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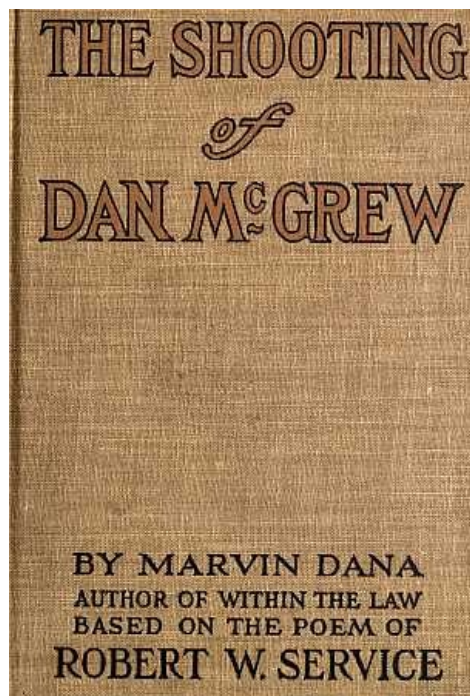
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Transcriber's Note:

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected. For a complete list, please see the [end of this document](#). Click/Select any photograph for a larger view.



THE SHOOTING OF DAN MCGREW

A Novel

BY
MARVIN DANA

Author of WITHIN THE LAW, etc.

BASED ON THE FAMOUS POEM OF
ROBERT W. SERVICE

PROFUSELY ILLUSTRATED WITH SCENES
FROM THE PHOTO PLAY

NEW YORK
GROSSET & DUNLAP
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EDMUND BREESE AND COMPANY IN "THE SHOOTING OF DAN MCGREW."

THE SHOOTING OF DAN MCGREW

Produced by

THE POPULAR PLAYS AND PLAYERS, Inc.

Scenario by

AARON HOFFMAN

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jim	EDMUND BREESE
Dan McGrew	WILLIAM MORSE
Lou	KATHRIN ADAMS
Nell	BETTY RIGGS
Jack Reeves	WALLACE SCOTT
Sam Ward	JAMES JOHNSON
The Sheriff	JACK AUSTEN
Fingey Whalen	JACK MURRAY
Caribou Bill	BILL COOPER
Harry, the Dog Man	HIMSELF

THE SHOOTING OF DAN MCGREW

CHAPTER I

A clatter of hoofs on the gravel of the driveway. A shout from the rider as he swung himself down from the saddle:

"Lou!"

A woman came swiftly from the cool shadows of the porch into the brilliance of the summer sunlight, to meet the man who now advanced toward her with fond, smiling eagerness.

The two kissed very tenderly, for they were lovers still, after seven years of married life. The delicate rose of the wife's cheeks deepened a little under the warmth of the husband's caress, and the graciously curving lips trembled to a smile of happiness as she looked up into the strong face of the man she loved. In the slightly rugged features, she read virility and honesty and loyalty. An exquisite contentment pervaded her. She felt that the cup of joy was brimming. Husband and child and home—!

Her train of thought was broken by the man's words, spoken quickly in a tone that mingled

curiously amusement and chagrin:

"Dangerous Dan! He's coming, Lou! He's buried the hatchet, and is coming to visit us. Dangerous Dan McGrew! Now, what do you think of that?" He waited for an answer, staring quizzically into the suddenly perturbed face of his wife.

"My rival!" he added whimsically, albeit a bit complacently.

"Never!" the wife declared with emphasis. A note of harshness had crept into the music of her voice. "Never your rival, Jim, though he tried to be." The earnestness of utterance gratified the man, in whom a vague, latent jealousy stirred at thought of that other who had loved where he loved. But there was no gratification in the new mood of the woman. Instead, a subtle dread touched her spirit. The contentment of a moment before was fled. There was nothing precise, nothing formulated, in her thoughts. Only, something sinister, menacing, pressed upon her. She welcomed the distraction afforded by her daughter's appearance on the scene.

The girl came running from the gardens behind the ranch-house and sprang into her father's arms with a cry of delight.

To her six years, his frequent rides to the village ten miles away were in the nature of great events, and she welcomed each return as if from long and perilous voyaging. Moreover, there was always an added thrill for Nell in her father's home-coming, because of the mysterious charm in the gift that never failed. To-day, indeed, the present was destined to mark her life; even to be of vital import in a crisis of distant years.

No hint of the gravity of things-to-be shadowed the radiant joy of the child's face, as she was lifted in the man's arms and kissed. There was only vivid anticipation of the gift that would mark this wonderful hour.

James Maxwell lowered his daughter to the ground, with an affirmative nod toward his wife.

"Now, Nell," he said in a voice of authority, "stand perfectly still, and keep your eyes shut, and maybe something will happen."

The girl rested uneasily in an effort of obedience, with her eyes screwed tight-shut, giggling expectantly.

The mother looked on, smiling again, the momentary depression of her spirit allayed, if not destroyed, by the scene. She met the man's glance with understanding in the brown, gold-flecked deeps of her eyes. The father took from a pocket a small leather case, and opened it, and held up for his wife's inspection the gold chain and pendant locket, set with an initial *N* in tiny pearls. The wife nodded her approval. Straightway, the chain was adjusted about the child's neck, with the locket hanging low on the slender breast.

"Now!" the father cried sternly.

On the instant, Nell's dark eyes flashed open in swift inquiry to her father's face, then, following the direction of his gaze, the proud chin was drawn in, and she stared down rapturously at the trinket lying on her bosom. Followed little squeals of bliss, then reverent touching of the treasure. The secret of the catch baffled her, and the father had to come to the rescue lest patience become too hardly strained. When the locket had been opened, she stared into it through long seconds in wordless pleasure. Finally, she spoke in a hushed voice, as if in the presence of something very sacred.

"It's you, Daddy!" It was a broken whisper of happiness. Her eyes, lustrous with glad tears, were lifted adoringly to her father's face for a moment. Then, again, her glance went to the locket.

"And you, Mamma!" she exclaimed, and turned to regard her mother with equal love. "Oh, it's just beautiful! Pictures of both of you—Daddy and Momsy!—all my very own!... And may I really, truly wear it?" Nell's voice was suddenly become timid, infinitely wistful.

The mother answered, as she stooped and kissed her daughter.

"Yes, darling; it's all your very own, to wear every minute, day and night, if you want to."

Presently, when the intricacy of the locket's catch had been fully mastered, Nell stole away to her favorite shady nook in the rose-garden, to be alone with her delight, while husband and wife ascended the steps of the porch, and seated themselves at ease in the wicker chairs. The lattice-work of vines shut off the rays of the westering sun. Blowing over the stretches of lawn, thick-set with shrubberies and studded with trees, the soft breeze came refreshingly, and bore to the two the multiple bland aromas of the generous earth. Beyond the green within which the mansion stood, rolled rich acres of ripening grain that undulated beneath the gentle urging of the wind in shimmering waves of gold. The whole scene was one of peace and prosperity, where a fruitful soil lavished riches in return for the industry of man. The house itself was a commodious structure, bountifully equipped with the comforts and elegancies of living; for James Maxwell was, though still a young man, one who had achieved a full measure of success from out the fertile fields of the West, and his culture and that of his wife had given to their home a refinement unusual in regions so remote. Thus far, their married life had been almost flawless. The wholesomeness and simplicity of their life together, blessed with the presence of the child, varied by occasional visits to the larger centers of civilization, had held them in tranquil happiness. Yet, this afternoon, there lacked something of the accustomed serenity between the two. Now, the oppression that had affected the woman at the mention of Dan McGrew returned to her in some measure, and, by reason of the sympathy between her and him, a heaviness weighed on his mood as well, though he concealed it as best he might, even from himself, and spoke with brisk cheerfulness.

"Yes, Lou, Dangerous Dan McGrew is about to descend upon us—handsome as ever, I suppose, and with all his wiles still working. I can't cease to wonder, Lou, how I ever came to win you from

him." There was a new tenderness in his voice as he spoke the final words.

The wife laughed softly.

"Don't fish, Jim," she retorted. "You know perfectly well that Dan never had a chance with me—not really. He was always a fascinating fellow enough, but, somehow—" She fell silent, a puzzled frown lining the warm white of her forehead beneath its coronal of golden hair.

"Yes," the husband agreed; "somehow, there is always that 'but' when one gets to thinking of Dan." He would have added more, but checked himself, reluctant to speak ill of one who had been his friend, one whom he had bested in the struggle for a woman's favor.

The wife had no such scruple. She spoke incisively, and her voice was harsher than its wont.

"I never trusted him," she said. "I always found myself doubting his honesty."

Thus encouraged, Jim spoke his mind frankly.

"Dan was always as crooked as a dog's hind leg," he declared, without any trace of bitterness, but as one stating a fact not to be denied.

"He wrote to you?" Lou inquired, with a suggestion of wondering in her voice.

"No; it was Tom."

Jim thrust his hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, and brought forth an envelope, from which he took out and unfolded a single sheet of typewritten paper. Then he read the letter:

Dear old Chum:

"Dan McGrew is back again in his old home after five years. He is coming down to see you and his old sweetheart, Lou. He has not yet forgiven you for winning her. He seems to have the same old unsettled disposition and I think he requires the strong hands of a friend to keep him in the straight path.

"Sincerely your old friend,

"Tom."

"Then you don't know when he will get here?" Lou asked.

Jim shook his head.

"No," he said, rather irritably; "we'll just have to wait for the visitation to descend upon us, be it sooner or later."

"We shall have to be nice to him, of course," the wife said.

"I'm not specially keen on dry-nursing Dan McGrew," Jim remarked plaintively. "We were never really intimate, though we were friendly enough. To tell the truth, Lou, I'm mighty sorry Dan's coming here." His face was somber as he gazed into his wife's eyes and read in their clear light sympathy with his own repugnance at the prospect. With an impatient ejaculation, he sprang to his feet and went into the house, where he seated himself before the grand piano that occupied the center of the spacious living-room. In a fierce crashing of dissonances, he voiced the resentment that was in him. But after a little, indignation somewhat relieved by such audible interpretation, his fingers flew into rippling arpeggios, out of which came, at last, a lilting melody, joyous, yet tender. For Jim Maxwell, lover of music all his days, had a gift of improvisation, with a sufficient technique for its exercise. To it he resorted often for the sounding of his deeper moods, and in it found a never-failing solace. So now, presently, soothed by his own art, he got up from the piano and went back to the porch, where he faced his wife, smiling.

Lou smiled in response.

"Thank you, Jim," she said softly. "You scared away all the blue devils with those dreadful discords. And then you just tempted all sorts of good fairies to come and hover, and they did. You cheered me up. It's all right that Dan should come to visit us. Only—"

She broke off, nor did the husband utter any question as to the uncompleted sentence. But in the hearts of both lurked still something of the dread which the music had failed entirely to dispel.

CHAPTER II

The time of Dan McGrew's arrival was not long left in doubt; for, on the third day following Tom's letter, Jim received one from Dan himself.

Dear Jim:

Am back again in the old home after five years, and have grown rich. Am coming right down to see you and my old sweetheart, Lou. I can still hardly forgive you for winning her from me, but I suppose you're the better man. I am still the same rolling stone, ever seeking the gold that seems to get further away as I approach. Will reach your place the Tuesday following your receipt of this letter.

Sincerely,
DAN MCGREW.

So, on the appointed Tuesday, Jim drove in his light, covered buggy to the town, to meet the through train from the East. With him, mounted on her pony, went Nell. She wore the precious locket proudly displayed against her trim khaki coat, and she rode in happy excitement, for the trip to her was a great adventure, and there was, in addition, the thrilling novelty of this stranger's coming, who might be a prince in disguise.

When, at last, the limited roared into the station at Coverdale, and Dan McGrew swung himself down from the Pullman's steps, Jim went forward and seized his visitor's hand in a warm clasp.

"It's good to see you again, after all these years," he cried heartily. At this moment, there was only kindness in his feeling toward the tall, handsome man who returned his greeting so genially. He meant to be as friendly as he could to this guest, to be helpful and loyal, so far as he might, though the other had no claim upon his friendship, and though he himself had neither liking nor respect for Dan McGrew.

After the first exchange of exclamations between the two, Jim called to Nell, who had remained standing diffidently at a little distance, her deeply tanned face, under the dark masses of hair, tense with interest, as her eyes searched the newcomer in vast curiosity. A great shyness was upon her as she approached.

"This is my daughter, Nell," Jim said, with manifest pride in the winsome creature.

"And Lou's!" the other muttered, under his breath. But Jim caught the words, and was moved to a fleeting pity for the man who had failed in love.

Nell murmured a stilted phrase in expression of her pleasure at meeting Mr. McGrew. But as the stranger bent and kissed her, she felt a sudden instinct of distaste under the caress that both frightened and puzzled her. For, hitherto in her childish experience, embraces and kisses had been matters either of pleasure, as in the case of her father and mother and others dear to her, or of utter indifference, as in the case of those for whom she cared nothing. Now, for the first time, a kiss was disagreeable. She felt herself somehow frightened by this fine gentleman, who might be a prince. She could not understand it.

The child could not have understood even had she been able to look into the heart of Dangerous Dan McGrew, there to see the black malice that fouled it.

For such was the fact. There was evil in the mind and in the soul of Dan McGrew. Through all the years since he had lost Lou Ainsworthy, he had longed for her. The circumstance that she was married to another man put no curb on his fierce desire for her. Unlawful passion throbbed in his blood. It was this that had driven him to the long journey. A man wholly without scruple, without care for any other than himself, save only the woman to possess whom he so craved, Dan McGrew was resolved to woo that woman anew, to win her for himself by any means, no matter how false or vile.

Thus, it came to pass that, in the days of his dwelling under the roof of the man whom he was determined to wrong, the visitor played the hypocrite with his host, aping a manner of bluff, candid good-fellowship. With the wife, too, he played the hypocrite. He dared not let her so much as suspect the hot fires that burned in him as he looked yearningly on her loveliness. He realized, at the outset, that her devotion to the man of her choice remained unaltered. He knew that the open confession of his illicit love would move her to scorn and loathing. Only by guile, and that of the craftiest, could he hope for triumph over loyalty and love. With the passing days, the task loomed before him as one almost impossible of achievement. From all that he knew of Jim's past life and all that he could learn concerning the husband's reputation in the community, there showed nowhere any least opportunity for attack. And attack must be made, for only by destroying the wife's faith could he have any opportunity to gain her favor. It occurred to him that, in a conspiracy, he would have need of accomplices. To get some information concerning such as might serve his end, he often rode alone to the town, while Jim was occupied with ranch affairs. There, he entered easily into the vulgar dissipations of the place, making himself hail-fellow-well-met with the riff-raff of the saloons and dance-houses, both men and women. The occupation was, in truth, congenial enough to him; for there was a coarseness in his nature that found satisfaction in loose living. Before he had been a week at the ranch, he had become known to all the blear-eyed habitués of Murphy's saloon—to some of the women frequenters there as well, and to certain men who were not blear-eyed; for they drank little, but played poker much. With these latter, especially, Dangerous Dan fraternized, since, like many a wiser man and better, he greatly admired poker—and his own playing of it.

Dan won the first day, and the second, and the third—as those playing with him meant that he should. But the stakes were small. Dan himself fretted because they were so small. It was his own suggestion, his own insistence, that the stakes should be raised. Immediately, then, Dan's luck slumped. It worried him only a little at first—more, as the ill fortune continued.

