drink, mister," he pleaded. "I'm seeing things. I was sure there was a big dog out there. I'd 'a' sworn I saw him jump into the river. Now I see there isn't, but gimme a drink—quick!"

"Bring tuh old sow a cup of hooch, Joey," snapped Moir over his shoulder. "Wilt see about this." He turned the weapon on the cowering MacGregor. "Speak quick, Scotch jackass, or I pull trigger. What's been done here; where's Tige?"

"Was it a real dog?" cried Reivers before MacGregor could reply. "I saw something—he went into the river."

"Speak, you!" said Moir to the Scotchman. "Speak quick."

"He's telling you straight," replied MacGregor, with a nod toward Reivers. "The dog went into the river. I saw him go down, out of sight."

"Out of sight," muttered Reivers, swallowing the drink which Joey had brought him. "So it was a real dog, was it? He jumped at me, and then he jumped back, and I guess he broke his chain, because he went into the river and never came out."

Moir stepped over and examined the rock from which Reivers had slipped the dog's chain.

"Tammy," he said quietly. Tammy came obediently, stopping a good two paces away from Moir.

"See that?" said Moir, pointing at the rock. Tammy nodded.

"You tied Tige out for tuh night, Tammy?"

"Yes, but——"

"And you tied so well tuh beast got loose, and into tuh river and is lost."

"Shanty, I swear——"

"Swear all you want to, lad," said Moir and dropped him cold with a light tap on the jaw.

"Pick him up." Moir's moving revolver had seemed to cover every one present, but now the muzzle hesitated on Joey. "Carry him into tuh shack."

As Joey obeyed Moir stepped back toward the little dugout, but stopped well out of reach of a possible rush.

"Old son," he said slowly, and the gun barrel pointed at Reivers' right eye, "old son, if you yell again tonight let it be your prayers, because you'll need 'em. Dost hear? I suspect 'twas thy yelling scared Tige into the river. Wouldst send thee down after him, only I've use for you in tuh pits. Crawl in and lie still if wouldst live till daylight, —— you. Wilt pay for the loss of Tige, I warn you that."

He turned away and Reivers fell back on his blankets chuckling boyishly. He was in fine fettle. The Snow-Burner was coming back to his old form, and in the delight of the moment's difficulties he had temporarily lost the softening memories that had disturbed him of late.

"How was it, old-timer?" he laughed. "Could you pick any flaw in it?"

MacGregor shook his head in wonder.

"I had a man go fey on me once, up on the Slave Lake trail," he said slowly. "He let go just such yells as came from your mouth now. I'm thinking no man could yell so lest he's fey himself, or has travelled wi' auld Nickie and stole some of his music."

"Quite so. Exactly the impression I wished to create," said Reivers. "I thank you for your compliment, but your analysis is all wrong. Complete control of your vocal organs, that's all. You see I wished to let out just such a yell. It was rather hard, because my vocal organs never had made such a sound before, and they protested. I forced them to do it."

"The man with the superior mind can force his body to do anything. Understand, Mac? It's the superior mind that counts. If you'd had a mind superior to Moir's you'd be top dog here, with Moir fetching bones for you. As it is, you're doing the fetching, and Moir's growing fat. And here I come along, with a mind superior to Moir's, and I'm going to be top dog now and gobble the whole proceeds of your squabbling. The mind, Mac, the grey stuff in the little bone-box at the top of your neck, that's all that counts. Nothing else. And I've got the best grey matter in this camp,

and I'm going to be top dog as a matter of course."

MacGregor flared up hotly.

"You say, that's all that counts?" he said. "D'you mean to tell me to my face that after I'd struck hands with a man to be my partner, as I did with Shanty Moir, that I'd turn on him and play him the scurvy trick he played me, just because I could? Well, if you say that, mon, you lie, and I throw the word smack in your teeth. Go back on my hand-shake, just to be top dog and get the bones! God's blood! There's other things better than bones, and there's other things that count besides a superior mind. How many times do you suppose I could have shot Shanty Moir after we'd found this mine?"

"Not once. You didn't have it in you. You couldn't do it. If you could you'd have been the superior man, and you're not."

MacGregor thought it over.

"You're right, mon, I couldn't do it. I thank God I couldn't. I'd rather be the slave I am at present than be able to do things like that."

"Sentiment, Mac; foolish, unreasonable sentiment."

"Sentiment!" MacGregor spoke hotly, then suddenly subsided. "Yes, you're right, lad," he admitted after awhile. "It's naught but sentiment. I see now. It's the kind of sentiment that white men die for, and that makes them the boss men of the world. Well, lad, I am sorry to hear you talk as if 'twas only your skin was white. But I do not see you top dog of this camp yet. I'll warrant Shanty Moir didn't allow you to slip a gun or knife into camp. And did you notice the little tool he had in his hand?"

"A six-shooter," said Reivers. "A crude weapon compared to a good mind, MacGregor."

"Aye? I'm glad to hear you say so, lad, for I've only a mind, such as it is, left me for a weapon, and I'm quite sure I must overcome the six-gun in Shanty's hand ere I ever win back to lay eyes on my daughter Hattie."

"Your daughter Hattie!" Reivers sat up, jarred out of his composure. "You forget your daughter Hattie; you hear, MacGregor? And now shut up. There's been enough yawping to-night; I want to sleep."

He rolled himself tightly in his blankets. MacGregor crawled miserably to his corner and huddled down to sleep as best he could in his cruel shackles. The dugout grew as still as a tomb. Faint sounds came from the place where Moir and his men were living, but as the night grew older these ceased, and a silence as complete and primitive as it knew before man bent his steps thither fell over the isolated cavern.

Reivers did not sleep. MacGregor's last words had done the work. "My daughter Hattie." Hattie with the clean, pure face of her. Hattie with the wide grey eyes; with the look of pain upon her. Curse MacGregor! What business had he mentioning that name? Reivers had forgotten, or thought he had. He was himself again. And then this old fool—curse him! Curse the whole MacGregor tribe. And especially did he curse himself for being weak and foolish enough to permit such trifles to interfere with his sleep.

He dozed away toward daylight and dreamed that Hattie MacGregor was looking at him. The hard look on her face had softened a little, and she said she was glad he had sent Neopa back to her lover, Nawa.

"— you, get out of there!"

In his half-waking Reivers fancied it was his own voice driving the picture from his mind.

"Get out, beasts, and get out quick!"

It was Shanty Moir's voice and he was calling to MacGregor and Reivers to get up.