On the fourth day, Jess, one of the painted women of the place, leaned over him so closely that the heavy musk of her perfume deadened his senses. She whispered her admiration of his play. Dan forgot that she was the wife without the law of Fingie Whalen, who sat across the table from him, ferret-faced and with slender, agile fingers that touched the deck of cards always with the soft delicacy of a caress. Jess's praise fattened Dan's pride in his own skill. He insisted loudly on larger stakes, which were accepted grudgingly by his fellow players. There were four others at the table with him. Despite his experience in cities further East, he had no least suspicion that the odds of the game were four to one. He lost a most attractive pot on a full house of kings with treys. The event angered him. A little later, a pot that had been raised around the board until it

was of admirable proportions, was lost by him to one who held a humble, but efficient, flush.

Dan was not an honest man. His losses irritated him. He believed, by reason of a certain dexterity in legerdemain, that he could thus cajole fortune. He misjudged his company. When he possessed himself of four aces, and held them concealed in his hand, he failed to note the eyes of Fingie Whalen, which had followed his every movement.

But this same Fingie, being a master of his craft, said nothing until after the bets had run high and it had come to the show-down. Dan had forced the betting to a point where the chips and bills and gold on the table totaled a most respectable sum. He swept the pot toward him, after a contemptuous glance at the four-of-a-kind which Fingie had offered against him. His own four aces were indisputably winners.

But Fingie Whalen thrust out an imperative hand in restraint.

"Nothin' doin'!"

In the same instant, his fingers closed in a viselike grip on Dan's left hand. Dan was the stronger man. But, in the moment of surprise, his muscles yielded. His hand was pulled forward—it lay open on the table.

Within his palm four cards were lying. With his free hand Fingie flipped the four cards upon the table. They were inconsiderable—a deuce, a nine, a pair of sevens.

His trickery thus baldly revealed, Dan would have acted, but he was too late. As he pulled the automatic from his pocket, the man next him thrust an elbow forward and the shot went wild. In the next instant, the pistol had been knocked from his grasp, and four men bore down upon him. Dan was a strong man, and, whatever his faults, absolutely fearless. He struck out vigorously, but the slender, silk-ankled foot of Jess caught him so that he stumbled and missed his blow. The fists of the four beat him to the floor.

It was then that Jim entered the room. He had business in town, and, on learning at the ranch-house that his guest had preceded him, he had felt it incumbent upon him to seek out Dan. He had acted from a rather futile sense of duty toward the man who, as Tom had put it, required the strong hands of a friend to keep him in the straight path.

At the hotel, he made inquiry of the clerk:

"Have you seen anything of Mr. McGrew?"

The clerk permitted himself an indulgent grin at the question. He admired Jim Maxwell, as did all the better element in the community, and he found himself wondering over the disreputable associations of the stranger who was the ranch-owner's guest. His answer was prompt:

"You're pretty sure to find him in the back room over to Murphy's. Usually, when he hits this burg, he sets in a game with the gang over there."

Jim's face lined grimly. He felt a great distaste for his mission. He was no precisian. He was not above taking a glass on occasion at Murphy's bar. But he had no liking for the vicious. The coarse debauchery of such a place was repulsive to him, as it must be to any decent man. Nevertheless, he went out of the hotel, and strode rapidly toward the corner on which stood the rough frame building of the saloon. As he drew near, the report of a shot came sharply.

"What hell's mess is on now?" he muttered savagely, and broke into a run. In the next instant, he had leaped through the door to the back room. He could not see clearly for a few seconds in the gloomy place, after the glaring sunlight of outdoors. But the evidences of conflict were plain enough from the sounds of stamping boots upon the boarded floor, the soft thudding of fists against flesh, the snarling curses, gaspings and guttural gruntings of the combatants, the shrill screams and whimperings of women. Then his eyes adjusted themselves to the dim light, and he made out the form of Dan McGrew, girt about with the thrashing arms and legs of his assailants. Without any hesitation, Jim plunged into the fray. His fists shot home in sledge-hammer blows, against which the four, taken completely by surprise, were defenseless. As they fell away from their victim, Jim saw the automatic lying where it had fallen on the floor during the scuffle. Before his adversaries could rally to the attack, he had pounced upon it, and had sprung back against the wall of the room, whence he menaced the four, who halted in fear of the weapon.

"There's been enough of this," Jim declared, and his voice was ominous, heavy with authority. "I don't know the rights of the fuss, and I don't care a damn, I guess. But there'll be no murder done here—unless it's been done already."

There came some profane grumblings from the discomfited quartette, but they ventured no other opposition to Jim's will, for they feared this man, and he knew it, and he did not fear them in the least.

"We caught 'im cheatin'—blast 'im!" Fingie affirmed, sullenly.

"I'm not interested in the history of the row," was the contemptuous retort; "only in the end of it." Jim thrust the revolver in his pocket, assured that there would be no further trouble; for now the bartender and Murphy had made a belated appearance on the scene. He stooped over the beaten man, who had already begun to show signs of returning consciousness. Presently, in fact, Dan was able to sit up, and to swallow the brandy Murphy had brought. His injuries, though painful enough, were superficial, and after a little he was able to clamber into the buggy, which Jim had hired from the hotel livery for the return to the ranch.

They had gone a mile from the village, when Dan spoke for the first time:

"It was all a devilish frame-up to rob me," he asserted. His tone was vindictive, but, somehow, not quite convincing.

Jim could not keep the scorn from his own voice as he answered:

"You can't complain—you knew what sort they were."

Under the lash of justice in the taunt from the man who had rescued him, Dan McGrew was silent; but the black malice in his heart seethed still more fiercely from quickened fires of hate.

CHAPTER III

Jim explained the affair to Lou, with a bitter emphasis that forbade questioning as to details.

"Dangerous Dan," he said, unable to avoid a sarcastic inflection on the adjective, "got into a fight at Murphy's. When I arrived, there were four on top of him."

"And you pulled them off, I suppose," Lou said, her lips curving to a smile in which amusement blended with admiration for the stalwart man who had spoken so curtly.

"I can't say that I exactly pulled them off," Jim answered, with a faint responsive smile. "Anyhow, I managed to get them off him, one way or another. That's the reason he's here now—worse luck!"

In the days that followed, Dangerous Dan played the hypocrite to perfection. He went no more to town. With Jim, he was all amiability, full of reminiscences concerning the long-ago, when they had pranked together in the devious ways of boys. Indeed, he was so agreeable that Jim found himself at least tolerant of the company of this guest, for whom, without any obligation whatsoever, he had assumed some measure of responsibility. For he remembered always that phrase in the letter Tom had written him: "And I think he requires the strong hands of a friend to keep him in the straight path." He felt an onerous responsibility for the visitor whom fate thrust upon him, though he detested that responsibility—and the man.

It was the time of the harvest. Jim was busy with overseeing a multitude of details in the gathering of the crops. Often, he was away from the house from dawn to dark. Nell, too, was frequently absent, for she delighted in the activities of men and horses and machines in the fields. On her pony, she spent hours in her father's company. The consequence was that Dan McGrew enjoyed unlimited opportunities of association with his host's wife. Necessarily, the intimacy of their former relations had its effect on their present intercourse. Indeed, Dan made a habit of half-jesting, half-sentimental references to that time when he had wooed so vainly. The phrase was often on his lips:

"Do you remember, Lou, when we were sweethearts—?"

Lou, for her part, undoubtedly found something pleasant in the situation. Dan showed himself at his best toward her. Since he knew the utter hopelessness at this time of winning her from her allegiance, he strove to hide from her any expression of the passion that burned within him, though the effort taxed his strength of will to the utmost. But, because of his restraint, Lou was unsuspecting as to the visitor's designs, and accepted Dan's proffer of innocent friendship. He was an amiable and entertaining companion, an agreeable variation from the somewhat monotonous loneliness of the ranch-house; especially at this season of the year, when husband and daughter alike so constantly deserted her. Certainly, she knew that her guest was her lover as well. But the fact did not militate against him in her regard. On the contrary, it gave piquancy to their companionship. The unvarying manner of respect for her as his friend's wife lulled suspicion. She sympathized with him for his failure in attaining the desire of his heart. A mild feminine vanity found gratification in the presence of one so humbly devoted. She had no shred of liking for him, in any deeper sense. Sometimes, indeed, of an evening, when the three were together under the lights of the living-room, she found herself comparing the two men. She admitted that, in a superficial way, Dan was perhaps the handsomer. His features were as clearly cut as those of some Roman emperor. The eyes, set wide-apart, gave dignity to his expression. There was in his air always a suggestion of ruthless strength, even of lawlessness, as of one who would wreak his will, reckless of consequence. It was that quality which in his boyhood had won him the name of Dangerous Dan. He had been given over to escapades, to exploits of daring prowess, to fights against odds for the sheer love of fighting. In bodily strength and the usual manly qualities, the two men were well matched. Lou could see little to choose between them. But her comparison ended always in a great welling of love for her husband. There was in his expression a kindliness, in no way weakness, that the other lacked. And there was, too, something subtle, a quality of the soul, to be felt, though not to be seen or described, by those with whom he came in contact. It occurred to Lou once, as she thus meditated while the men talked together, that Jim's love for music, together with his skill in its interpretation, was characteristic of the difference between the two; for to Dan, though he was at times swayed easily and deeply by music, the art meant little to him, made no component part in his life.

Strangely enough, it was Jim's music that, very directly, precipitated a crisis in the situation.

It was a day of languorous heat from a sun like molten brass. Jim, a little weary after hours among his men, found an opportunity for leisure, and welcomed it. He rode to the ranch-house, and sighed gratefully as he entered the cool-shaded porch, where he found Lou busy with some sewing, while Dan lounged at ease over a pipe. The wife welcomed her husband gladly, and

fussed over him, and brought him lemonade. Jim was listless at first from fatigue, and listened lazily to the chatting of his wife and their guest, without taking part. But presently, he felt himself revived, and entered heartily into the talk. Perceiving his increased animation, Lou made a request.

"If you're not too tired, Jim," she said eagerly, "I wish you would play over that melody you worked out the day you received Tom's letter. I do hope you remember it," she continued, with a little catch of anxiety in her voice. "Bits of it have been running in my head all day."

Jim rose obediently, with a smile for his wife. As their eyes met, Lou smiled mischievously.

"Perhaps, you will remember it began with a great lot of startling chords. But you don't need to repeat them."

Jim grinned appreciatively.

"I'm not in the mood for those chords, as you politely term them, to-day. But I think I have that song still in my head—and in my heart." The last words were spoken softly.

From the living-room, a moment later, came a ripping charm of arpeggios that in their sequence told softly of the melody to come. Then, soon, the air itself sounded in its joyous, lilting rhythm of a passionate tenderness.

It was plain that the player was telling the truth of his heart. The music made a rhapsody of love. Deep within it was a whisper of spiritual things, of things sacred. But, too, the weaving notes made a mesh of sensuous splendor. There was a voluptuous spell in the throbbing cadences.

It was the sensual witchery of the music that probed the emotions of Dan McGrew, and beat them to swirling revolt against the calmness he had striven to maintain. The finer, nobler meaning of the love-lyric touched him not at all. But the sorcery of that exquisite voluptuousness thrilled in his blood. He sat watching the woman, and his eyes were aflame. The enchantment of the melody was upon her as well. Body and soul, she responded in her mood to the mood of the player, whom she loved, even as he loved her. The oval of her cheeks bore a deepened rose. The red curves of the lips bent to a tremulous smile. The dark glory of her eyes shone more radiantly, as she stared, unseeing, into the distance. The lithe, gracious form was become tense in this moment of absorbed feeling. Never had Dan McGrew seen her so wonderfully alive, so vibrant of emotion, so beautiful, so desirable, so altogether adorable. With the beat of the music lashing on desire, the spectacle of the woman's loveliness fed the flames of longing, until the fires of his passion consumed utterly the will that would have held them in control. The music softened at last to a mere breath of beautiful sound. Then, a clangor of triumphant harmonies—and silence.

Lou rose quickly, and went into the living-room.

In his fevered imagination, Dan McGrew could see the caress between husband and wife, and, though he continued to sit immobile, staring dazedly at the spot where a moment before the woman had been, wrath surged in him against that other man. By so much as his love for the woman welled in him, by so much the tide of his hate mounted. For a long time, he sat there, through ages of torture, as it seemed to him. He heard Jim go out of the house by the back way. Soon afterward, there came to his ears the clatter of a horse's hoofs on the gravel of the drive, and he knew that the ranch-owner was off again to the fields, though he did not look up to see. With mad eagerness, he was awaiting the woman's return. Reason no longer had any hold on his mood. He was helpless in the clutch of passion. The music had softened the fibers of resolve. The allurements of the love-light that had shone from Lou's face while she sat listening, had drawn his desire of her into a vortex that held him powerless against its rush. He had no plan of action, no thought as to what his course should be. He was conscious only of an intolerable need of this woman. As the minutes passed, and still she did not return, the longing mastered him completely. He got to his feet, with unaccustomed awkwardness, and went into the living-room with shambling steps wholly unlike his usual elastic tread. He moved falteringly, as might one in the dark in a strange place. For, in truth, the mists of passion had settled on his spirit, shrouding and blinding him.

Lou was reclining in a low easy chair, within a nest of cushions. In the abandonment of her posture, the suave grace of her body's lines, still maidenly, rather than matronly, despite her full womanhood, were clearly revealed to the man's avid eyes. On her face was still the expression of rapturous tenderness that was not for him, which, nevertheless, had enthralled him. Dan McGrew, in this hour of folly, was bereft of judgment utterly. The woman there in the chair, who did not even turn her head toward him as he entered, was a loadstone that drew toward her irresistibly every atom of the blood racing in his veins. He went toward her—without any hesitation or faltering now. All the life in him seemed in this instant to be at its best, potent as never before, and not to be denied. So, he moved forward lightly and swiftly. Before the woman had so much as guessed his presence there beside her, he had stooped and taken her in his arms.

Lou cried out sharply under the shock of fear in the first second, when the man's arms closed about her. But, in the next instant, as she felt herself lifted bodily from her place, and crushed against Dan's breast, a horrible fear beset her that sapped her strength, and left her limp within the fierce embrace. Her face was suddenly become pallid. She was half-swooning under the dreadfulness of the thing that had befallen. Dan rained kisses on the golden masses of her hair, from which the delicate perfume penetrated his senses, and inflamed him to new madness. He loosened his clasp upon her body, in order to raise the white face to his lips. But then, at last, the energies of the woman were suddenly restored. A hot flush of mingled shame and anger dyed face and throat. The heavy lids lifted from the dark eyes, which now were blazing. Her body tensed, then writhed in an abrupt, violent effort for freedom. Her action caught the man unawares. She slipped from his arms, and darted behind the chair in which she had been sitting,

so that its bulk was interposed as a barrier between them.

"Oh, you have dared—!" She broke off, choking over the humiliation of such an outrage against her womanhood. She was pale and flushed by turns. Her body was racked by convulsive shudders. She was wounded to the depths of her being.

Dan, nevertheless, was without compunction at sight of her distress. He was still crazed by desire of her—a desire only intensified a thousand-fold by that brief contact of her within his arms. With a great leap, he was upon her before she could flee again, had caught her shoulder, wrenched her about, and, for a second time, swung her to his breast. The shriek she would have uttered was muffled by his lips on her mouth.

Jim returned early from the fields that afternoon. His heart was fairly singing with happiness, as he mounted the steps of the house. His love was overflowing. All things in life were perfect to him. He halted on the porch, somewhat surprised that neither Lou nor their guest should be there. He chanced to glance through the window into the living-room. It was the very moment when Dan McGrew held the woman strained to his bosom, his mouth on hers. Jim stared, uncomprehending, unbelieving. Then, horror fell upon him, enveloped him in a black pall of agony—for his wife lay supine, unresisting, yielding to the kisses that polluted purity. But, in another second, Lou found strength to twist her lips aside, and the cry that had been stifled broke from her. Its appeal was unmistakable in its frantic suffering. Jim heard and understood, and answered with a roar of rage, as he hurled himself through the door and upon the man who thus dishonored him. Lou, released as Dan heard Jim's shout, shrank away, and stood trembling against the wall, while the two men reeled back and forth in a frenzied grapple. Their strength was so well matched that neither at the outset could gain an advantage; for each was keyed to extreme endeavor by the urge of elemental passions at their full. Then, as their lurching bodies sent a massive chair volleying to the floor, Jim's hold was loosened. Dan had time to snatch the automatic from his pocket—but not time to use it. Before his arm could be raised to fire, Jim had caught his wrist in a grip not to be broken. A hip-lock threw Dan backward violently against the table that stood on one side of the room. Strong though it was, the table yielded under the impact of the two heavy bodies upon it, and went crashing to the floor, with the two men atop the splintered boards. The force of the fall stunned Dan for a moment. The automatic dropped from his released hand. Jim saw, and seized the weapon. Ere Dan could move, he had scrambled to his feet, where he stood menacing the fallen man. Perhaps he would have shot his enemy there and then—but Lou interposed. She had watched with dilated eyes the fight between the men who loved her. Her whole feeling had been a desperate prayer for her husband's victory: a prayer made vital by hate against the man who had so grossly insulted her. Now at the end, however, a softer, feminine emotion compelled her. She leaped forward, and clung to her husband's arm.



THE TABLE WENT CRASHING TO THE FLOOR, WITH THE TWO MEN ATOP THE SPLINTERED BOARDS.

"No, no, Jim!" she implored him. "Don't shoot! Tell him to go.... Oh, my God! Tell him to go, Jim."

Dan clambered clumsily to his feet. The muzzle of the automatic stared at him in vicious threat of death. The issue had left him helpless. He was too weak for further combat, in the reaction from great emotions. He stood with downcast eyes, swaying a little unsteadily.

Jim spoke, his voice metallic:

"You hear?" he said. "Get out of here, you dog! I'll send your things to the hotel to-night. Not a word out of you—damn you!—or I'll kill you in your tracks."

Husband and wife stood rigidly motionless, watching. The beaten man ventured no rebellion against the decree. He went out of the room with a stealthy, slinking haste, as though he feared lest the self-restraint of his victor might fail. But in his heart was neither remorse nor despair—only a fiercer hatred of the man, a fiercer love of the woman.

CHAPTER IV

On the porch, Dan caught up his hat, which had been lying on the chair, and hastened to the stables. He did not scruple now to make use, for the journey to the village, of the horse which he had been accustomed to ride. As he trotted down the driveway, he encountered Nell, mounted on her pony. The girl's gypsy-like face was flushed from a brisk canter under the hot sun, and her black eyes shadowed by the long, curling lashes, were sparkling with the joy of life. She called out cheerily in inquiry whether her father was at the house. Dan called a curt, "Yes," in answer, without checking his pace. But, as the two came abreast, the girl's glance took in the haggard fury on the man's face, and the fearfulness of it fell like a blight on her gladness. She was terror-stricken, without in the least understanding why. For his part, Dan McGrew rode on his way with an added curse for this innocent child.

Dan McGrew registered at the hotel in the village, with a careless announcement to the clerk that the loneliness of the ranch had outworn his patience, and that his luggage would be along presently. Then, after he had been fortified with a solitary drink at the bar, he betook himself to his cell-like room, which was the best the hotel afforded, and there gave himself over to evil plotting. As a result, when night had fallen he sent a message by the hotel porter to Fingie Whalen, who at this hour would doubtless be found somewhere about Murphy's. Under the circumstances, naturally enough, he deemed it a measure of prudence not to visit Murphy's, where he would be at the mercy of the men from whom Jim had saved him. He was sure, however, that Fingie would not permit any false delicacy to stand in the way of possible gain. He had decided that he could make use of the gambler, and of the gambler's painted woman, Jess, and he meant to bribe the pair to his purpose.

Fingie came promptly. Within fifteen minutes from the dispatching of the porter, there came a heavy knock at Dan's door, and in response to a summons to enter, the squat form and lowering face of the gambler appeared. He grinned evilly at Dan, and swaggered forward truculently.

"What in hell are you up to?" he demanded, as he came to a standstill, facing his host, who remained sprawling in a chair, seemingly quite at ease. Dan had determined precisely on how to conduct himself in the interview. So, now, he waved his hand hospitably toward a bottle of whiskey which, with a jug of water and glasses, stood on the table.

"Help yourself," he exclaimed genially, "and sit down. I want to have a talk with you."

"You'll have to do some mighty tall talkin' to get rid of them extra four kyards I seen with my own eyes," Fingie retorted. He approached the table, however, without any reluctance, where he helped himself liberally before seating himself.

Dan made his explanations glibly.

"I got on to the fact that I was getting the bad end of a crooked deal in that card game.... Now, hold your horses!" he commanded, as Fingie scowled and would have spoken. "I don't mean anything for you to get mad about. Only, the four of you were doing me up. I had too much of Murphy's dope, and tried a silly trick. It failed, as it ought to have failed, and I was in bad. I'm sorry, and I want you to let bygones be bygones. You bruised me up good and plenty, if that's any satisfaction to you, and, besides, you got my money. Not quite all of it, however!" he added suggestively. He noted with satisfaction the increasing amiability of Fingie's expression, and the avaricious glint in the ferret eyes of the man at the concluding words.

"What's the game?" Fingie demanded bluntly.

Dan forthwith revealed in detail the work he required to be done. He felt himself safe in being candid with this accomplice, who was wholly free from any moral restraints, and who, as he now made known with many oaths, was still suffering from a swollen jaw, the result of one of Jim's blows. In fine, the gambler entered into the conspiracy with such evident zest that Dan was able to make a better bargain than he had expected for his services and those of his mistress. For an hour, the two discussed the vicious plot, and then, at Dan's bidding, Fingie went in quest of the woman, Jess. Presently, he returned with her, and she, too, was stirred to pleasurable anticipations of the evils to be wrought through her aid. For, on one occasion, she had cast languishing and provocative glances on Jim Maxwell, which he had returned with a look in which pity could not conceal repugnance.

There was a round of drinks for the three, and then Dan made his payment to the gambler. This done, Jess was seated at the table with writing materials, and took from Dan's dictation a note, which she wrote in her natural hand, without any effort toward disguise, and signed with her own name. When, at last, the worthy pair took their leave, that note remained in the possession of their host.

Dangerous Dan's activities for the day were not yet completed. Within an hour, he was astride a horse from the hotel livery, riding rapidly toward the Maxwell ranch. When he was within a quarter of a mile from the house, he dismounted, and hid his horse behind some bushes by the roadside. He went forward on foot cautiously, for it was moonlight, and objects were clearly discernible. Yet, he had little apprehension of being observed, for he knew the customs of the place: that, though it still lacked an hour to midnight, the household would doubtless be fast asleep. There were dogs, it was true, which ran at large; but with these Dan had made friends, and they would raise no outcry against him, though he came with malignant purpose.

Dan, after he reached the lawns that spread before the house, picked his way so as to keep within the shadows of the trees and shrubberies. He avoided the gravel of the drive and the walks, going noiselessly over the turf. The dogs charged upon him, welcoming, but gave no alarm. Burglary was a thing almost unknown in this region, and the ranch-house, as Dan knew,

was left quite unprotected from thievery—or worse. The prowler, when he had come to the porch, took off his shoes, and then crept silently up the steps, and on to a window of the living-room. As he had anticipated, it was open, though there was a wire screen. Under Dan's hand, the screen was raised. It slid easily along its grooves, and in another moment Dan stepped into the room. Enough moonlight fell through the side windows for him to see his way distinctly. He crossed to a corner in which was a writing-desk, commonly used by the master of the house for the keeping of papers not sufficiently important for the safe. Conspicuous upon it was lying a letter-case of Russia leather. Dan could distinguish the darker shadow of its outline upon the surface of oak. With a deft certainty of movement, he took from his pocket the note he had that night dictated to the gambler's woman, and, opening the case, thrust it within one of the compartments. Immediately, he retraced his steps across the room, and climbed out through the window, where he paused to lower the screen. When he had descended the porch steps, he sat down on the grass, and put on his shoes again. In due time, he reached his horse, and rode back to the town, filled with unholy joy over the success of his expedition.

Dan, like many another conscienceless scoundrel, slept soundly after his evil work. Yet, he was early astir, for time pressed, and there was still much to be done toward the accomplishment of his design. He found the morning clear, to his vast relief, since, had rain come, Jim would in all likelihood have remained at the ranch-house, thus shutting off the possibility of Dan's seeing Lou alone, which was his immediate purpose. At once, then, after he had breakfasted, he mounted and rode to the ranch-house boldly. He had no lack of courage, and freely ran the risk of meeting the man whose hospitality he had so abused. That risk, he knew, must be encountered for the sake of his plan. But he knew, also, that the chances of an encounter were small with the harvest requiring the rancher's presence in the fields.

As a matter of fact, when he rode up to the house, he neither saw nor heard anything of its master. But, even before he dropped from the saddle, he saw Lou, sitting on the porch with idly folded hands, and with an expression of deep melancholy casting its shadows over the delicate loveliness of her face. Dan's heart leaped exultantly. He wondered if, by any chance, the reflex of her mood from yesterday might contain some measure of sadness on his account. The slightest feeling of womanly compassion for the culprit might prove invaluable to him in his campaign of treachery. He was annoyed for a moment over the presence of Nell on the porch, playing with a doll. But a second thought caused him to decide that the child's company at the outset of the interview might be of benefit to him, as likely to place restraint on the mother's expression of anger against him.... That he was right in his conjecture, the issue proved.

At sight of Dan McGrew, riding to the door from which he had been so ignominiously spurned less than twenty-four hours before, Lou Maxwell sat in dazed amazement, which swiftly merged in anger, untinged by any thought of fear. That the man was dangerous, she knew. But she was no longer to be entrapped by a belief in the self-restraint of this lover. Moreover, she was on her guard now, not unsuspecting, as yesterday. And, too, there were servants within call. These things flashed upon her in the instant of perceiving him. So, she knew that she need not fear anything from him beyond the insult of his presence. But that he should dare thus to approach startled and confounded her by the sheer audacity of the act. She was stupefied by the effrontery of the man as he dismounted and ascended the steps toward her. She rose, under a sudden impulse of resentment, and stood regarding him with a level gaze, wherein was contempt that might have caused a weaker man to quail. But Dangerous Dan had the courage of his wickedness, and he was not to be intimidated, or swerved from his design, by her contumely, even though to win her favor was the dearest purpose of his heart. For the present, he must withstand stolidly the shafts of her disdain, to the end that he might entice her to his will against her own.

Dan swept the cap from his head, and stood undaunted, yet with an air of humility that was disarming. There was something pitiful in the appealing glance of his eyes, something almost pathetic in the soft tone of humiliation with which he spoke.

"I want you to forgive me, Lou—if you can forgive me—for a madness I couldn't help.... I'm sorry."

Somehow, the woman was appeased, despite herself. Her wrath against the man who had affronted her so mortally was no whit lessened; yet, his manner of humble contrition touched her, against her will, to a feeling of compassion. She still loathed him; notwithstanding, her mood was unmistakably tintured by commiseration. She hesitated for a moment, then turned toward Nell, who, with round eyes of wonder, was regarding her mother and their late visitor.

"Run out in the rose-garden, dear," she said quietly, "and play there for a little while."

The child went obediently enough, though with obvious reluctance, for her curiosity was aroused. She had passed from sight around the corner of the house before Lou spoke again. Then, she did not mince her words:

"You have no right either to ask or to expect forgiveness," she said sternly. Her voice was very cold, charged with bitter contempt. "You have shown the kind of a man you really are. Nothing can change that. I despise you utterly. I hope I shall never set eyes on you again. I do not wish to hear another word from you. Your presence is hateful to me. Go! My husband may come at any moment, and, if he finds you here, he'll kill you on sight, as you deserve."

With the last words, she turned from him, unheeding his exclamation of remonstrance, and went into the living-room.

Dan did not hesitate to follow her.

"Let me say this much, at least," he pleaded, still with utmost humility. "I sinned so because I loved you so. I could not hold myself back. Forgive me, Lou." His voice was tenderly entreating.

The woman faced him resolutely. Her eyes were sparkling with wrath, her voice shook a little under the throb of emotion.

"You, and your love!" she cried, in disgust. "Faugh! Must I summon the servants to put you out of the house?"

Dan made an appealing gesture. He answered with a tone of deprecation.

"No, Lou, you need not do that. I'll go in a moment, and never trouble you again. But, before I go, I must tell you one thing—why I lost my self-control yesterday. It was because I saw you so tender and fond and devoted and unsuspecting in your love for a man who is—unworthy!"

Lou started involuntarily, then stood rigid, too astounded for speech. But, in another moment, she cried out in vehement rebuke:

"How dare you speak like that of Jim!" Her tone was virulent; the dark-brown eyes, usually so limpidly soft in their light, flashed with the fires of her anger. "Jim is as clean as you are foul. How dare you insinuate anything against him! Almost, I wish I hadn't interfered to save your life yesterday. Oh, you beast! How dare you!"

"Because it's true," Dan retorted. He felt now that the situation was well within his grasp, and there was an authoritative ring in his voice that somehow, against her will, caused a chill of apprehension in his listener. He went on speaking swiftly, with incisive earnestness, as one not to be denied. "You see, Lou, I know the truth, and you do not. For example, where is Jim this morning?"

He shot the question at her with such unexpectedness that she answered involuntarily:

"Why, Jim's out in the fields, of course." She realized suddenly the insolence of the question, and would have added a scathing rebuke.

But Dan went on imperturbably:

"Of course, you say that, because you do not know. But he was wise enough to tell you that he must go to town to-day, to attend the meeting of the directors of the bank."

Lou smiled in derision.

"To-day is the regular weekly meeting," she said, with an inflection of dawning curiosity, which Dan noted complacently. "He always goes to the bank-meeting. Why shouldn't he?"

"No reason at all," was the suave response. "But there is every reason in decency why he should not go to another place, of which you know nothing." He spoke in a voice that was significant, grave, portentous. "That's where he is now."

"You mean something—something nasty, I suppose," the wife exclaimed. Her tone was full of abhorrence for this traducer of the man she loved and trusted. "I'll listen to none of your lies against Jim, Dan McGrew."

"I chanced on some information in the town last night," Dan persisted, undismayed by her outbreak. "I have heard gossip before. There's a woman—one of the sort you good women shrink from. She had been drinking too much. She let drop something about the rich man who was coming to visit her to-day, and she said his name was Jim."

Lou felt a tremor of fear. The jealousy that sleeps or wakes in the heart of all lovers stirred within her for the first time. She sought to stifle it, ashamed of even a thought of doubt as to her husband's loyalty. It was monstrous that she should be thus moved by slanderous accusations of one for whom she had only contempt. Again, she would have spoken, but the man forestalled her.

"The woman, whose name is Jess, was bragging in her cups that her lover, Jim, always came when she sent for him. And she said she had written him—Jim—to visit her to-day."

The speaker's sneering assurance, his malignant emphasis on her husband's name, filled the measure of the wife's wrath full to overflowing. She advanced a step, raised her right arm, and with all her strength struck the palm of her hand across Dan's cheek.

"Liar!" she cried, savagely.

The man did not flinch under the blow. The eyes of the two clashed, and held steadily. Dan's cheek whitened where the stroke had fallen, then burned redly. It was the woman's gaze that dropped at last, and Dan smiled, cynically exultant.