CHAPTER XLI—SHANTY MOIR—TEMPERANCE ADVOCATE

Reivers came forth from the dugout, stooped and shaking, the drunken squaw-man's morning condition to perfection, but in reality alert and watchful for the opportunity he was seeking. He had had a bad night, and he was anxious to have the job over with and get away with his loot to some place where he could forget.

A surprise awaited him outside. Two tin plates loaded with meat and a tin cup half full of liquor were placed on the sand before the dugout. Ten feet away stood Shanty Moir, his six-shooter covering the two men as they emerged. With the instinct of the wild animal that he was, Moir knew the value of clamping his hold firmly on his victims in the cold grey of morning.

"Drink and eat," he said, satisfied with the humility with which the two went to their food. "Eat fast, or you'll go into tuh pit with tuh belly empty."

"I thought you hired me for a cook, mister," whined Reivers, as he raised the tin cup to his lips. "I want to cook."

"Cook, —!" sneered Moir. "Tuh squaw'll do all tuh cooking done here. Draft beast with tuh Scotch jackass, that's what 'ee be, old ox. Hurry up. Wilt have a little of tuh prod?"

Out of the corner of his eye Reivers saw that MacGregor was eyeing the cup of liquor wistfully. Moved by an impulse that was strange to him he took a small drink and held out the cup to his companion. As MacGregor eagerly reached for it Moir's gun crashed out and the cup flew from Reivers's hand.

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"Tuh motto of this camp is, 'No treating,'" chuckled Moir. "Hooch is good on tuh trail. We're on tuh job now. You get liquor, old son, because 'tis medicine to you, and any hooch dranked here, I must prescribe."

Across the creek, Tammy, at work building a fire under the thawing-pan, heard his chief's words and growled faintly.

"Yes, and 'ee prescribe terrible small doses, too, Shanty," he muttered. "A good thing can be over-played. Hast no reason for refusing Joey and me a nip before starting work this morning."

Moir, moving like a soft-footed lynx, was across the creek and behind Tammy before the latter realised what was coming. From his position Moir now dominated the whole camp, and a sickly smile appeared on Tammy's mouth.

"Aw, Shanty!" he whined. "Didst only mean it for a joke. Can take a joke from an old chum, can't 'ee, Shanty?"

"Get into tuh pit, Tammy," said Moir quietly, pointing with his gun to the tunnel where sounds indicated that Joey already was at work.

"Aw, Shanty——"

"Get in!"

Slack-jawed with terror Tammy crawled into the dark tunnel.

"Eh, Joey, ma son!" called Moir down the pit-mouth.

"Aye?" came back the answer.

"Dost 'ee, too, think 'ee should have a drink this morn'?"

"Aye, Shanty," replied the unsuspecting Joey.

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"Have a hot one, then!" roared Shanty and kicked a blazing log from Tammy's fire into the pit.

A mingling of shrieks and protests greeted its arrival.

"Aw, Shanty! Blood of tuh devil, chief! Canst not take a joke?"

"Am taking it now, ma sons," laughed Moir, and kicked more brands down the tunnel.

Gasping and choking from the smoke that filled the tiny pit, Joey and Tammy essayed to crawl out. *Bang!* went Moir's six-shooter and they hastily retreated. The tunnel was filled with smoke by this time. Down at the bottom, choking coughs and cries told that the two unfortunate men were being suffocated. Moir waited until the faintness of the sounds told how far gone the men were. Then he motioned to Reivers with his revolver. The smoke was leaving the pit by this time.

"Step down and drag 'em out, old son," he said. "Come now, no hanging back. Tuh trigger on this gun is filed down so she pulls very light."

Reivers obeyed, climbing into the pit as if trembling with fear, and toiling furiously as he dragged the unconscious men out, though he could have walked away with one under each arm.

"Throw water on 'em. Splash 'em good."

Ten minutes later Joey and Tammy were sitting up, coughing and sneezing, and trying their best to make Moir believe they had only been joking.

"Good enough, ma sons; so was I," chuckled Moir. "Now back to tuh job, and if ever you doubt who's top man here you'll stay in tuh pit till you're browned well enough to eat. Dost hear me?"

"Aye, Shanty," said the two men humbly, and hurried back to their tasks.

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"And now, jackass and old ox, step over here and get into tuh harness," commanded Moir.

He continued to hold the gun in his hand and motioned to the sledge near the thawing-pan. High side-boards had been placed on the sledge, making it capable of holding twice its former load, and a looped rope supplemented the traces to which MacGregor was so ignominiously hitched.

"Take hold of the rope, old son," directed Moir.

He did not approach as MacGregor resignedly led the way to the sledge. Tammy turned from his thawing-pan to hitch the Scotchman to his traces and to strap down his hands. Moir stood back, the gun in his hand, dominating all three.

"Now into tuh pit; Joey's got a load waiting," he commanded. "And one whine out of you, old ox, and you get the prod. Hi-jah! Giddap!"

With MacGregor leading the way, Reivers humbly picked up his rope and helped drag the sledge into the mine. The tunnel, high and broad enough only for two men to crawl abreast, ran at a steep slant into the sand for probably twenty-five feet. At its end it spread into a small room in which Joey was at work, chopping loose chunks of frozen earth.

One glance around and Reivers knew from experience that this room had been the home of the pocket, and that, unless the signs lied, the pocket soon would be worked out. Judging by the extent of the excavation the pocket had been a good-sized one, and the amount of dust and nuggets taken from it undoubtedly would foot up to a neat sum. Yes, it would be a tidy fortune. It would be plenty to give him a new start in life, plenty to pay him for the trouble he had gone to, plenty even to pay him for the baseness of his present position.

He obeyed Joey meekly when ordered, with curses and insults, to load the sledge. He could have throttled Joey down there in the mine without a sound coming up to warn those above of what was happening, but Moir's conduct of the morning had made an impression upon Reivers. A man who kept himself out of reach, who kept his six-shooter pointed at you all the time, and who could shoot tin cups out of your moving hand, was not a man to be despised.

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The first hour of work that day convinced Moir and his henchmen that their original unflattering estimate of Reivers was correct. Even a close observer, regarding him during that period of probation, would have seen nothing to indicate that he was anything but what Shanty Moir had judged him to be. A miserable, broken-down squaw-man, without a will of his own, and only one ambition—to clamour for as much liquor as possible—that was the character that Reivers played perfectly for the benefit of Moir and his two men.

At first, they kept an eye on him, watching to see if by any chance the old fool might be dangerous. They discovered that he would be dangerous if turned loose—to their supply of liquor. Beyond that he had, apparently, not a single aim in the world. His physical weakness, they soon discovered, was exactly what was to be expected of a whisky bloat. He was able to help haul the sledge-loads of frozen earth up the incline of the shaft, and that was all. Even that left him puffing and trembling.

"Is an old ox, as 'ee said, Shanty, with even tuh horns burnt off him by tuh hooch," said Joey, after the first few loads. "Keep a little o' tuh liquor running down his throat each day and he'll be a good draft beast to us. Nothing to fear o' him. Didst well when 'ee picked him out, chief."

They stopped watching him. He was harmless. Which was exactly the frame of mind which Reivers had worked to create.

MacGregor alone knew how cleverly Reivers was playing his part, and he regarded his new companion in misery with greater awe and swore beneath his breath in unholy admiration. He had excellent opportunity to appreciate Reivers's ability to play the part of a weakling, for the Snow-Burner, when not observed, caught his free hand in MacGregor's traces and pulled the full weight of the heavy sledge as if it had been a boy's plaything.

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"Eh, mon!" gasped the weakened Scotchman in relief. "I begin to comprehend now. 'Tis a surprise you're planning for Shanty Moir. Oh, aye! 'Tis a braw joke. But you maun l'ave me finish him, man; 'tis my right. And I thank you and will repay you well for the favour you are doing me in my present bunged-up condition."

"Favour your eye!" snapped Reivers. "It's easier to pull the whole thing than to have you dragging on it. Don't think I'm doing it for your sake. You'll have a rude awakening, my friend, if you're building any hopes on me."

"I dinna understand you," said MacGregor with a shake of his head. "You're different from any man I ever met. But at all events, you've made the loads lighter, and I think I must have perished soon had you not done so."

"Shut up!" hissed Reivers irritably. "I tell you I'm doing it because it's easier for me."

His attitude toward the old man was brutally domineering when they were alone and openly abusive when they were in the presence of Moir or the others. He showered foul epithets upon him, pretended to shoulder the greater part of the work on him, and abused him in a fashion that won the approval of the three brutes over them.

"Make him do his share, old sonny," roared Moir. "Wilt have tuh prod? Joey, give him tuh prod so he can poke up tuh jackass when he lags back."

"Don't need no prod," boasted Reivers. "I can handle him without any prod. Come on, pull up there, you loafer. Think I'm going to do it all?"

MacGregor on such occasions would hold his head low to hide the gleam in his eyes and the grin that strove for room on his tightly pressed lips. His harness was hanging slack; Reivers took more of the load upon himself with every curse that he uttered.

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All through the day it was Reivers' strength that pulled the heavy sledge up the dirt incline of the tunnel, and at night, when the day's work was done, and MacGregor, tottering feebly toward his bunk, fell helpless through the dugout's flap, Reivers picked him up, laid him down gently and placed his own blanket beneath his head.

"God bless you, lad!" whispered MacGregor.

"Shut up!" hissed Reivers. "I don't want any talk like that."

He looked down at the prostrate man for a moment. Then with a muttered curse he unloosened the straps that bound MacGregor's arms to his sides and hurled himself over to his own side of the shack. He was very angry with himself. Pity and succour for the helpless had never before been a part of his creed. Why should he trouble about MacGregor?

"I'll have to strap you up again in the morning," he flung out suddenly, "but it won't hurt to have your hands free for the night. Shut up—lay still! I hear somebody coming."

CHAPTER XLIII—"THE PENALTY OF A WHITE MAN'S MIND"

309

"Oh, Snow-Burner!" It was Tillie who came, bearing the evening food, and Reivers crept out on the sand to meet her. "Oh, Snow-Burner," she whispered quietly, "I am weary of this camp. The air is bad, and the country is not open. It is in my heart to poison Iron Hair as soon as the Snow-Burner says we are ready to go from this place."

Reivers stared at her. A short while ago he would not have been shocked in the slightest degree to have heard this—to her, natural speech—fall from Tillie's lips. But of late another woman, another kind of woman, had been in his thoughts, and Tillie's words left him speechless for the moment.

The squaw continued placidly—

"The Snow-Burner comes here after gold?"

"Yes."

"And when he has the gold we go away?"

"Yes."

"Good. The pig, Iron Hair, wears a great belt of buckskin about his middle. The gold is in there, much of it. I will poison him to-night, and we will take the belt and go away from here in the morning."

Reivers made no reply. Here was success offered him without so much as a move of his hand. He need have no part in it, none at all. Tillie would bring him the gold belt. That was what he had come for; and hitherto he had never let anything in the world stand between him and the gratification of his desires. Yet he hesitated.

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"Is there more gold here than Iron Hair wears in his belt?" asked Tillie.

Reivers shook his head.

"Then why wait?" Her whisper was full of amazement. "It is not like the Snow-Burner. Was there ever a man who could make him do his will? And yet now the Snow-Burner labours for Iron Hair like a woman."

"Like a woman?" He repeated her bold words in surprise, while she sat humbly awaiting the careless, back-hand blow which knocked her rolling on the sand. "And was that hand like the hand of a woman?" he asked.

Tillie picked herself up with a gleam of hope in her eyes. It was long since the Snow-Burner had struck her strongly.

"Oh, Snow-Burner!" she whispered proudly as she crawled back to his side. "Why do we wait? It is all ready. The Snow-Burner knows where the gold is that he came for. Tillie will do her share. The sleep-medicine is sewed in the corner of my blanket. There is enough to kill this big pig, Iron Hair, and his men three times over. Will not the Snow-Burner give the sign for Tillie to put the sleep-medicine in their food? Then they will sleep and not awaken, and the Snow-Burner and Tillie can go away with the gold. Was it not so that the Snow-Burner wished to do?"

Reivers nodded. That was what he wished.

It was very simple. Only a nod. After that—the sleep-medicine, the tasteless Indian poison, the secret of which Tillie possessed, and which she would have used on a hundred men had Reivers given the word.

Yes, it was very simple—except that he could not forget Hattie MacGregor. The memory of her each hour had grown clearer, more torturing. Because of it he had taken the killing load of work from her father's shoulders; because of it he was growing weak. He swore mutteringly as he thought of it. He had permitted her memory to soften him, to make a boy of him. But now he was himself again. Tillie's words had done their work. He turned toward the squaw, and she saw by the look in his eyes that the Snow-Burner at last was going to give the fatal sign.