"I don't ask you to believe me," he said impressively. "I only ask you to open your eyes to the truth. I suppose Jim would take pains to destroy any note from the woman, Jess. But there's always a chance. Men get careless when they have wives that are so very trusting." His sharp eyes perceived a lessening tension in the woman's form, a growing listlessness in the expression of her face. He knew that there had come a reaction from the strain of her emotions, that her will was growing impotent, that now, at last, she would be pliant to his purpose.

He strode to the desk, and drew out the letter-case, while Lou watched his every movement narrowly, as though she expected some trickery, while powerless further to combat him. Her loyalty to Jim was no less, but her powers of resistance had snapped. So, she looked on as Dan fumbled for a moment among the papers in the letter-case, and then held out to her the note that the woman had written in his room at the hotel, the night before.

Lou took it rather gropingly, in mechanical obedience, because of the utter weariness that was fallen upon her. She read it with eyes that were dimmed—and again. Then, she stood staring still at the page of coarse paper with its rudely scrawled lines, with its words of vile insinuation; but her gaze was unseeing. The man's voice came to her very faintly, as from a great distance.

"Well?"

"It's all a lie, of course," Lou said, feebly. "But I—don't understand."

The cynical exultation in Dan's smile grew. At last, he was bold enough to bring the affair to a crisis.

"Do you dare to ride with me to the town, to test the thing for yourself?"

"Do I dare?" Lou repeated, arousing in some degree from her apathy. "What do you mean?"

"I mean just that," he said. His voice was intentionally brutal. "You've begun already to be afraid of the truth. Do you dare to ride to town with me, and so test the truth with your own eyes?"

The taunt provoked her to a new anger, to a new strength. Once again, the slender form grew tense, the head was raised proudly. Her voice came harshly. There was no note of fear in it now, only a great disdain and something of cruelty.

"I will ride with you, Dan McGrew," was her answer, "to find my husband, and I shall tell him what you've said, and he'll kill you. Now, do you dare?"

"I dare," the man said, quietly. "Let's go."

CHAPTER V

Dan McGrew had plotted with devilish cleverness. He had seized on the fact of Jim's attendance at the bank-meeting as timely to his purpose. He had, indeed, made it the pivot about which the details of his scheming were grouped. As a result of his carefulness in planning, during the hour of his interview with Lou, Fingie Whalen was stationed in the street outside Murphy's saloon. He sat on a bench that stood against the wall of the structure, and smoked incessant cigarettes, the while his ferret eyes scanned closely the length of the main street, down which Jim Maxwell must ride on his way to the bank. Just before him, a saddled horse stood patiently, with the bridle-rein trailing. Within the saloon, Jess, also, waited—with a drink, as well as a cigarette, to comfort her in the interval. Thus, it befell that, when Jim Maxwell came riding briskly into the town, his approach was noted from afar by eyes hired for the purpose. Instantly, then, Fingie acted. He sprang up, and darted into the back room of the saloon, where he called Jess's name, and beckoned. The response of the woman was no less prompt. She stood up quickly, and hurried out of the place, while Fingie himself remained to peer anxiously from the window that gave on the street. There, for a minute, he observed events outside. Afterward, he lounged against the bar with a gratified smirk.

Jim, as he rode slowly down the main street, idly noted the woman who hastened out of Murphy's, and mounted astride the horse. He wondered a little that she did not start away. But, as he drew closer, his keen eyes perceived that the form of the woman was swaying unsteadily in the saddle. Alarmed for her safety, though with a suspicion that only excess of drink ailed her, Jim quickened his horse's pace—too late. Before he could reach her, the woman lurched, and fell heavily to the ground, where she lay motionless, evidently stunned, if not more seriously injured, while the startled horse backed away snuffing.

Jim was on the ground almost as quickly as the woman herself, and was beside her before the few others in the street who came running. He did the natural thing under the circumstances, precisely as Dan McGrew had expected that he would. Since the woman lay with closed eyes, showing no signs of consciousness, unless in the faint moaning that issued from her rouged lips, Jim lifted her in his arms, and bore her through the side door, which Fingie had thoughtfully left ajar, into the back room of Murphy's saloon.... It was at this moment that the gambler left the window to lounge unconcernedly against the bar. Jim carried his burden to one of the round tables which was empty, and placed her gently upon it, continuing to support her with his arms about the waist and shoulders.



JIM CARRIED HIS BURDEN TO ONE OF THE ROUND TABLES.

"Bring brandy!" he called out sharply to the nearest of the occupants of the room, who now

came crowding forward with ejaculations of dismay. The man addressed was Fingie Whalen himself. He stared down at the woman with shocked surprise writ large on his sullen features.

"Why, it's Jess!" he mumbled, in a voice that he vainly strove to fill with distress. "Whatever has she been an' gone, an' done?"

"Get that brandy!" Jim reiterated the command curtly.

"Yes, sir," Fingie answered humbly, and hurried off to the bar. In a moment, he was back with the liquor, which he held to the woman's lips. To Jim's relief, Jess swallowed the draft easily enough—to tell the truth, rather greedily; but of that fact her rescuer was quite unaware, and from it he augured well.

Jess managed her apparent recovery from the effects of the fall with such art as she possessed, which, in truth, was not of the highest, though ample for the beguiling of a man who was honest and kindly and wholly unsuspecting. Soon, her eyes unclosed a little, and she breathed more deeply, and the moaning, which had been interrupted by the brandy, was resumed more vigorously. Through the paint on her cheeks showed the deeper red of a genuine flush, the natural result of the dram, but a sure evidence of vitality, none the less. Jim rejoiced over these signs of restoration, and even smiled on Fingie, as he bade him continue the chafing of the woman's hands.

"She's not seriously hurt," he remarked, with much satisfaction in his voice; "though the way she flopped off that horse was enough to jar her teeth loose." Being ignorant of the fact that Jess had been a member of a circus troupe before she yielded to the blandishments of the gambler, Jim wondered mightily that so severe a fall should have had no worse effect.

Jess opened her eyes wide, and stared up blankly into the face of the man who held her in his arms.

"Where am I?" she asked, with the languid air of her favorite stage heroine when swooning.

"It's all right," Jim hastened to explain soothingly, having due regard to her dazed condition. "You were dizzy for a second, I suspect, and fell from your horse. But there doesn't seem to be anything much the matter, and you'll be all right in a jiffy." He addressed Fingie.

"Bring her another nip of the brandy."

The gambler would have remonstrated against this unnecessary extravagance, but could find no plausible reason for refusal, and Jess, who was enjoying herself hugely, offered him no assistance. When the drink had been brought, she swallowed it without too much display of eagerness, and coughed as a lady should who is unaccustomed to strong waters. At once thereafter, she straightened up to a sitting posture on the table, though she still accepted the support of Jim's arms to his discomfort, and regarded him with coquettish glances of gratitude, which were offensive to him, and to Fingie Whalen as well. He tried to withdraw his arms, but she leaned upon him too heavily, and he was forced for a few minutes longer to retain her in a passive embrace. But, as he repeated the effort tentatively, Jess bethought herself that her recovery had now advanced so far as to make such support unnecessary. Therefore, to play her part, she withdrew herself, and sat up unassisted, but with a hand to her brow to indicate that her brain had not yet wholly cleared.

"Oh, you have been so good to me, Mister!" she gushed. "I shall be thankful to you to my dying day. Why," she added in a burst of imagination, "the horse might have stepped on me, if you hadn't been right there to save me."

"Nothing like that, I'm sure," Jim declared, as amiably as he could contrive. "The horse seemed to be doing his best not to step on you without any help from me. You don't owe me any thanks, really."

Jess put out an appealing hand. It was accepted reluctantly by Jim, and, with his assistance, and that of Fingie on the other side, she got down from the table tottering, and sank into a chair, where she sat limply, with closed eyes, following her rôle devotedly to the end.

"You'll have a drink with us, Mr. Maxwell," Fingie urged, twisting his lowering features to an expression of affability. "What's past is past an' done. You sure did give me an almighty swat on the jaw t'other day, but I ain't one to nuss no grouch, an' Jess here, an' me, we're plumb grateful for yer kindness to her this mornin'. What'll you have, Mr. Maxwell? I'll bring it."

Jim shook his head in refusal. He, too, had no wish to nourish a grudge; but he had no liking for the gambler—less for the woman, whose tawdry airs nauseated him. He was already a little disgusted, with the episode, and desirous to end it.

Jess saw the refusal in his face, and was quick to intervene; for failure now would mean the utter collapse of all their plotting. She spoke gently, and, in the genuineness of her anxiety, her voice trembled with appeal:

"Please, sir—please, Mr. Maxwell!" she besought him.

Jim, in spite of his repulsion, was touched by the woman's earnestness. His sense of chivalry impelled him to yield to a plea so natural and so ingenuous on her part. He smiled, a bit wryly, in answer to her imploring look, and nodded assent.

"I'll have a glass of beer," he said to Fingie, and, as the gambler hurried off to the bar, he seated himself at the table beside Jess.

The woman prattled nervously, made garrulous by the brandy, and by fatuous ambition to impress this aloof companion with her charms. As a matter of fact, the conspiracy came perilously near to failure in consequence of her chatting, which almost drove Jim to flight. His instinct of politeness, however, conquered inclination, and he remained in his place, listening with a forced semblance of interest to hide how desperately he was bored. Yet, throughout, he

rested without a faintest suspicion that this affair was aught beyond the innocent thing it seemed. To him, the happening was merely a nuisance—nothing more, nothing in any wise sinister. It did not occur to him to wonder why Fingie should have volunteered to serve as their waiter. He did not trouble even to follow the gambler with his eyes, as the fellow went to the bar.

For that matter, it would have availed Jim nothing, had he watched never so closely. The card-sharp possessed the dexterity of his trade. Those long, slender, mobile fingers of his had been fashioned by fate for a surgeon, a conjurer, a gambler, or a pick-pocket. Not even the keen-eyed bartender, who was close to him, noticed the tiny vial in Fingie's hand, as it hovered over the frothing glass of beer on the counter, or saw the trickle of the colorless drops into the brew. So, the gambler came back to the table presently, with a tray, on which were two glasses of brandy—one for himself, of generous size; the other for Jess, so tiny that she frowned indignantly at sight of it—and the glass of beer for Jim. The three drank together.... Then, the gambler and his woman watched avidly for what should befall.

There was no delay. Jim, glad that the ordeal was at last done, would have risen to leave. But a strange lethargy held him fastbound. A black cloud descended on his brain; thought ceased. Suddenly, he slumped in his chair. His arms dropped heavily on the table. His head fell on them. Fingie and Jess chuckled aloud in gloating over the inert form of the man. They were not afraid lest he hear them, now.

CHAPTER VI

There was not a word exchanged between Lou and Dan on their ride from the ranch-house to the town. For his part, the man was filled with rejoicing over the triumph that he anticipated. He had no fear of failure. The ingenuity of his plot insured success. Its strength lay in the seeming simplicity of the events that would lead to the desired climax. Dan's only doubt had been concerning his ability to hold the woman to his will, and to make her play her vital part in his machinations. He had realized that he would have need of all his wit to secure from her even a hearing of his accusations against the man she loved. By his arts, he had enticed her into listening, and by reason of the very indignation thus aroused, he had warped her mood to his purpose. So, he went forward full of confidence as to the outcome, exultant, heedless of the misery of the woman who rode by his side.

That misery was poignant. At intervals, wrath flamed high in her, and she longed for the moment when she should bring the two men face to face, that the slanderer might receive the punishment he merited from the one maligned. But, oftener, her emotion dropped into abysses of despair. There had been something unspeakably revolting to her wifely instincts in the tawdry phrases of the ill-written note, signed "Your loving Jess." Her spirit writhed as she recalled the words, so damning in their explicitness: "Shall expect you at the usual time. Don't let your trusting Lou keep you away, as I can't do without you." The wife found herself compelled to fight with all her energies against the demon of doubt that so hideously beset her. That note had been addressed to "Dearest Jim." And Jim was her husband's name, and the note had been lying in his letter-case. And, if these things of themselves were not enough to sap faith, there was the sneering use of her own name: "Don't let your trusting Lou keep you away." The distracted wife told herself a hundred times that her belief in the loyalty of her husband remained unshaken, but it was not so. She lied to herself, from very horror of the truth. Only by fierce and incessant denials of the doubt that welled in her could she repel the assaults of despair. Of the man beside her, she thought hardly at all, except in the fitful and constantly lessening flashes of her anger. Her thought was for the husband, with a pitiful wondering over the hateful mystery that had come to pass. Oh, surely, there was some simple explanation of it all—there must be! It was a hoax, a jest, some misunderstanding—anything! But, though she argued against belief, there remained always in her consciousness the stubborn, sickening facts, and a great dread lay crushingly upon her spirit. The agony of suspense grew unbearable. Her quirt rose and fell in a vicious lash on the flanks of the mare. The astonished thoroughbred leaped and stretched into a run.... Dan McGrew pressed his own mount forward, to keep pace.

While the two thus rode toward the town, there was a period of tedious inaction for Dan's accomplices. In the back room of Murphy's saloon, Jess remained impatiently in her seat at the table, with the empty brandy glass before her. She would have liked another drink, but dared not call for it, since it had been forbidden by her master, because her part in the sordid drama was not yet finished. Beside her, Jim sat motionless, his body sprawled clumsily over the table. He had not stirred since his yielding to the influence of the drug. The only evidence of life about him was the sound of stertorous breathing. The habitués of the place had given no heed to him after a few sneering comments concerning one who would get drunk so early in the day.

Fingie Whalen, after he had seen his drops take effect on the victim, went out of the saloon, and reestablished himself on the bench against the wall, where once again he gave himself over to an unremitting survey of the main street, down which any one coming from the ranch must pass. He smoked with nervous rapidity, which increased as minute after minute passed, and

there was still no sight of those for whom he watched. At the end of an hour, the gambler's impatience had become anxiety. He began to fear failure at the last, when success had seemed assured. It might well be that, in spite of Jess's note, Dan McGrew had been unable to persuade Lou Maxwell into accompanying him. Or—as would be equally disastrous—they might come too late. Fingie had been as liberal as he dared in the drugging of the beer, but there is a great difference in the reactive powers of various men against such poison. He had not been minded to run any risk of murder. Therefore, he could not tell with precision when Jim Maxwell would recover consciousness. As the minutes hurried on, Fingie's fear mounted by leaps and bounds. From time to time, he left the bench, and peered in through the window, to reassure himself as to the continued unconsciousness of the drugged man.

Then, at last, as he turned from one of these glimpses through the window, Fingie Whalen saw in the distance the forms of two riders coming at a furious gallop. For a second, he stood staring, to make sure that there was no mistake, that these were in fact those for whom he had waited with such anxiety. In another moment, he became certain that one of the two who approached was Dan McGrew. The flapping of a divided skirt proved that the other rider was a woman. He could no longer doubt that McGrew had succeeded. There needed now only to set the stage for the final scene. For the second time that day, Fingie whirled and darted into the saloon. He caught up from the bar a glass of brandy, which he had left under the barkeeper's charge, since he had not deemed it safe on the table within Jess's reach. He moved now without undue haste, in order to avoid attracting attention to himself and the others concerned. When he had reached the table at which Jess and their victim were seated, he put the glass down, with a nod to the woman to indicate that the end of the play was now at hand. Jess shoved her chair close to that in which Jim slouched. At the same time, Fingie seized the unconscious man by the shoulders, and lifted the heavy form upright in the chair. Jim yielded limply to the procedure—a dead weight in the other's grasp. He was still unconscious. His face was hot and flushed, the face of one under the influence of liquor. His breath still came noisily. Fingie, straining under the weight, tilted the flaccid body over a little way, until it rested against the shoulder of Jess, who braced herself to sustain it. Fingie raised Jim's left arm, as the unconscious man reposed thus against the woman at his right, and laid it about her neck. Thus the two remained in an embrace, which bore every evidence of fondness that knew no shame in this public and disreputable place. Jim's head sagged, until it rested upon the woman's bosom. Her right arm was wreathed about him, holding him tenaciously, with all her strength, lest he lurch away from her. With her left hand, she took up the glass of brandy, which Fingie had brought, and held it close to the lips of the unconscious man.