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"To-night," she pleaded. "Let it be to-night. It is a bad camp here. The air is not good. Iron Hair is a pig. Let me give the sleep-medicine to-night; then we go from here in the morning—together."

She crept closer to him, slyly smiling up at him; and suddenly Reivers flung her away with a

movement of loathing and sprang up, tall and straight.

"No," he said quietly, "not to-night." And Tillie crouched at his feet.

"Snow-Burner," she whispered, "I hear Iron Hair and his men talk. They go away soon. They take the gold with them. Does not the Snow-Burner want the gold?"

Reivers looked down upon her. He was standing up, stiff and proud, as he should stand, but as he had not stood since he had begun to play at being a drunken squaw-man.

"I do not want you to help me get the gold," he said slowly. "I do not want you to give Iron Hair the sleep-medicine, to-night, or any night. I will take the gold from Iron Hair without your help. I have spoken."

He stood looking down at her, and Tillie, looking up at him, once more was reminded that he was a white man and that the vast gulf between them never might be bridged. Wearily, hopelessly, she rose to her feet.

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"The Snow-Burner has spoken; I have heard," she whispered, and went humbly back into the large dugout.

Reivers laughed a small laugh of bitterness as he heard the flap drop behind her. He threw his head far back and gazed up at the slit of starlit sky that showed above the mouth of the cavern, and for once in his life he felt the common insignificance of human-kind alone in the vast scheme of Nature. He was weak; he had thrown away the easy way to success; he had let the memory of Hattie MacGregor's face, flaring before his eyes in the instant that Tillie thrust her lips up to his, beat him.

He threw up his great arms and held them out, tense and hard as bars of living steel. He felt of his shoulders, his biceps, his chest, his legs, and he laughed sardonically.

"Body, you're just as superior to other men's bodies as you ever were," he mused. "Yes, Body, you're just as fit to rend and prey on others as ever. But you're handicapped now. You're not permitted to do things as you used to do them. Body, you're paying the penalty of being burdened with a white man's mind."

MacGregor looked up as Reivers re-entered the dugout bearing the evening food. A tiny fire in one corner lighted up the room and by its flickering flames he saw Reivers' face.

"Blood o' God!" whispered the old man in awe. "What's come over you, man?"

He rose on his elbow and peered more closely.

"Man—man—you ha' not overcome Shanty Moir? You have not finished him without letting me ___"

Reivers laughed.

"What are you talking about? Do I look as if I'd been fighting?"

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MacGregor studied him seriously.

"I donno," said he slowly. "I donno that you look as if you had been fighting. But you come in with your head high up, and the look in your eyes of a man who has conquered. That I do know. Tell me, lad, what's taken place wi' you outside?"

"None of your business," snapped Reivers. "Here's your supper." And he returned to his side of the dugout to sit down to think.

He was on his mettle now. He had put to one side the easy, certain way to success that Tillie had offered. Success was not to be so easy as he had thought. Thus far it had been easy. He had met Moir, he had won his way into the mine, he had learned where the gold was hidden, all as he had planned. Remained to get the gold and get safely away. The time to do it in was short.

Reivers' experienced miner's eyes had told him that the pocket was perilously near to being mined out. Any day, any hour now, and the pay-streak which they were following might end in barren dirt. That would be the end of his opportunity. Moir and his men would waste no time in the Dead Lands after making their cleanup. They would pack and travel at once, southward, to the railroad. They would not permit even so harmless an individual as a sodden squaw-man to trail them. Hence, Reivers knew that he must find or make his opportunity without waste of time and strike the instant it was found or made.

He had been unable to find an opportunity that first day. Moir in his camp was a different man from Moir on the trail. He was the boss man here, and Reivers granted him ungrudged admiration for it. Liquor was his master on the trail; here he was master of it. His treatment of Joey and Tammy in the morning had explained his attitude on that question too clearly to make it worth while to attempt to entice him into a bout at drinking. Moir was boss here, boss of himself and others, and he always had his six-shooter handy to prove it.

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Tammy and Joey wore knives at their hips, but no guns. Moir's 30.40 rifle hung carelessly on a nail near the door of his dugout. This had puzzled Reivers at first. Would a bad man like Moir be so simple as to leave his rifle where any one might lay hands on it, and carry a six-shooter in a manner to provoke a gun-fight? When he was ordered to carry a pail of water to the dugout Reivers managed to take a careful look at the rifle, and the puzzle was explained. The breech-block had been taken out and the fine weapon was no more deadly than any club eight pounds in weight.

His respect for Moir had increased with this discovery. Evidently Moir was not so thick-headed after all. He took no chances. The only effective shooting-iron in camp was his six-shooter and, with this he was thoroughly master of the situation.

In the first hour Reivers had noticed that Moir had a system of guarding himself. It was the system of the primitive fighting man and it consisted solely of: let no man get at your back. At no time, whether in the mine, at the washing-pans, in the open, or in the dugout did Moir permit any one to get behind him. He made no distinction. In the pit he stood with Joey before him. At the pans he worked behind Tammy. When the others grouped together he whirled as smoothly as a lynx if any one made to pass in his rear. Even when he sat at ease in the dugout with Tillie he placed his back against the bare stone wall at the rear of the room. So much Reivers had seen during his first day in the camp.

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"Does he sleep soundly at night?" he asked suddenly.

"Who?" asked MacGregor.

"Moir, of course."

"Soundly?" The Scotchman gritted his teeth. "Aye as soundly as a lynx lying down by its kill in a wolf country."

Reivers smiled a grim smile. There was no chance, then, of rushing Shanty Moir in his sleep. It would be harder to get the gold and get away than he had expected. In fact, the difficulties of it presented quite a problem. He liked problems, did the Snow-Burner, and his smile grew more grim as he rolled himself in his blankets and lay down to wait, dream-tortured by pictures of Hattie MacGregor, for the coming of daylight of the day in which he had resolved to force the problem to solution.

CHAPTER XLIV—THE MADNESS OF "HELL-CAMP" REIVERS

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The day opened as the day before had opened. A bellow from Shanty Moir, and Reivers strapped MacGregor into his harness again and they tumbled out to their rude morning meal. Again Moir stood a distance away, the big six-shooter balanced easily in his hand. But this morning Joey and Tammy, over by the pit-mouth, also were awaiting the appearance of their two beasts of burden, and Reivers instantly sensed something new and sinister afoot. At the sight of MacGregor's decrepitude, as, stiff and tottering, he made his way to his meal, Joey and Tammy strove vainly to conceal the wolfish grins that appeared on their ugly faces.

"Aye, Shanty, art quite right. Is worth his keep no longer," said Tammy. "Hast been a fair animal for a Scotch jackass, but does not thrive on his oats no more."

"One fair day's work left in him," said Joey, appraising MacGregor shrewdly. "Will knock off a little early, eh, Shanty, so's to have tuh light to see him swim."

"Would not miss tuh sight of that for a pound of dust," replied Shanty, and the three roared fiendishly together.

"You poor, misbegotten spawn," said MacGregor, quietly beginning to eat, eyeing them one after the other. "I'll live to spit on the shamed corpses of the lot of you."

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As the day's work began, Reivers started to calculate each move that he and Moir made with a view to discovering the opportunity he was looking for. All that he wished was a chance to rush Shanty without giving the latter an opportunity to use his gun.

The odds of three to one against him, and Joey and Tammy armed with knives, he accepted as a matter of course. But a six-shooter in the hands of a man who could use one as Shanty Moir could was a shade too much even for him to venture against. The manner in which Moir had shot up the tin cup the morning before proved how alert and sure was his trigger-finger. To make the suspicion of a move toward him, with the gun in his hand, would have spelled instant ruin.

As he watched now, Reivers saw that Moir was more vigilant than ever. He kept far away from the pit-mouth. The gun either was in his hand or hanging ready in the holster. And when Reivers saw the first load of sand he understood why.

The pay-streak had paid out. They were winnowing the drippings of dust washed down from the pocket now, and this job soon would be done. Moir was not taking any chances of losing at this stage of affairs. The fortune was in his grasp; he would break camp and be off in the same hour that the sand began to run low-grade.

He took no part in the work to-day. He merely stood and watched. And Reivers watched back, and the hours passed, and the short day began to draw to a close, and still not the slightest chance to rush Shanty Moir and live had presented itself.

As the early twilight began to creep down into the cavern, the ugly grins with which Joey and Tammy regarded MacGregor began to increase. Suddenly Tammy, washing a pan of sand in the brook, threw up both hands.

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"Not a trace in the last load, Shanty!" he shouted.

"All out!" came Moir's bellow, as if he had been waiting for the signal.

Joey and Tammy threw down their tools and came over and stood behind Reivers and MacGregor who came up dragging a loaded sledge behind them.

"Take that load down yonder!" ordered Moir, pointing to the black tunnel into which the creek disappeared in leaving the cavern.

Tammy and Joey followed, grinning, two paces behind the sledge. Moir, gun in hand, walked ten feet behind them.

"Whoa!" he laughed when Reivers and MacGregor had drawn up against the cliff beside the stream's exit. "You can unhitch tuh old jackass now, ma sons. Then over with it quick."

With a yelp Tammy and Joey tore loose MacGregor's traces. They held him between them, and in his bound and weakened condition he was unable to struggle or turn around.

Before Reivers could move they had hurled MacGregor into the deep water in the tunnel. He sank like a stone and the current sucked him in.

"Good-by, MacGregor of the big boasts!" laughed Moir, but he laughed a trifle too soon.

In the instant that the current bore MacGregor into the darkness of the tunnel his face bobbed up above the waters. He looked up, and looked straight into Reivers's eyes. It was not a look of appeal; it was the same look that had been in the eyes of Hattie MacGregor the day when Reivers had left her cabin.

Then Hell-Camp Reivers felt himself going mad. He hit Tammy so hard and true that he flew through the air and struck against Moir. The next instant Reivers was diving like a flash into the black water, groping for MacGregor, while the current swept him into the total darkness.

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He heard the bullet from Moir's revolver strike the water behind him in the instant that his hands found MacGregor; heard mocking laughter as he pulled the old man's head above water; then the current whirled him and his burden away. It whisked him downstream with a power irresistible. It threw him from side to side against the ragged rock walls. It sucked him and the load he bore down in deep whirlpools and spewed them up again.

He bumped his head against the stone roof of the tunnel and swore. The roof was a scant foot above the water. He put his hand up. The roof was getting closer to the water with every yard. Soon there was only room for their upturned faces above the water.

Reivers laughed heartily. So this was to be the end! The joke was on him. After all he had gone through, he was to drown like a silly fool through a fool's impulse.

Presently roof and water came together. For a moment Reivers fought with his vast strength, holding his own for an instant against the current, hanging on to the last few seconds of life with a fury of effort. The current proved too strong. It sucked them under; the water closed above them. They were whirled and buffeted to the last breath of life in them, and then suddenly their heads slipped above water and they were looking straight up at the gray Winter sky.

CHAPTER XLV—A SURPRISE FOR SHANTY MOIR

320

Reivers caught hold of a spear of rock the instant his head came out of water, and held on. He did not try to think or understand at first. Sufficient to know that he was alive and to pump his lungs full of the air they were crying for. He held MacGregor under his left arm, and he rather wondered that he hadn't let him go in that moment when he went under. MacGregor was beginning to revive, too. Reivers looked around.

There was not much to see. They were in a tiny opening in the rocks, a yard or two in length. It was a duplicate of Moir's cavern on a miniature scale, except that here the rock walls were not high or impossible to climb. For this space the brook showed itself once more to the sun, then vanished again under the cliffs.

"Is it Heaven?" gasped MacGregor, only half conscious.

"Nearer hell," laughed Reivers.

He lifted himself and his burden out of the water to a resting-place on a shelf of rock. For a minute or two he sat looking up at the rock walls and the grey sky above them. He looked down at the water, at the spot where they had been spewed from death back into life. And then he leaped upright and laughed, laughed so that the rocks rang with it, laughed so that MacGregor's senses cleared and he looked at his saviour in consternation. His laughter was the uncontrollable, heart-free laughter of the man who suddenly sees a great joke upon his enemy.

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He smote MacGregor between the shoulder-blades so he gasped and coughed. He tore the straps and harness from his arms, body and legs, tossed him up in the air, shook him and set him down on the rock.

"I've got him!" he said at last. "Oh, Shanty Moir, what a surprise you have coming to your own black self!"

MacGregor, with his senses cleared enough to realise that he was alive, and to remember how the miracle had come about, said quietly—

“Man, that was the bravest thing I ever saw a man do.”

“What?”

“Diving into that hole after me.”

“Oh, to — with that! That’s past. The past doesn’t count—not when the very immediate future is so full of juice and interest as happens to be the case just now. I’ve got Shanty Moir, old-timer. Do you understand? He’s mine and all that he’s got is mine, and he’s going to be surprised. Oh, how surprised he’s going to be!”