JIM'S HEAD SAGGED UNTIL IT RESTED UPON THE WOMAN'S BOSOM.

Such was the business of the piece, as it had been arranged beforehand in each detail by the conspirators. Jess cast a look of inquiry toward the gambler, to learn whether or not the situation met all the requirements of the plot. He gave a brief nod, and grunted approval. He heard the clatter of hoofs in the street outside—a clatter of hoofs of horses ridden in haste. It ceased just without the door of the saloon. Fingie walked quietly to the bar. A quick glance about showed that the attention of none had been attracted to his movements. He grinned evilly in anticipation.... From the time when he had first sighted the riders, not more than a half-minute had elapsed. He leaned against the bar, and stared furtively toward the window that gave on the street.

Dan McGrew drew close alongside Lou, as the pair pounded down the main street of the town.

"Stop at the corner, this side of the bank," he called to her. "At Murphy's saloon."

The woman shivered as her ears caught the words. She knew the character of the notorious place, which catered to the most depraved tastes of the community. Was it to a resort so ignoble that she must go to refute the slander against her husband? To refute it! Or—she broke off her thought, appalled by the terrible alternative. Then, in the following instant, she found herself already abreast of the saloon. She heard her companion's brisk command:

"Stop here!"

She obeyed, though, almost, the dread that beat upon her forced her to flee on, and on—anywhere away from the horror that menaced. She pulled her mare to a standstill, and got down from the saddle, and let the bridle-reins trail. She moved as one in a dream—rather, as one in a nightmare. Yet, now the crisis was upon her, she did not suffer quite so cruelly. Her feeling was numbed, somehow. It was with a certain listlessness in her voice that she addressed Dan McGrew, as he stepped to her side.

"Well?"

"There's no need to go inside," Dan explained. "We can see enough, I fancy, through the window.... Come!"

Lou followed obediently whither he led. So the two came to the window, with the dirty glass and its tattered shade raised high, so that whosoever would might look freely on the squalor within. Dan stepped forward and peered into the room for a moment, then turned and beckoned to Lou.... And the wife advanced, as he bade her, and looked over his shoulder.

Lou's eyes, accustomed to the full glare of the noon-day sun, could at first distinguish nothing more than a vague litter of weaving shadows within the murk of the dingy room. Very soon, however, her vision adjusted itself to the dim interior, so that she began to see distinctly. Even in this moment of emotional stress, Lou was conscious of her repugnance at the spectacle of coarsely flaunted vice. She noted the line of sodden men loafing along the bar, the few others grouped about the tables with the bedizened and painted women, whose wanton faces, and more wanton manners, proclaimed their unsavory sort. Yet, her attention was thus arrested for only a fleeting fraction of a second. Then her gaze fell on that other table and she saw her husband.

There could be no doubt as to Jim's identity. As she recognized him, Lou's dark brown eyes dilated before the fearfulness of this thing. For she saw, as well, every detail of his visible plight. The scene was etched on her consciousness with the acid of horror, there to remain indelible throughout the years. She knew, in the first second of seeing, every feature of the creature within whose arms her husband was lying. She knew the cut and color of the soiled bodice, with its drapery of cheap lace over the bosom—on which his loved face reposed. She felt a nausea. There was nothing lovable now in his face. Instead, it was bestial, repulsive—the face of a man who had given himself over to gratification of the beast within him, and who was wallowing in the mire of his degradation.... So it seemed to Lou Maxwell, as she stood staring, bereft, upon that scene which to her meant the end of all things. The life had gone out of her face. A sickness as of death clutched at her heart. Suddenly her gauntleted hands caught Dan McGrew's shoulder. Only his quick support saved her from falling. She spoke dully, in a broken whisper:

"Take me away."

CHAPTER VII

Lou was able to climb to her saddle with Dan's assistance, though she moved very feebly, and her white, drawn face was that of one who had been stricken with a mortal hurt. But once safely mounted, with less strain on her muscles, a little strength flowed back into her, so that she sat steadily enough as the two started back at a walk over the way down which they had ridden so furiously. By the time the town was left well behind, the fresh air and the motion had restored her faculties in part, both physical and mental. But with the clearing of her brain came an agony of realization almost unendurable. She urged her horse to its full speed, fain to put all distance possible between her and the detestable scene on which she had just looked. Indeed, the instinct of flight in this crisis of her fate was dominant. Her one desire was to flee to the ends of the earth, to escape forever from all that had been.

Throughout the years of her life hitherto, Lou had experienced no real anguish. Her sorrows, great though some of them had seemed to her as child and woman, had been essentially trivial, over trivial things. She had never known the ills of poverty. The death of her father had occurred while yet she, the only child, was too young to grieve deeply or long. Her mother's death had occurred some years after her marriage, when she had been weaned from the old home-life. In truth, all her years had been pleasant ones. The sum of her happiness had been far beyond that of most. The love between her and her husband had been a beautiful one, in which she had found supreme content. It had been crowned by the birth of the child. It had held the promise of serenely joyous years to come.... And now, the catastrophe! Here was the end of all things. Doubt of her husband's loyalty had never tainted her devotion. She had believed utterly in his cleanness, his wholesome manhood. And now, in an instant, the whole fabric of her life was in shreds, beyond any possibility of reweaving; befouled beyond any possibility of purifying. All her happiness had been an illusion, the gracious charm of it only a mask that covered the ugly truth.

Lou had never a doubt concerning that truth. With her own eyes, she had witnessed it. She had seen Jim in drunken debauch with the painted woman, who had boasted that this lover came always at her call. The wife had seen her husband fondled openly by a wanton in a public place, had seen the creature holding the glass to that husband's lips. Dan McGrew had plotted well. By his intrigue, he had destroyed absolutely all her faith and happiness.

The humiliation of the revelation sharpened the torture. It would not have been quite so terrible, Lou thought, if Jim had loved some woman of a decent sort. But the loathsomeness of being scorned for that infamous woman of the dance-hall—! The wife writhed under the ignominy: that a being so sordid should have ousted her from her husband's heart. His infatuation for one so base proved his entire worthlessness. He was but the gross, soiled

caricature of her ideal. The idol of gold which she had worshiped was shown to be of clay—clay filthy and corrupt.

Dan McGrew realized, to some extent at least, the anguish of the woman at whose side he rode. Had it been consistent with his purposes, he would have spared her that suffering. In his way, he sympathized with her keenly. Yet the fact that her grief was wholly of his making, had no cause whatsoever except the visible lie which he had built for her eyes to see—the fact that he alone had thrust the iron into her soul troubled Dangerous Dan not at all. He had no remorse, though he pitied her. He was absolutely without compunction for the misery he had wrought. Dangerous Dan was a strong man, save for his vices. He was a hard man as well. What he desired, he meant to take, and he was ruthless and unscrupulous as to the manner of his taking. More than anything else in the world, he desired to possess for his own Lou Maxwell. To that end, he had concocted his scheme of villainy. The woman's present agony was a necessary part in the success of his plotting. So, though he was sorry for her whom he had thus fearfully wronged, he felt no vestige of regret—only exultation. In his way, Dan McGrew loved Lou. His love for her was, indeed, the chief passion of his life. But his love, like that of many another man, was wholly selfish. She was necessary to his happiness. That he must destroy her happiness in order to secure his was of no importance. Moreover, with the egotism of a strong man, he was confident that he would be able in the days to come to make her happier than she had ever been before.

Now, on the ride, Dan discreetly kept silence. He could follow well enough the workings of the woman's mood, and he believed that it would be unwise at this time to attempt the direction of her thoughts. It seemed to him certain that under the circumstances she must inevitably reach the conclusion he desired. There might be danger that a suggestion from him would provoke suspicion, though this possibility was remote, after the effectiveness of the scene on which she had looked. Nevertheless, despite his confidence in a victorious issue of the affair, Dan was glad when Lou went forward at full speed. He, like Fingie Whalen, knew that the influence of the drug on Jim Maxwell would be only of a temporary sort, and that soon the ranch-owner would recover consciousness. Just how long an interval there might be before the husband's return to the ranch, Dan could not tell. But, because he was in a fever of impatience for a rapid development of events, he rejoiced over the haste in which they rode, and welcomed with a sigh of relief their arrival at the ranch.

As Lou dismounted, Nell came running from the porch with a rapturous cry of greeting. The mother dropped to her knees, and gathered the girl into her arms, with passionate kisses. She realized, with bitter self-reproach, that in all this time of trial she had had not a single thought for the daughter whom she so loved. In her humiliation as a wife she had forgotten her obligation as a mother. Now, abruptly, the shameful significance to the daughter of what had befallen was borne in upon Lou's consciousness.

"He is unworthy ever to look on her face again." She was unaware that in the intensity of her feeling she had spoken aloud with deliberate emphasis.

Nell, already somewhat perplexed by the ardor of these caresses, became even a little frightened by the unfamiliar expression on her mother's face, and by the sternly spoken words, which she did not understand. She was relieved when, the next moment, she was released, and she hurried off to her favorite nook in the rose-garden, where she might be alone to puzzle over the meaning of it all.

Unlike the child, Dan McGrew understood exactly the wife's ejaculation, and he knew that he had achieved his end. Without invitation, but quite as a matter of course, he walked at Lou's side as she ascended the steps and entered the living-room. She accepted his company without remonstrance, indifferently. It was only after she had sunk down into a low easy chair, where she lay back wearily with closed eyes, while she drew off her gauntlets, that Dan McGrew finally dared to address her explicitly:

"You must leave him, of course," he said gently. His voice was very grave and kindly. It came with something of a shock to the woman's ears—she had forgotten him so completely in the self-absorption of her mood. But, too, there was something soothing to her in the manner of his utterance. She became aware that here was one to aid her in the accomplishment of things to be done. She no longer remembered how, within the hour, she had execrated this man who now stood before her. She had become oblivious of the insult he had so recently put upon her. The revelation of her husband's treachery obsessed her mind to the exclusion of all else. So, she was fully disposed to accept the assistance of Dan McGrew in this emergency. She was ready to acquiesce in his suggestions for her guidance in escaping from this place which her husband had polluted. She sat up in a quick access of energy.

"Yes," she said harshly, "I must leave him—at once." Her animation grew. Her face, which had been pallid a moment before, was flushed with eagerness. Her expression became resolute. "I must take Nell away from him. I don't want him ever to set eyes on her again—he's not fit."

Dan forbore comment. There needed from him no condemnation of the husband. The wife's conviction as to Jim's guilt was complete. So he avoided Lou's reference to her husband's culpability, and spoke to the point:

"You want to get away without seeing him again," he remarked, in a tone of positiveness, as if the matter admitted of no doubt.

"Yes," the wife answered. "It would be too horrible to see him again! And for Nell—"

Dan McGrew nodded sympathetically.

"It would only mean a nasty row," he agreed. "You might as well spare yourself that—and spare the child, too," he concluded, craftily. For he realized that Lou would fly fast and far for the

child's sake, if not for her own. He detested the necessity of the child's presence in their flight, but he recognized the fact that it was a necessity, and therefore to be endured—even, as far as possible, to be turned to advantage.

"Yes," Lou continued, "we must hurry as fast as we can, for I suppose there's no telling when Jim might return. And it would be dreadful to run into him in the town, on the way to the train."

Dan McGrew nodded assent.

"It would, indeed!" he declared. "In the condition he's in now there's no telling what he might do."

Lou shuddered at the memory of her husband's sodden face, as she had seen it resting on the breast of the woman in Murphy's saloon.

"We must not meet him!" she declared desperately. "It would be too terrible to have him see Nell." She pressed her hands to her bosom as if to hold back the emotion that surged within her. "More dreadful for Nell to see him. I want her to have a clean memory of her father, whatever he is."

"We can avoid any danger of meeting him," Dan McGrew asserted, with a brisk tone of confidence that reassured his listener. "We'll just ride across country to the main line. Do you know the road? I have only a general idea."

Lou was all eagerness over the suggestion.

"Yes, yes," she exclaimed excitedly; "that is the way to do it. I know the road. We must get ready and start at once. But you don't need to go with us."

Dan McGrew spoke decisively:

"I've got you into this mess, Lou, and it's up to me to see the thing through. I want to help you in any way I can—and just now you need help." His tone was firm, yet tender, with a note of devotion in it that touched the distraught woman. She sprang to her feet and held out both her hands, which were seized in a warm clasp.

"Thank you, Dan," she said gently. "God knows I need help."

Then, forthwith, she became all animation. She summoned her maid, and ordered that two small bags which could be carried on horseback should be packed with necessaries for herself and Nell. At Dan's suggestion, she sent an order to the stables for Nell's pony and two fresh mounts to serve for Dan and herself. These things done, it occurred to her that she must leave some explanation of her departure for her husband on his return. She seated herself at his desk, and wrote hurriedly and briefly, in distaste for even this indirect contact with the man who had wronged her.

Dear Jim:

I know all. I do not want to be in your path, so am going away. You love another, so will perhaps not miss me.

Good-by, Jim.

I forgive you.

Lou.

Lou, when she had set her name to the short form of words, thrust the sheet into an envelope, which she addressed with the single word, "Jim." For long seconds she sat staring at the lines she had last traced—that name which had been through so many years the symbol of her happiness, which was now become the symbol of vileness and misery. The horror of it smote her anew, essenced in that name which had been her blessing, which was now become her curse.

The sound of the hoofs stamping on the gravel before the door aroused her. The maid came to announce that the horses were in readiness, with the bags strapped to the saddles. With the maid came Nell, who had needed no preparation, since she was already in her riding clothes. Lou took the girl in her arms and kissed the exquisite dark face with a tenderness that was like a benediction.... She had no least hint that this was destined to be the last time her lips should touch the soft roundness of the girlish cheek.

"You are to ride with me this afternoon, Nell," she said. "Don't ask any questions now. I'll tell you all about it by-and-by. It's a surprise." She shivered over the words. A surprise—yes, a surprise that meant the end of all things. So, presently, the three went forth from the living-room, and across the porch, and down the steps, and got into the saddles of the waiting horses. Without any exchange of words among them, they rode away. None of the three looked back—Nell, because she had no guess as to the sinister meaning of this parting; Dan, because even his calloused soul felt a twinge of shame over the ruins that he left behind; Lou, because she could not.

It was not until late afternoon that Jim slowly struggled back to consciousness. He was first aware of a deadly nausea, which seemed billowing through every atom of his being. Then he felt the torture that stabbed through his brain. In an effort of revolt, he raised his head, though the movement tried his strength to the utmost. His eyes swept dimly over the scene, and a dull wonder filled him. Just at first, he did not recognize the place. Very quickly, however, the acrid odors of spilled liquors and the reek of cheap perfumes from the women quickened memory. Suddenly his eyes opened wide, and he saw clearly, with new consciousness of his surroundings—and of himself. He realized that in some mysterious fashion, altogether inexplicable to him, he had been overcome in the back room of Murphy's saloon. His mind went to the period immediately preceding the blank in memory. He remembered his presence there along with the woman, Jess, and the gambler, and his taking a drink with them. Of whatever had followed, he had no knowledge. Evidently, he had suffered a seizure of some sort. As his faculties were restored, it occurred to him that he might have been drugged by the gambler or the woman, for the purpose of robbery. But a hasty examination showed that his watch and money were untouched. Besides, it seemed to him, on second thought, preposterous that either of the two should have dared anything of the kind against him. No, it was certain that he had been attacked thus without warning by some unexpected physical ailment. He was rather alarmed by the experience, as strong men usually are when unaccustomed weakness assails them. He determined to submit himself to a careful examination at the hands of a competent physician, on his first visit to the county-seat.