MacGregor looked down at the two yards of rushing water, up at the rock walls and then at the jubilant Reivers.

“I dinna see it,” he said dryly.

“Really?” Reivers suddenly became interested in him as if he presented a rare mental problem. “Can’t you make that simple mind of yours work out the simple solution of this problem?”

MacGregor shook his head.

“What I see is this: we’re alive, and that only for the present. We’re in a little hole in the Dead Lands. Happen we climb out of the hole, we have no dogs, food, or weapons. The nearest camp is two good days’ mushing, with good fresh dogs. Too far. If I could manage to stagger five miles I’d surprise myself. There is not so much as a dry match on us. No, I maun say, lad, my simple mind does not see the solution of the problem.”

“Try again, Mac,” urged Reivers. “Make your mind work. What do we need to make our condition blessed among men; what do men need to be well-fitted on the Winter trail? You can make your mind do that sum, can’t you?”

“We need,” replied MacGregor doggedly, “dogs, and food, and fire, and weapons.”

“Correct. And now what’s the next thought that your grey matter produces after that masterpiece?”

“That the nearest place where we may obtain these things is too far away for us to make, unless happen we meet some one on the trail, which is not likely.”

“Pessimism!” laughed Reivers. “Too much caution stunts the possibility of the mind. Interesting demonstration of the fact, with your mind as an example.” He turned and smote with the flat of his hand the stone wall from under which they had just emerged. “What’s the other side of those rocks, Mac?”

“Shanty Moir and his six-shooter.”

“And dogs, and food, and matches, and cartridges, and gold, everything, everything to make us kings of the country, Mac! And they’re ours—ours as surely as if we had ‘em in our hands now.”

“I dinna see it,” said MacGregor.

“Pessimism again. How can Moir and his gang get out of their camp?”

“Up-stream, by the creek, of course.”

“Any other way?”

“There’s the way we came—but they do not know that.”

“Correct, and when we’ve plugged up that single exit they can’t get away from us, Mac, and then we’ve got ‘em!”

MacGregor’s eyes lighted up, then he grew dour again.

“We have got ‘em, if we plug up the river, I see,” he admitted, “but when we have got them, what good does it do us? What are you going to do, then?”

“That’s the surprise, Mac; I won’t tell even you.” He looked swiftly for a way up the rock walls and found one. “The first question is: Do you think you can climb after me up that crevice there?”

“I could climb through hell and back again if it would help in getting Shanty Moir.”

“All right. I can’t quite give you hell, but I’ll give Shanty Moir an imitation of it before he’s much older. Come on. We’ve got some work to do before it gets dark.”

He led the way into the crevice he had marked for the climb up from the hole and boosted MacGregor up before him. It was slow, hard work, but MacGregor’s weak hold slipped often, and he came slipping down upon Reivers’ shoulders. In the end Reivers impatiently pulled him down, took him on his back and crawled up, and with a laugh rolled himself and his burden in the snow on top of the cliffs. A few rods away smoke was rising through the opening above Moir’s camp, and at the sight of it MacGregor’s numbed faculties came to life.

“Lemme go, man!” he pleaded as Reivers caught him as he staggered toward the opening. “It’s my chance, man. I can kill the cur with a rock from up here.”

“Save your strength; I’ve got use for it,” said Reivers. “Can you walk? All right. Come on, then, and don’t try to get near that gap.”

Taking MacGregor by the hand he led the way carefully around the big opening till they came to the opposite side of the mass of rocks, where the creek entered the tunnel by which Moir reached his camp. Crawling and slipping, they made their way down until they stood beside the bed of the stream.

"Now to work, Mac," said Reivers, and seizing a rock bore it to the tunnel's mouth and dropped it into the water.

"Aye, aye!" chuckled MacGregor, as he understood the significance of this move. "We'll wall the curs in."

For half an hour they laboured. Reivers carried and rolled the heaviest rocks he could move into position across the tunnel, and MacGregor staggered beneath smaller pieces to fill up the chinks. When their work was finished there was a rock wall across the mouth of the tunnel which it would have been almost impossible to tear down, especially from the inside.

It was growing dark when the task was completed, and Reivers nodded in great satisfaction.

"That'll hold 'em long enough for my purpose, and we just made it in time," he said. "Now come on up the mountain again, and then for the surprise."

"The surprise, man?" panted MacGregor as he toiled up the rocks. "What are you going to do? Tell me what's in your head?"

"Hush, hush!" laughed Reivers, pulling him up to the top. "Your position is that of the onlooker. It would spoil it for you if you knew what was going to happen."

"An onlooker—me—when it's a case of getting Shanty Moir? Don't say that, lad. Don't leave me out. He's mine. You know that by all the rights of men and gods it's my right to get him. Give me my just share of revenge."

"Shut up!"

They were nearing the brink of the opening. Reivers' hand covered MacGregor's mouth as they leaned over and looked down upon the unsuspecting men in the cavern below.

In the shut-in spot night had fallen. On the sand before the dugout Tillie was cooking over a brisk fire, going about her work as calmly as if nothing of moment had happened during the afternoon. Near by, Moir and Joey were packing the dog-sledge and repairing harness, evidently preparing to take the trail after the evening meal. Tammy sat by the fire, holding together with both hands the pieces of his nose which Reivers' blow had smashed flat on his face.

Reivers scarcely looked at the men, but began to scan the walls for a way to get down. The walls slanted inwardly from the top, and at first it seemed impossible that a man could get safely into the cavern without the aid of a rope. But presently Reivers saw that for thirty feet directly above the large dugout the rocks were ragged enough to afford plenty of holds for hands and feet.

The walls were nearly fifty feet high. If he could reach to the bottom of this rough space he would be hanging with his feet, ten or twelve feet above the cavern floor.

"Good enough," he said aloud. "It's a cinch."

"A cinch it is," breathed MacGregor softly. "We'll roll up a pile of rocks and kill 'em like rats in a pit. But you maun leave Shanty to me, lad, I——"

"Shut up!" Reivers thrust the Scotchman back from the brink. "Do you want me to go after the harness for you? I told you that your job was to be the onlooker. I settle this thing with Shanty Moir myself."

"But man——"

"Moir kicked me. Do you understand? He placed his dirty foot on me. Do you see why I'm going to do it by myself?"

"Placed his foot on you? God's blood! What has he done to me—robbed me, made an animal of me, stabbed me with a prod! Who has the better right to his foul life?"

"It isn't a case of right, but of might, Mac," chuckled Reivers. "I've got the better might. Therefore, will you give me your word that you'll refrain from interfering with my actions until I've paid my debt to Mr. Moir, or must I go back after the harness and strap you up?"

"Cruel——"

"Promise!"

"I promise," said MacGregor. "But it's wrong, sore wrong. I protest."

"All right. Protest all you want to, but do it silently. Not another word or sound out of you now until the job's done."

Together they crawled back to the brink above the large dugout and peered down into the darkening cavern. In a flash Reivers had his mackinaw and boots off. The cooking-fire was deserted. No one was in sight. Moir and his men and Tillie were at supper in the dugout, and Reivers's chance had come. He swung himself silently over the brink and hung by a handhold on the rock.

"Don't interfere, Mac," he said warningly. "Not till I've paid Shanty Moir for the touch of his foot."

With a twist of his body he threw his stockinged feet forward and caught toe-holds on the rough surface of the wall. Next he released his right hand and fumbled downward till he found a solid piece of protruding rock. Having tested it thoroughly he let go his holds with both feet and left hand and dropped his full weight into the grip of his right. Above him, MacGregor, with his face glued to the brink of the opening, gasped twice, once because he was sure Reivers was dropping straight to the bottom, and again when his right hand took the shock of his full weight without loosening its grip.

Reivers heard and looked up and smiled. Then he swung his feet inward again, secured another hold, lowered his right hand to another sure grip, and so made his startling way down the inwardly slanting cliff.

At the third desperate drop MacGregor drew back, unable to stand the strain of watching. Had Reivers been able to see on top of the cliff he would have laughed, for the Scotchman was down on his knees in the snow, earnestly praying.

Finally MacGregor summoned up courage to peer down once more. Then he knew his prayers had been answered. Reivers was hanging easily by his hands, directly above the front of the large dugout, and his feet were less than ten feet above the bottom of the cave. MacGregor gave a whoop of thanksgiving and gathered to him an armful of stones.

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For a moment Reivers hung there, looking down and appraising the situation. He loosened his hold until his whole weight hung on the ends of his fingers.

"Come out and fight, Shanty!" he bellowed suddenly. "Come out, you cheap cur, and fight like a man!"

Nothing loath Moir came, responding like a wild animal on the instant of the weird challenge from above. Like a wild man he came, six-shooter in hand, tearing the front of the dugout away in his rush, and Reivers dropped and struck him neatly the instant he appeared.

It was a carefully aimed drop. Landing on Moir's neck, Reivers would have killed him. He had no wish to kill him—yet. He landed on Moir's shoulders and the six-shooter went flying away as the two bodies crashed together and dropped on the sand with a thud.

Reivers was up first. It was well that he was. Tammy and Joey were only a step behind Moir. Like wildcats they clawed at Reivers and like wildcats they rolled on the ground when his fists met them. Then Moir was up on his feet. His senses were a little dull, but he saw enough of the situation to satisfy him. Before him was something to fight, to rush, to annihilate. And he rushed.

Up on the cliff the maddened MacGregor yelped joyously, a stone in each hand, as Reivers leaped forward to meet the rush and struck. Shanty Moir had expected a grapple, and Reivers' fist caught him full in the mouth and threw him back on his shoulders a man's length away.

When Moir arose then, the lower part of his face had the appearance of crushed meat, but he growled through the blood and rushed again. Reivers struck, and Moir's nose disappeared in a welter of blood and gristle. He struck again, but Moir came on and locked him in his huge arms.

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Joey and Tammy were up now. Their knives were out. They saw their chance and leaped forward to strike at Reivers' back. With his life depending upon it, the Snow-Burner swung Moir's great body around, and Joey and Tammy stayed their hands barely in time to save plunging their knives into the back of their chief.

Growling a wild curse, MacGregor dropped two stones the size of his head. One struck Joey on the shoulder and sent him shrieking with pain into the dugout; the other dropped at Reivers' feet. With a yell he hurled Moir from him and snatched up the stone. Joey, reading his doom in the Snow-Burner's eyes, backed away into the brink of the brook. The heavy stone caught him in the chest. Then he struck the water with a splash and was gone.

But Moir was up in the same instant and his arms licked around from behind and raised Reivers off his feet. The hold was broken as suddenly as it was clamped on. They were face to face again, and face to face they fought, trampling the sand and the fire indiscriminately. Each blow from Reivers now splashed blood from Moir's face as from a soaked sponge, and at each blow MacGregor shouted wildly:

"That for the kick you gave him, Shanty! That for the dirt you did me!"

The dogs, mad with terror, fled up the brook, met the stone wall and came whining back. They cowered, jammering in fright at the terrible combat which raged, minute after minute, before them.

Out of the dugout softly came stealing Tillie. A knife, dropped by Joey or Tammy, gleamed in the light of the fire. She picked it up. With a smile of great contentment on her face she crept noiselessly toward the struggling men. They were locked in a clinch now, and with the smile widening she moved around behind Moir's broad back. The knife flashed above her head. Reivers saw it. With an effort he wrenched an arm free and knocked the knife away.

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"Keep away!" he roared, springing out of the clinch. "This is between Iron Hair and me."

Up on the cliff MacGregor groaned. In freeing himself Reivers had hurled Moir to one side, and Moir had dropped with his outstretched hands nearly touching his six-shooter, where it had fallen

when Reivers had dropped upon him. Like the stab of a snake his hand reached out and snapped it up.

"Your soul to the devil, Shanty Moir!" shrieked MacGregor and hurled another stone.

His aim was true this time. The stone struck Moir squarely on his big head and drove his face into the sand. He never moved after it.

Reivers looked up. On the brink of the cliff MacGregor on his knees was chanting his war-cry, his thanks that vengeance had not been denied him. Reivers smiled.

"That's a good song, Mac, whatever it is!" he laughed, when the maddened Scotchman had grown quieter. "But the fact remains that you disobeyed my orders and interfered."

"Aye! I interfered. I hurled a stone and sent the black soul of Shanty Moir back to his brother the devil!" chanted MacGregor. "But, lad, I did not interfere until you'd paid him in full—until you'd paid double—for the kick he gave you. Three of them there were, and they were armed and you with bare fists! God's blood! Never since men stood up with fist to fist has there been such fighting. One disabled, and two men dead! Dead you are, you poor pups! And I can tell by the way you lived where you're roasting now." 331

"Ah, ah! I ha' seen a man fight; I ha' seen what I shall never forget, and, poor stick that I am compared to him, I ha' e'en had a hand in it myself. Man, man! Would you grudge me a little bite after your belly's full of battle?"