The nausea had subsided in some measure, and the pain in his head, too, had lessened. But he felt mouth and throat parched. He got up, moving with difficulty, and, after a few moments of unsteadiness while he held to the back of a chair for support, he was able to stand firmly enough and to walk forward to the bar.

"Give me a glass of water," he said to the bar-keeper.

The fellow obeyed with alacrity, for he knew Jim Maxwell to be a man of importance in the community, and he had been puzzled by the events of the day—even a little frightened lest trouble come of them. Jim gulped the water and demanded more. He drank a number of glasses before his thirst was even partially quenched. The effect was speedy. He felt strength returning to him. His brain was quite clear again.

The bar-tender, watching narrowly, saw that the ranch-owner was himself once more. He ventured to speak ingratiatingly, in the hope of satisfying his curiosity.

"That was quite some snooze, Mister," he remarked, with a smirk.

"It was nothing of the sort," Jim snapped. "I don't know what it was. But it was bad enough."

"I thought mebbe as how you'd had a drop too much," the bar-keeper explained, "an' was jest nacherly sleepin' it off. If we'd knowed you was sick, we'd have got the Doc in to give you a look-over."

"That's all right," Jim answered. "I'm not blaming you any—unless it was the drink you gave me that poisoned me."

Presently Jim went out into the street. He found his horse tied to a ring at the corner of the saloon building. He unhitched it, mounted, and rode slowly homeward. He was still in distress physically, but his condition was improving from moment to moment, so that he no longer felt apprehension as to the outcome. Soon, indeed, he became sufficiently sure of himself to put his horse to a trot.... As the shadows of evening drew down, he rode up to the door of his home.

There was a bank of lurid clouds in the west, massed heavily on the horizon. The air was motionless, weighted with portents of coming storm. Jim felt the oppressiveness, and in a subtle way it rested upon his mood as something sinister. A weight of melancholy pressed upon him as he entered the house. The stillness of the air seemed reënforced in the quiet of the living-room into which he stepped. There was no sound. He listened for his wife's greeting. It did not come. He listened for the pattering steps of Nell, running to welcome him. He did not hear them. The silence hurt him in some curious way. He had an overwhelming sense of the absence of those he loved—the absence of wife and child.

He crossed the room to his desk. He slipped the loop of the quirt from his wrist and let it fall on the desk. The effect of the drug was not yet assuaged; he was very thirsty. He called to the maid passing through the hall:

"Bring me a glass of water, Mary."

The girl came quickly with the drink. She and the other servants were in a ferment of curiosity, full of suspicions and wonderings. There had been much gossip in the house over the fight between the two men the day before, which had not passed unobserved. To-day, the wife had suddenly left her home with the man who had been ordered out of the house. Over this fact, scandalous tongues were clacking loudly. Mary had made it her business to be passing in the hall, in order that she might note the attitude of the master at such a time. So she stood, in eager expectation, eying her master closely, as he took the glass of water.

But he set the glass back on the tray suddenly, for he saw an envelope lying on the desk, addressed in the handwriting of the woman he loved:

"Jim."

A foreboding of disaster crashed upon him. He trembled, standing there with the envelope unopened in his hand. Then he strove to throw off this craven dread—for which there was no reason. He turned to the maid.

"Where is your mistress?" he asked, quietly.

It was the question for which Mary, and the whole household, had been waiting.

"Why, sir," she answered falteringly, dismayed now that the matter was coming to a crisis, "she has gone out—with Miss Nell, sir—and with Mr. McGrew."

McGrew! The name roared in Jim's brain. The man who had insulted his wife, whom he had beaten and driven from his home like a whipped cur... And Lou and Nell had gone with Dan McGrew. He felt a sickness, inexpressibly more horrible than the physical nausea that had sickened him there in Murphy's saloon. That Lou should have gone with Dan McGrew—and Nell! The thing was incredible!

His eyes searched the room, as if looking for wife or child, or for some clew to explain the mystery. They fell on the envelope, which he still held in his hand. He tore it open in a frenzy of eagerness.

He read confusedly. But, somehow, the essential meaning beat upon his brain. He grasped the fact that the woman he loved had gone from him. It was all a monstrous lie, of course. Yet, there was the horrid truth—she had gone away. Lou and Nell—the two things in the world—had gone away. He could not understand. But they had gone.

"Good-by, Jim!"

She had written that, and she had signed it "Lou." There was confusion in his thoughts. He could not guess the meaning that lay back of what his wife had written. He only knew that there was some monstrous lie.

The maid's voice came softly. The girl was appalled at the expression on the man's face as he stood staring down at the sheet of paper in his hands. It was from a desire to bring things back to the ordinary that she spoke apologetically:

"Your glass of water, sir."

The words made a mechanical impression on Jim Maxwell's consciousness. He stretched out his left arm, and his hand, from which he had not yet pulled off the riding-gauntlet, closed over the glass on the tray. He raised it toward his lips. His eyes fell on the note once more.

"You love another, so will perhaps not miss me."

The incredible words were there before him. And she had gone—she and Nell... With Dan McGrew! The thing was impossible. There was no truth anywhere. He stared down at the letter, aghast at the horrible conundrum propounded to him by fate. Lou had gone—with Dan McGrew!... Why?

His eyes held to the note.

"—so I am going away."

The words beat a refrain of dreadfulness in his brain.

"—so I am going away."

His hand, holding the glass of water, clenched fiercely in the reflex of emotion. The glass was shattered, and the fragments were multiplied as his passion still sought expression in the violence of that clutch.



HIS HAND CLENCHED FIERCELY IN THE REFLEX OF EMOTION.

Jim turned to the maid, who had watched his unconscious splintering of the glass with distended eyes.

"When did they go?" he asked.

Mary answered hurriedly, disconcerted by the obvious distress of her master.

"It was some hours ago, sir. They went sort of unexpected-like, as it seemed to me, sir."

Jim reasoned swiftly. Somehow, he sensed a frightful fraud underlying this mystery. But he knew the need of haste. By some malevolent chance, his wife had been led into this error of understanding—out of which she had written:

"I do not want to be in your path, so am going away."

Jim turned to the girl, who was still hovering doubtfully in the doorway.

"There's been a mistake somewhere, I guess." His voice was quiet, but in it throbbed a heart-beat of deepest feeling. "Tell the foreman, I want the boys to ride with me to-night."

CHAPTER IX

As the cavalcade passed from the driveway into the high road, which ran east and west, Dan McGrew spoke quickly.

"We'll ride toward the town."

Lou turned her horse obediently, according to his direction.

"But why?" she demanded, wonderingly. "We might meet—him."

"That's a risk we must run," was the decisive answer. "When we are well out of sight of the house, we'll cut around through the fields, and get back into the road below. So, if they come after us, they'll start the pursuit in the wrong way."

In this fashion, the matter was carried out. Half an hour later, the three were back on the high-road, riding in the direction opposite to that in which they had started. They went forward rapidly through the hot hours of the afternoon, but not too rapidly, in order that the horses might hold out for the long journey. Nell, from time to time, would have questioned her mother over this strange outing. She became a little petulant, fretful from balked curiosity. But the mother was not minded to explain as yet. It required all her powers of self-control to maintain a fair degree of composure in this time of trial. She knew that any attempt to make plausible explanations to the girl would overtax her strength, and cause collapse.

Night drew down on the travelers. With its coming, the storm, which had been threatening in the sultry air, broke furiously. Within the minute, the three were drenched. Dan was disturbed by the discomfort thus inflicted on mother and child, as well as himself, but pressed on stubbornly, since no relief was possible. Presently, however, as he asked a question concerning roads and distances, Lou had an inspiration:

"We can cut off eight or ten miles by not going through Salisbury, to which this road runs. We can ford the river, and beyond it's open range to Hoytsville. Then we'll strike the high-road again."

Dan questioned her closely, and was convinced by her replies.

"I've ridden it often with—with Jim," she said. There was a catch in her throat at utterance of the name. "I think it would be quite safe, even in the dark."

Dan agreed as to the advisability of her plan. Presently, then, the three turned out of the road, and moved toward the river, which, Lou explained, ran through a little valley just beyond. The rain had ceased as suddenly as it had begun. The passing of the storm had cleared the air. The oppressive heat of the afternoon and evening was gone. Now, a chill breeze was blowing. It pierced the drenched garments of the three, so that they shivered with cold. Lou became alarmed lest Nell should suffer some ill consequence from this exposure. As they descended the slope that ran down to the river-bank, she spoke suddenly.

"Let's stop here for a little rest," she suggested; and her voice was so anxious that Dan hardly dared refuse. For that matter, he had had something of the sort in his own mind.

"It's imprudent," he answered; "but, if we must, why, we must, I suppose."

"I don't think it's really imprudent," Lou maintained. "There are trees and bushes along the river-bank to hide us and the horses. Anyhow, we're out of sight from the road. Could you build a fire?"

"If I can find any wood dry enough to burn," was the rather doubtful response.

They halted on the edge of a grove, which grew close to the river. Dan led the horses within the concealment of the trees, and tied them as best he could with his chilled fingers. He had difficulty in finding dry leaves and branches for the fire, but, in the end, succeeded in making a blaze. Soon, the three were grouped close around the flame, grateful for the heat, which relaxed their stiffened muscles, and sent up steaming vapors from their wet garments. After a little, Dan left the fire for a look at the river, which was to be forded at this point. He could see only very indistinctly, for scudding masses of black cloud hid moon and stars. As nearly as he could make out, the river was about fifty yards in width, its surface almost flush with the bank on which he stood. In the darkness of the night, the vaguely seen stream appeared somehow disquieting, as if in treacherous waiting Dan McGrew, looking on it, felt a shiver that was not from the cold. He turned away, with an impatient curse for his moment of weakness. Lou had said that the utmost depth of water in this shallow creek would not reach to the stirrups. Yet, despite self-contempt over his feelings, Dan experienced a depression of spirit for which he could in no wise account, as he returned to the fire.

It was perhaps an hour after their arrival in the grove that the man's alert ears caught a thudding of hoofs upon the high-road from which they had turned aside. He listened and made sure that the riders—for there were several—were following the road toward Salisbury and Hoytsville, at full speed. Had they been going in the opposite direction, they could have been disregarded. But, under the circumstances, their presence seemed a sure indication that pursuit in the right direction had been begun. To escape them, it would be necessary to press forward with all haste, taking advantage of Lou's plan for a shorter distance.

Even while his thoughts were formulating this decision, Dan had taken prompt measures of precaution against discovery. He had scattered the glowing embers with thrusts of his feet, and

had stamped upon them, until they were completely extinguished.

"We must ride instantly," he said, in an authoritative voice to Lou, who acquiesced at once. For she, too, had heard the galloping through the night and had guessed its meaning.

Dan hurried to unfasten and lead out the horses. When he was come to the place where he had tied them, he could distinguish in the faint light only the two larger mounts. Instantly, the apprehension that had been so formless crystallized in definite fear of a possibility, which, in the following moment, was proven fact. Dan cursed again over the clumsiness of his cold-stiffened fingers, which had caused such a mishap. More than ever, now, he detested the presence of the child with him and Lou, for it was likely to prove a serious encumbrance in their further flight. He called softly, but there came no nicker of response from the pony. He explained to Lou and Nell what had happened, and, at his request, the girl called, in hope that her pet would hear the summons and obey her voice, if not another's. But, again, there was no response. A search, Dan knew, would be useless, since the escaped pony might be already miles distant, on its way to the ranch.

"I'll take Nell on behind me," Dan announced roughly. "It's the only way."

Within a minute, Lou and Dan were mounted. Then, Dan bent over, and swung the girl up to a seat behind him.

"Hold on tight," he commanded.

The girl obeyed passively. What with the cold and the soaking and the loss of her pony, and this dreadful river which they were about to enter, and the strangeness of everything, the child was frightened and miserable. She was sobbing very softly, and the sound irritated Dan McGrew.

"You lead, Lou," he ordered, "since you know the way. You can see well enough?" he asked anxiously. "You're sure that you know the way?"

"Yes," was the confident reply. "But the water is higher than I've ever seen it. Why, it's up level with the bank, almost."

"Is it safe, then?" Dan demanded.

"We must risk it, anyhow," Lou returned. "If we go by the road now, they'll be waiting for us ahead."

"If the creek's as shallow as you said, I guess we can manage it, all right," was the man's decision. "There must have been a cloud-burst somewhere in the mountains where the stream rises. We got the tail end of the storm—and that was a plenty!" he added savagely. "Let's be off."

Lou led the way as he had bidden her. She rode a furlong down the bank of the stream, to a point beyond the grove where she and her husband had entered the water for the crossing. As the horse stepped reluctantly down the shelving bank into the current, a qualm of dismay stirred in the woman. She could not doubt that the rush of the water as it came swirling about the horse's legs was much more violent than it had been on those other occasions when she had ridden through it. And, too, there was something strangely dispiriting in the combined effects of the black tide and the ominous gloom of the night beneath a heaven hidden by the masses of scurrying clouds. She looked back, as her horse advanced with laggard pace into the deepening water. She craved the comfort of companionship in this horrible time and place. Her eyes could make out only a silhouette that moved a little way behind her. She could not perceive any detail there in the darkness. But she knew that Dan McGrew rode close at hand, and with him, though invisible, rode her daughter, Nell—the one thing dear left to her in all the world. So, she went forward bravely enough, though her mood was as black as the blackness of the night that hung upon her in a smothering pall of weariness.

The water deepened and flowed with more fierceness. It reached to the horse's belly. The steed snorted in affright. Then, it lost its footing, and sank until only its head, with the nostrils lifted high, was clear of the water. Lou cried out at the shock, as she found herself immersed in the coil of waters. But, even as she screamed, she threw herself out of the saddle, to relieve the mare of her weight, and swam, holding to the pommel of the saddle. Her horse fought its way forward, breasting the flood valiantly. At an oblique angle to the force of the current, the woman and her steed won slowly to the shore.... Her own cry and the splash of her body, as she threw herself from the saddle, had shut from the mother's ears another shriek that had broken the silence of the night.

Dan's mount, troubled by its increased burden, was more reluctant even than Lou's had been to advance through the lashing currents of the swollen river. It had held back, in spite of Dan's urging, so that it was at some distance in the rear, when, at last, it slipped, and scrambled wildly to regain its footing—only to fail and plunge beneath the surface, borne down by the weight it carried. It was in the second before the two riders were finally submerged that Nell voiced her terror in a shrill cry. The noise of it rang in Dan's ears, confusing him. But it was strangled in the second of its birth by the enveloping waters. As he struggled out of the saddle, holding his breath, Dan became aware that the girl was no longer on the horse. She was not clinging to him. She had gone from him out into the mystery of the black night and the hungry river. He realized that her cry had been that of despair, as the force of the current wrested the child from her hold on horse and man. Dan's head came above the surface, and he floated easily enough, supported by a hand on the swimming horse. Even his iron nerves were shaken by the calamity. There was no further sound out of the stillness of the night, save the rippling murmur of the water as the horse swam onward. Dan was aware that he could do nothing toward the girl's rescue. Already, the hurrying current must have carried her far beyond his reach. It seemed clear enough that Nell must have lost consciousness at once after being swept down into the element. Otherwise, she must have cried out again—and there had come no second cry. Strong man as he was, Dan

McGrew felt himself helpless in the grasp of circumstance. There was nothing that he could do to avert or to mitigate the tragedy. He could only go forward helplessly, leaving the unfortunate girl to her fate. The suddenness, as well as the dreadfulness of the catastrophe, sickened him. Later on, he might rejoice over this summary removal of one who must have proved an obstacle in his path. But, just now, his emotion was of dismay—a dismay strange to his experience. Beyond the natural horror aroused in him by the accident, Dan McGrew found himself almost in despair over what must come to pass when the mother should learn of her daughter's death. He knew well that Nell was the one treasure that remained in the mother's heart. The loss of this last possession would rend her being to its depths, and leave her utterly desolate. The first effect from knowledge of the tragedy would be that the mother would not go a step further, until after the river had been searched, and her daughter's body recovered. Such a delay would be fatal to the plotter's every hope.... At once, Dan McGrew forgot his horror, his despair. He began again his plotting—to the end that the mother should not learn the truth too soon.

When, finally, his horse gained a footing, near the other bank of the river, Dan McGrew had matured a plan to suffice for the moment. Beyond that, he could not see his way. The future lay in the lap of the gods.

On dry land again, Dan reined in the horse, which welcomed the respite gladly after its battling with the river. He listened, and soon heard Lou calling his name. From the sound of her voice, he knew that she was at some distance from him, further up the stream. He sent a cheery shout in answer to her hail. Then, he rode forward slowly and cautiously through the darkness, which was so deep that he could hardly see to pick a way among the bushes and trees that lined the bank of the creek. And Dan McGrew blessed fate for that darkness. Lou's voice came again, near at hand. Now, Dan could perceive the vague outline of her form against the background of the sky, as she sat her horse on the crest of the little knoll that rose from the river's brim.

"We're all right," he cried, and his voice was full of content. "But I don't think much of your easy ford, Lou. It was a nasty crossing." Then his voice rang sharply, imperiously: "But we must hurry on, if we are to gain anything for all our trouble."

"And you're all right, then?" Lou asked. There was a note of vast relief in her voice. "You're all right, you—and Nell?"

Dan McGrew's voice came with an emphasis of sincerity:

"We're all right, Nell and I." Again his voice came insistently:

"Ride on, Lou. We'll follow."

Lou called out once again, and the music of her voice was very tender:

"It will only be for a little longer, Nell. Mother's brave darling!"

Dan's voice came roughly, to cover the lack of any response from the child.

"Hurry, Lou! Hurry! We'll follow."

Wholly unsuspecting, Lou rode on her way amid the shadows of the night. She had no least instinct to warn her that now, at last, she had lost everything her life had held dear. There was still the torture that had come when she had learned the baseness of her husband. But she could not guess the last evil that was upon her. So, she rode swiftly through the night. Always, even when they came into the road at Hoytsville, Dan rode a little in the rear. Lou looked back from time to time. She could see the outlines of man and horse. She could not see the form of her daughter; the bulk of the man hid even its shadow from her eyes. But the fact that she could not see caused no fear in her, and she rode swiftly, as contented as one may be when the sweetness of life has changed to abomination.

It was not till they came to the outskirts of the little city, through which the main line of the railroad ran, that Lou learned the truth. It was under the lights of the streets that she turned, and looked, and saw Dan McGrew close behind her—and saw that there was none clinging at his back. She stared disbelievingly. Then, a ghastly fear leaped within her.

"Nell!" she cried.

Her voice was strained and shrill, broken with dread. "Nell!" she repeated, in a tone muffled by terror. "Where is she?" She turned her horse sharply and reined it to Dan McGrew's side. Motionless, the two regarded each other through seconds that were as ages.

Finally, Dan McGrew spoke:

"She was torn away when we were swept under," he said; and his voice was very compassionate. "I did what I could. There was no way to save her. She only cried out once. She must have gone down immediately."

Lou sat rigid, gazing with eyes that widened and burned in flames under which the man before her cringed. And then, of a sudden, the fires of her gaze were quenched. It was as if a black flood rolled over her as well, and extinguished the very last sparks of her spirit. The lids slowly fluttered down to closing. Under the blue white of the arc-light, her face was that of a dead woman. The last blow of fate in that frightful day had overwhelmed her. She tottered in her saddle. Dan McGrew, watching fearfully this thing that had come to pass through his machinations, leaped, and stood, and caught the fainting woman as she fell.

He remained motionless there for a full minute, with the lifeless body in his arms. For once, he found himself perplexed, incompetent. But, abruptly, his thoughts cleared. Something of his usual self-confidence, so greatly shaken this night, came back to him. He smiled with a cruel, utterly selfish satisfaction.

"It's the best way out," he muttered to himself. "I'll get her into some quiet place. She'll need a lot of nursing before she gets over all this. I'm sorry for Lou, but it had to be; and it's all for the

best."

With that monstrous declaration concerning the evil that he had wrought, Dan McGrew strode forward toward the nearest house, carrying the unconscious woman in his arms.

CHAPTER X

Jim and his men rode throughout the night in vain. Nowhere could they come on any trace of the fugitives. There was as yet no telephone installed in this newly settled region. But their search was thorough. There were inquiries at the railway stations in the various towns round about. At none of these had ought been seen of Dan McGrew and woman and child. Jim found himself baffled in his quest. He could not guess that the wife who had thus deserted him was lying in a stupor, from which she aroused only to rave over a lost husband and a dead child. He could not know that she had broken under the stress of sorrow, and was being ministered unto by a kindly woman to whom Dan McGrew had told many lies, in order to enlist her sympathetic aid. Even had his inquiries reached the very house in which Lou was sheltered, he would still have been deceived. For he sought a mother and her child: and here was no child.

So, the hunt availed nothing. The three who fled had vanished utterly. There came not even a rumor as to their whereabouts. They were gone as completely as if the earth had opened and swallowed them up.

Nevertheless, Jim was not slow in learning something of the truth. He was told of Dan's visit at the ranch that fatal day, and of his wife's accompanying this visitor to the town. Those there were who had seen the two as they dismounted at Murphy's saloon, and looked in through the window. Jim, remembering his own experiences of that day in the back room of the saloon, was aroused to suspicion of the fact. He got from the bar-keeper details as to what had occurred. The fellow's reference, jestingly made, to the manner in which Jim and the woman, Jess, had embraced, gave him a sudden illumination concerning the plot of Dan McGrew by which his wife had been beguiled.

Straightway, Jim hunted out Fingie Whalen's woman. She would have denied, but, in the face of the injured husband's rage, she was fairly terrified into confession. In the end, the woman wrote at Jim's dictation, even as she had written at the dictation of Dan McGrew. But, now, she wrote without any smirk of vicious satisfaction—with a face pallid and with fingers that trembled from fear of the fierce-visaged man who stood over her in stern and menacing domination. Fingie Whalen, all his bluster gone, looked on in timid consternation, cringing from the baleful threat in the eyes of the man mortally wronged.



SHE WOULD HAVE DENIED, BUT WAS FAIRLY TERRIFIED INTO CONFESSION.

The painted woman was so moved by the anger of the man whom she had helped betray, that, for the first time in more years than she would have cared to tell, she revealed the name with which, back in a quiet New England village, she had been christened by simple, God-fearing parents.

This was the note of confession, which the woman wrote at Jim's command, duly dated, and witnessed by Fingie Whalen and the landlady of the house, who was summoned for the purpose. Jim realized that these formalities were extravagant, but, somehow, they seemed necessary to him just then, to put this evidence of the crime against his home and happiness beyond cavil of doubt.

I, Anne Weston, confess to tricking Jim Maxwell and deceiving his wife at the instigation of Dan McGrew. McGrew hired Fingie Whalen and me to help him fool Mrs. Maxwell. I wrote the note signed "Jess." At the time when Mr. Maxwell was due to arrive in town, I was all ready, and as he came by fell from my horse as if I had fainted. He carried me into the saloon, and then Fingie gave him knock-out drops, and we fixed

it up so that when McGrew came with Mrs. Maxwell and looked in at the window, it was as if we were loving together. But it was all a lie, worked out by Dan McGrew to make Mrs. Maxwell believe her husband was false to her.

ANNE WESTON.

Jim carried that paper in his pocket. It was the document with which he would prove to Lou how she had been deluded. But the days passed, and there came no opportunity to show her the sheet of paper on which Anne Weston had scrawled her confession. He used every means at his command, but he was powerless to gain any trace of the woman whom he had loved and lost through despicable treachery.

It was on the fourth day after Lou had fled her home, that Jim Maxwell seated himself at the piano in the living-room. Hitherto, he had been so occupied in the vain effort to find his wife that he had been, in some measure, unappreciative of the misery that was upon him. Now, when he had exhausted every resource of activity, he suddenly felt the desolation of his home—the ruin of his life. With his instinct toward the musical expression of moods, he took his place before the instrument.

Then, again, that glorious love-lyric came softly sonorous from the keys. The lilt of the melody rose and fell with a subtle vigor, instinct with the joy of life. The delicate tenderness of the music throbbled the story of a love complete and enduring. There was passion in the rhythm. It was a passion ennobled and purified by the intricate harmonies woven around and within it. It was a song of the spirit. It was overlaid with a splendor of sensuous sound. There was nothing gross—only the fullness of life.... Jim was playing with exquisite art that song of happiness which he had improvised on the day he received the news of Dan McGrew's coming.

Now, after he had followed the melody to its end, the truth, which during the moments of his playing he had forgotten, crashed upon him in a discord so horrible that he could not touch the keys to voice it—could only sit, moveless, listening to the din within his own soul in an ecstasy of despair.

Often, again, in the years to come, Jim Maxwell played that same melody. Always, he was searching for the wife whom he had loved and lost. Men whose eyes were sharp noted him here and there around the world, because he seemed so uninterested in everything, and because so often his left hand touched his breast.... In the pocket there, he carried, ready for Lou's reading, the confession signed by Anne Weston—the woman Jess.

And, in the years as they passed, Jim Maxwell gained something of reputation for another thing. He traveled the world over; he had money enough. His foreman was competent. Even without his personal attendance, the revenues from the ranch increased year by year. He lived for only two things: to find Lou and prove to her his innocence—and to kill the man who had betrayed them. In his search, Jim Maxwell went everywhere. He was known in the capitals of Europe; he was known in the wild places of the earth. Men spoke of him, though they had little acquaintance with him. The reason they spoke of him was because on occasion—it might be in the parlor of some sailor's lodging-house in Vladivostok, or it might be in a drawing-room of the Savoy, this man would seat himself at the piano, and he would play. And, always, he played the self-same melody, a lilting air of love and tenderness, filled full of the joy of life. Always, too, the melody was embroidered over with an intricate web of harmonies, magnificent, yet somber. And, in the end, always, the player beat suddenly upon the keys a frenzy of discord.

CHAPTER XI

"Then you're quite sure, Jack? You don't mind my being a—nobody?" The girl's tone was half-playful, half-sad. There was a note of wistfulness in the musical cadences of her voice.

The young man whom she had addressed answered with an emphasis that left no doubt as to his sincerity. His clear gray eyes were alight with love, as he looked into the dark, gypsy-like face of the girl at his side.

"Why, Nell, you're just everybody. You're everything worth while in this little old world of ours."

"You do say the sweetest things, Jack!" The shadowy eyes that met tenderly the warm gaze of the lover were lighted with fond appreciation. Then, of a sudden, the red lips trembled into a mischievous smile, as she added: "I guess I wouldn't give a snap for a sweetheart who was tongue-tied when he talked about my charms."

The two were seated in the main room of a small, roughly-built Alaskan cabin, which stood on the outskirts of a ramshackle village, created almost in a day by the gold lure's magic. The lovers had been left alone together on the eve of their wedding-day by the kindness of the girl's foster parents, Mr. and Mrs. Ross. It was of these, who, in the tiny back room, were recalling the distant days of their own courtship, that Nell now spoke.

"They have been so good to me!" she said musingly. "I've told you that they were not really and truly my parents. I didn't tell you just how I came to be with them, because it was such a dreadful

time to me. Even after all these years, I hate thinking of it."

"Don't!" Jack Reeves urged. "What's past is past, and there's no earthly reason for you to worry yourself over it by telling me."

The girl shook her head.

"I want to tell you, dear," she said simply. Then she fell silent for a little. The lover, watching the warm olive contour of the cheek against which the long black lashes swept as her eyes closed in meditation, rejoiced yet once again in the beauty and the daintiness of this maiden whom he had found and won for himself here amid the rigors of the Northland. He noted the slight drooping of the tenderly curving lips, and longed to kiss away their sadness. Presently Nell went on speaking, rather rapidly, as if anxious to be done with an unpleasant task, and in a tone that told of restrained emotion:

"It was twelve years ago that Papa and Mamma Ross found me. You know Papa Ross is a born pioneer, and Mamma has grown to be just like him. For years they have been moving with the frontiers. That time they were camping by a river down below. There had been a heavy storm, and the river ran high. They heard a cry from somewhere out in the night on the water. They ran to the bank and looked. But it was dark, and they couldn't see anything or hear another sound. Rover was with them—a splendid big Newfoundland." The girl's voice softened. "Rover died two years ago, just before we came up here. I loved him so!"

"I think I can guess," Jack ventured, as the girl paused. "It was Rover who saved you—for, of course, it was you out there in the river."

The girl nodded somberly.

"Yes," came her answer, very gently uttered; "I was out there in the river, drowning. The current swept me along with it. There was a point of the shore just below where Papa Ross had camped. I was carried into the eddies there. Somehow, Rover caught a glimpse of my face, or, maybe, just his instinct guided him. Anyhow, as Papa Ross has told me, Rover sprang into the river, and, when Papa Ross had followed around the inlet toward the point, he found the dog trying to drag me out of the water, up on the bank. Papa Ross carried me to the camp, and there he and Mamma worked over me for a long time. It was a close call, Papa Ross says, but finally they got me to breathing again.... And that's about all."

"And so," Jack questioned in some surprise, "you don't know any more than that?—where you came from, or anything?"

Once again Nell shook her head.

"No, nothing more than that. Papa Ross always thought that I must have struck my head somehow, there in the water. Anyhow, I was confused when I came to. I couldn't seem to remember anything exactly—except my name, Nell. Sometimes I have shadowy memories, but they melt away before I can get anything definite. So, you see, I'm just a nobody, Jack, as I told you—just a mystery that came out of the night and the river."

"Everybody to me," the lover declared again; "everything to me." And now, at last, he took the lithe, slender form of the girl into his arms, and kissed the sorrowfully drooping lips to smiles again.

But, after a little, when there came a lull in the caresses and murmured endearments, Jack Reeves spoke a question that was puzzling him:

"But I should think it would have been easy enough to trace you? If inquiries had been made, surely you might have learned where you came from, and who you were, and all that?"

But, once again, Nell shook her head, and this time very emphatically.

"Papa Ross did what he could, but it came to nothing. When we got to a town, he tried to find out about any girl's being lost like that. Nobody knew of any such case. There was no report of any child's having been drowned. He did what he could—I'm sure of that. Anyhow, as long as you don't care, Jack, I don't suppose I need to. But, somehow—" Nell's voice broke, and she sat silent, absorbed in melancholy reverie. Always, this mystery was a painful thing to her. Even now, when her happiness was full, on the eve of her marriage to the man she loved, she was grieved by the fact that she must come to her husband as a waif, a creature whose origin was unknown, a nameless bit of flotsam, dragged from the river by a dog. Then, in another moment, the depression of her mood was forgotten as she drew away from Jack's embrace, for she heard Papa Ross stamping heavily about the back room of the cabin—in kindly warning that he was about to intrude upon the lovers.