Reivers spoke quietly and coldly.

"Go down and tear out as much of the stone wall as you can. I'll take the heavy stones from this side." He turned to Tillie. "Take the big belt from Iron Hair and give it to me. Then make all ready for the trail. We march to-night."

And Tillie, as she harnessed the dogs, spat upon Iron Hair, the beaten.

CHAPTER XLVII—THE SNOW-BURNER PAYS 332

"And now the Snow-Burner has his gold. He has robbed the great Iron Hair in his own camp. Great is the Snow-Burner! Now he has the gold which he longed for. Now he is rich. The white men will bow down to him. Great is the Snow-Burner!"

Tillie crouched beside Reivers as, an hour later, he stood on the edge of the Dead Lands, and triumphantly crooned the saga of his success. The gold belt of Shanty Moir hung heavily over his shoulder, its great weight constantly reminding him of the fortune that it contained. The dogs were held in leash, eager to be quit of the harsh rock-chasms through which they had just travelled, and to strike their lope on a trail over the open country beyond.

MacGregor sat wearily on one side of the sledge. The exertions and excitement of the afternoon had exhausted him in his weakened condition. He sat slumped together, only half conscious of what was going on. In a moment he would be sound asleep.

And Reivers had the gold. He had succeeded. He had the gold, and he had a supply of food and a strong, fresh team of dogs eager for the trail. All that was necessary was to turn the dogs toward the south. Two, three, four days' travelling and he would strike the railroad. And the railroad ran to tide-water, and on the water steamboats would carry him away to the world he had planned to return to. 333

It was very simple, as simple as had been Tillie's scheme for getting rid of Moir. But he couldn't do it. He didn't want to do it. He wanted to do just one thing now, above all others, and that was what he set out to do.

He stood down and strapped the belt of gold around MacGregor's middle. MacGregor was sound asleep now, so he placed him on the sledge and bound him carefully in place. Tillie's chant died down in astonishment.

"We take the old one with us?" she asked.

"We do," said Reivers. "Hi-yah! Together there! Mush, mush up!"

To Tillie's joy he turned the dogs to the northwest, in the direction of the camp of her people. The Snow-Burner was lost to her; she knew that, when he had refused her help with Shanty Moir; but it was something to have him come back to the camp.

Reivers, driving hard and straight all night, brought his team up the river-bed to Tillie's camp in the morning. MacGregor was out of his head by then, and for the day they stopped to rest and feed. Reivers sat in the big tepee alone with MacGregor and fed him soft food which the old squaws had prepared. In the evening he again tied the old man and the belt of gold to the sledge and hitched up the dogs. Tillie had read her doom in his eyes, but nevertheless she came out to the sledge prepared to follow.

"You do not come any farther," said Reivers as he picked up the dog-whip.

Tillie nodded.

"I know. With gold the Snow-Burner can be a great man among the white women. Will the Snow-Burner come back—some time?"

"I will never come back."

"Ah-hh-hh!" Tillie's breath came fiercely. "So there is one white woman, then. If I had known——"

But Reivers was whipping and cursing the dogs and hurrying out of hearing.

MacGregor, clear-headed from the rest and food, but still weak, lifted his head and looked around as the sledge sped over the frozen snow.

"A new trail to me, lad," he said. "Where to, now?"

"On a fool's trail," laughed Reivers bitterly, and drove on.

Next morning MacGregor recognised the land ahead.

"Straight for Dumont's Camp we're heading, lad," he said. "Is it there we go?"

"Yes."

They came to Dumont's Camp as night fell. Reivers halted and made sundry enquiries.

"In a shack half ways between here and Fifty Mile," was the substance of the replies.

"Hi-yah! Mush, mush up!" and they were on the trail again.

At daylight the next day, from a rise in the land, he saw the shack that had been designated. Smoke was rising from the chimney, and a small figure that he knew even at that distance came out, filled a pail with snow and went in again.

Reivers stopped his dogs some distance from the shack. He threw MacGregor, gold belt and all, over his shoulder and went up to the door and knocked. For a second or two he smiled triumphantly as Hattie MacGregor opened the door and stood speechless at what she saw. Then he bowed low, laid his burden on the floor and went out without a word.

The dogs shuddered as they heard him laugh coming back to them.

"Hi-yah, mush!"

He drove them furiously into a gully that shut out the sight of the shack and sat down on the sledge. The dogs whined. It was the time for the morning meal and the master was making no preparations to eat.

"Still, you curs!" The whip fell mercilessly among them and they crouched in terror.

The time went by. The sun began to climb upward in the sky. Still the man sat on the sledge, making no preparations for the morning meal. The memory of the whip-cuts died in the dogs' minds under the growing clamour of hunger. They began to whine again.

"Still!" The master was on his feet, but the whip had fallen from his hand.

Down at the end of the gully a small figure was coming over the snow. She was running, and her red hair flowed back over her shoulders, and she laughed aloud as she came up to him. The pain was gone from Hattie MacGregor's lips, and her whole face beamed with a complete, unreasoning happiness, but the pride of her breed shone in her eyes even unto the end.

"Well, well!" sneered Reivers. "Aren't you afraid to come so near anything that pollutes the air?"

She laughed again. She did not speak. She only looked at him and smiled, and by the Eve-wisdom in the smile he knew that his secret was hers. He felt himself weakening, but the Snow-Burner died hard. He tried to laugh his old, cold laugh, but the ice had been thawed in it.

"What do you want?" he sneered. "I'm not a good enough man for you. Why did you come out here?"

"Because I knew you would not go away again," she said, "and because now I know you are a good enough man for me."

"You red-haired trull!" He raised his hand to strike her.

She did not flinch; she merely smiled up at him confidently, contentedly. Suddenly she caught his clenched fist in her hands and kissed it. With a curse Reivers swung around on his dogs.

"Hi-yah! Mush, mush out of here!"

Out of the gully into the open he kicked and drove them. He did not look back. He knew that she was following.

She followed patiently. She knew that there was nothing else for her to do. She had known it the first day she had looked into his eyes. He was her man, and she must follow him.

So she trudged on behind her man as he forced the tired dogs to move. She smiled as she walked, and the wisdom of Eve was in her smile. She had reason to smile, for the Snow-Burner was driving straight toward the little shack.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SNOW-BURNER ***

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