The next morning broke clear, and when at last the slowly clambering sun rose to traverse its short circle between the horizons, its slanting beams seemed full of warmth and good cheer, though the mercury stood at twenty degrees below zero. There was not a breath of wind, and the chill air, pure with a purity unknown to lower latitudes, was like the wine of life. The breath of it in the lungs set the blood a-tingle with joyousness. And the purity of the air had for its background the visible purity of the snow-mantle that lay over everything. Beneath the sun, the white expanse shimmered in prismatic brilliance. Afar, the mountains loomed in purple masses—the green of conifers seen through the vista of many miles.

And the day, in its spirit of vigorous life and wholesome gayety, was suited to the mood of the tiny temporary town, which sprawled here in the wilderness. For the place was en fête. The hardy men who had thus ventured into the wilds of the North welcomed the diversion of this

romance among them, which was to culminate to-day in the wedding of Jack Reeves and Nell Ross at the Dyea Hotel. Public sentiment had insisted that the nuptials should be celebrated at the hotel. The hotel, truth to tell, was neither commodious nor imposing. But it was a boarded structure, the only one in the village, and it was by far the largest, small though it was. And the citizens were determined that they should be permitted to assemble in force on this auspicious day, when the glamour of love was to soften in some degree the austerity of the arctic land. So, betimes, the men of the community gathered at the hotel to await the marriage ceremony. A scant half-dozen women, courageous followers of the men they loved, were there as well. Some had been at pains to bring heaps of evergreen boughs, and with these the main room of the hotel—at once lobby, bar and office—was decorated. Caribou Bill brought a great bank of moss, for which he had dug through six feet of snow. To it was attached a piece of flaming-red paper, in which tea had originally been packed, and this paper had been laboriously cut by Caribou Bill into the shape of two hearts, lovingly joined as one. The symbol of wedded happiness was established by its smirking inventor on the central shelf above the bar, where it commanded the enthusiastic admiration of the populace.

It was noon to the second when Nell Ross and Jack Reeves stood in the center of the main room of the hotel before the one who was to make them man and wife. He, too, was at heart a pioneer, and he was, as well, an earnest worker for the saving of souls. His own preference, with a roving commission, had brought him to this remote place. He found a singular pleasure in the fact that his ministrations were required for the uniting of this winsome maiden and this virile, clean young man. It was as if the ceremony typified in some fashion the purity and vigor of life here within the frozen North.... It was noon to the second! The time-keeper was Harry, the Dog-Man, who carried a Waterbury watch, on the accuracy of which he would cheerfully have staked his hopes of eternal happiness. Because of the exactness of his time-piece, which none cared to deny, he had usurped the office of master of ceremonies. When he saw the two hands of the watch blent as one upon the hour of twelve, he raised his arm, and Nell and Jack moved forward within the little lane walled by the crowd, to stand before the clergyman, who regarded them with a benevolent smile, in which, unknown to himself, was something almost of envy in the presence of their youth and happiness and love.

So, the minister spoke the words that made this pair husband and wife.

There was a noise of snapping dogs outside. A man came into the hotel, stamping the snow from the high-buckled overshoes worn over his boots of felt. Behind him came a woman muffled in furs. She looked on the scene with a certain feminine interest, for she realized at once that a wedding was in progress; but without any personal concern. Indeed, she was rather displeased, being weary from a long journey over the snows, because she saw that she must wait for attention until the ceremony should be concluded. The man with her shook the hood of the parka from his head, and stood regarding with cynical amusement the two who had clasped hands before the clergyman. So he waited while the words were uttered that made the pair one. The ceremony ended, the husband kissed the bride; the minister in turn bent and touched his lips to hers, with a curious stirring of half-forgotten emotions.

Then the crowd surged forward, eager for its prerogative of a kiss. And, as she turned, Nell saw the man who had just entered, standing there with that smile of cynical amusement upon his handsome face. The eyes of the two met and battled. There came to her a strange feeling of dread. In this, the supreme moment of her life, wherein all had been happiness, there stirred a feeling of doubt, of evil anticipation.

The man, staring into the face of this beautiful girl upon whose nuptials he had stumbled by chance, experienced a thrill of emotion which he could not understand. Some secret monition moved him to an alarm. He felt an unreasonable disturbance in the presence of this girl.... Dan McGrew had no suspicion that he had blundered thus on the child who, years before, had been swept away from him in the darkness of the river's flood-tide.... Nor did the woman, who stood behind him so wearily, waiting for the end of this tiresome ceremony, guess that the gentle girl, blushing there under the storm of kisses claimed by the crowd, was, in fact, the daughter for whose death she had mourned through so many years.... Nell did not see the woman at all.



"THEY'VE STRUCK IT RICH ON FORGOTTEN CREEK!"

Of a sudden there came an interruption:

A man leaped through the doorway. He waved his hands and staggered as one drunken. His voice rose in a raucous shriek:

"They've struck it rich on Forgotten Creek!"

There was a moment of intense stillness. These men had fled from civilization in pursuit of the will-o'-the-wisp of gold. Now sounded the clarion call:

"They've struck it rich on Forgotten Creek!"



THESE MEN HAD FLED FROM CIVILIZATION IN PURSUIT OF THE WILL-'O-THE WISP OF GOLD.

For long seconds the stillness endured. Then, abruptly, there came a huge cachinnation. It was the mellow, roaring laughter of Bert Black, the only negro in this Aladdin village so close up under the Pole. The company looked at the man expectantly, and he answered the interrogation in their eyes:

"We-all is just shohly goin' to have a stampede!"

Then, again, the silence held for a little, while each and every man of them saw the vision of the straggled crowd trailing the waste places, lured on by the will-o'-the-wisp of gold.

CHAPTER XII

The Fates, in weaving the intricate web of human lives, smile grimly oftentimes over the curious intermingling of the threads. Often, too, the incomplete design might well move them to a cruel mirth, but that they see beyond the seeming tangle of events to the perfecting of their pattern at the last. So, perhaps, they are content of their task, though we mortals, with short-sighted eyes, seeing dimly, look on the happenings of our lives as the blessed or the baneful work of chance. Thus, now, the Fates had brought here, beneath the flickering of the Northern Lights, all the actors in the drama of the years ago, when the happiness of a home had been shattered by a villain's ruthless passion. Their presence within a short radius of miles had every appearance of purest chance. Nevertheless, the Fates had brought them within reach of one another, that thus the seeming snarl in the threads of these lives might be shown as in fact untangled and woven into a design just and harmonious and beautiful.

Dan McGrew moved sociably among the men of the village, as they celebrated the wedding with many jovial libations. He was hail-fellow-well-met with each and all, for it had come to be a matter of professional necessity with him to attain a fair measure of popularity whithersoever he went. He had deteriorated much with the passage of the years. He had sunk to be a common gambler, and on occasion had not scrupled at worse methods in pursuit of ill-gotten gains. To-day his keen eyes were speedily drawn to one of the men, who was especially lavish in hospitality.

"Who is he?" Dan asked of the bar-tender. "Seems flush, all right."

"That's Sam Ward," was the answer. "He's got a hole somewhere up in the hills, which nobody don't know nothin' about—'cept it's cussed rich. Sam blows a pokeful o' dust ev'ry time he hits town."

Dan eyed the fortunate prospector greedily, and his predatory instinct brought him to a quick decision. He went to Lou, who was sitting, drearily enough, alone at a table in a corner of the room. He spoke to her softly, that none might overhear, though of this there was little danger amid the noise of rollicking gayety.

"There's a chap here I mean to chum up with a bit," Dangerous Dan explained. "I'll introduce him, and you must be nice enough to him to make him talk."

The woman nodded assent. For it had come to such a pass. Often, she had stooped to play decoy for the man in his schemes against his fellows.

Dan McGrew had persistently lied to this woman. By his arts he had ruined her life. But Lou had still no inkling of the truth. One great fact was impressed upon her as time passed: This man

loved her—and he was loyal to her. Since she had lost everything dear, it seemed her duty to give the worthless remnant of her life to the one who thus esteemed it something precious.

When Lou returned to consciousness, after the fever and delirium that seized her the dreadful night of the flight from home, her first question was concerning the drowned child.

The man at the bedside met her imploring gaze steadfastly, and spoke his falsehoods so convincingly that she had never a doubt. The river had been searched with every care, he declared. The body had not been found. The bereaved mother had been denied the last pitiful solace of grief—a place of burial wherein to mourn over the lost.

After the final deprivation, Lou was apathetic. The light had gone out of her life. She was numb with misery. Her most distinct emotion was a sort of passive gratitude toward the man who had so frightfully wronged her. It was in obedience to the promptings of this feeling that Lou meekly accepted his every suggestion. She did so with the more readiness because these suggestions were so skillfully contrived as to seem the epitome of unselfishness.

Thus, for example, there was the matter of divorce. Dan learned that the kindly woman into whose house he had brought Lou suffered from nostalgia. She had come out into the West with an eager, improvident husband, who had died and left her with this tiny home, on which the mortgage of a few hundreds rested as a burden beyond her strength to remove. She was sick with longing to go back among the home-folk. Dan's sympathetic voice and candid, honest eyes won confidence from the lonely old woman. And, too, she quickly grew fond of the invalid in her house. Therefore, she had no hesitation in acceding to the proposal made to her by Dan McGrew: that she should travel to the East with Lou, as nurse and companion. The money offered to her by Dan McGrew for these services was enough to ease her declining years. Moreover, there was the added inducement that, in this manner, she would be able to return to the place for which she longed.

Lou made no objection to the arrangement. She liked the old woman, and the instinct of flight was still upon her.... She was only grateful to the man who was at such pains in her behalf.

In due time, the three were duly established in the East. Dangerous Dan, in the course of his daily visits to Lou from a lodging he had taken close at hand, guided her thoughts so craftily that, with no suspicion of having been influenced, the heart-broken woman decided that she should get a divorce. Dan had chosen a location in a State where desertion was a sufficient cause. Lou brought suit, and the issue was expedited in the courts. She believed that thus she gave to her husband an opportunity to marry the woman with whom he had become infatuated, and thus, too, an opportunity to restore in some degree his self-respect.... She could not guess that, owing to the treachery of the man on whose advice she relied, her husband had no knowledge whatsoever of these proceedings. The newspapers, with their formal advertisements to the defendant in the action instituted in the courts, were never posted to the address of the ranch-owner.... Dan McGrew saw to that.

Eventually, there came a decree *nisi*. In due time, the divorce was made absolute. Throughout this interval of delay, the man demonstrated the firmness of his purpose by the patience with which he waited for the attainment of his ends.

It was not until a year after her flight from home that Lou became the wife of Dangerous Dan McGrew.... Why should she not give herself to him who had so befriended her?

The late dawn of the morning after the wedding came on clear, with a soft wind blowing from the south. Under its gentleness, the sun was able to thaw the surface of the snow. Then the wind swung to the north. Within an hour, the crust on the snow, as the Arctic air blew over it, was strong enough to support a horse. And Dan McGrew and many another took advantage of the fact. There were a few meagerly fed horses in the town, remnants from the discontinued Lodestar Mine, which had failed to pay a profit, after elaborate installation of equipment. They knew that at the first change of the weather their mounts would become worse than useless. In the meantime, however, there was a luxury in this form of travel that appealed. And there were hangers-on in the town, too poor for a grub-stake, who for a pittance would run on foot with the train, and afterward take back the horses to the village, when a softer snow should make them a hindrance rather than a help.

Nell used the voice of wifely authority:

"Why, the idea! Of course I shall go too!" She was all eagerness. For years she had lived with those who were informed with the spirit of the frontiers. Her husband, thus far in his battling with the Northland, had been successful. He had found claims of value. Some of them he had sold; some of them he had worked. From most of them he had won a deserved profit. So, when the news of the strike on Forgotten Creek came—even though it was his wedding-day—Jack Reeves was all agog with anxiety to be off to this region whither fortune beckoned.... And Nell would not be left behind. She would follow her husband where fate led. She would not be denied.

Thus it came about that the bridal pair were among the crowd that surged in the village street before the Dyea Hotel on the morning after their wedding. Jack had a team of dogs, the best within hundreds of miles. They were strong enough to make play of hauling the long sled, laden with provisions, on which Nell was seated with ease, well-wrapped in furs, and sheltered beneath

a drapery of white—the skin of a polar bear, which Jack had brought back with him as a trophy of experiences beneath the Arctic night.

There were in the throng men who had no dogs. They carried on their backs the small allowance of bacon, beans, flour, tea, coffee, sugar, tobacco. The adventurers were of all sorts. Some went well supplied. Others joined in the stampede recklessly. They might starve, or freeze, out there in the mountains. But they were caught and drawn on by the lust for riches. Somewhere out there in the cold and the distance gold was lying. In the sands of the creeks, in the ledges of the mountains, were the golden flakes, the riches for which each and every one craved....



THE ADVENTURERS WERE OF ALL SORTS. THEY WERE DRAWN ON BY THE LUST FOR RICHES.

The huskies yelped and snarled in fierce rivalry. Harry, the Dog-Man, snapped his whip with a vicious crack like the report of a gun. The dogs strained against the breast-straps in their fierce lunge forward. Along the line was everywhere impetuous, eager movement. The stampede had begun.

Dangerous Dan McGrew, who rode beside his wife, spoke to her softly, so that his question would not be overheard by Sam Ward, who rode on her other side:

"What does he say?"

Lou answered in a whisper:

"He'll leave to-night, when the camp's quiet, for his own claim."

CHAPTER XIII

From a nook on the mountainside, a lone man watched scornfully the long, thin line of the stampede.

Those same threads spun by the Fates had caught another in their mesh. In a lonely hut, there in the desolate Northland, Jim Maxwell had his home. His presence was needful for the weaving of that design by which right should be realized in the final presentation of life's tapestry. He had traveled thus far beyond the confines of civilization under the urge of that immutable purpose which drove him in all his wanderings throughout the years—to find the man he hated, and the woman he loved. He had sought vainly over all the world in the usual haunts of men—in many that were unusual. Never, anywhere, had he found a trace. He had come into this forbidding land, not for the lure of gold, as the others had come; but for the lure of vengeance against the man who had despoiled him, and for the lure of love toward the woman who had his heart in her keeping.

Then, somehow, Jim Maxwell, when he found himself isolated there in a cabin amid the loneliness of this land, almost forgot vengeance, almost forgot love, in the immensity of the peace that brooded over the snow-clad wastes. In the hut he had built with his own hands, from spruce timbers, he was snugly sheltered against the austerities of the clime. He had fuel enough, of his gathering along the wooded slopes of the foot-hills. In the maw of the sheet-iron stove, which he had packed, the resinous branches were transmuted into dancing flames, redolent of warmth and cheer in the tiny room of the hut, though outside the blasts from the Pole were cold as the ice from which they came.

The day of his daughter's wedding—though he had no least suspicion that wife, or child, or enemy was within thousands of miles—Jim made a round of his traps. In making the circuit, he was absorbed, without thought, for the time being, of the life that had been, without thought of vengeance, without thought of love. It was only after he had returned at nightfall to the hut, and had fried his mess of bacon on top of the red-hot stove, and had boiled his coffee hard, as one must in the North, where there is need of all the energy from food, that Jim sat down on his bunk of spruce boughs, ready for sleep—yet, for a moment, wakeful.

Then there sounded softly on his ears that old, old lyric of love. It was the song that had been played out of the feeling of his heart for his wife, in the years long gone. It was that improvisation with which he had told Lou his passion on the day when he had heard that Dan McGrew was coming to visit them. Now, Jim had no means of audible expression. Nevertheless, the song welled in him. It thrilled in every atom of his being. It was that same wonderful, joyous, lilting melody, full of life at its best. The tenderness of love rang in its cadences. Jim's fingers tensed—they were hungry to seize the chords, rapacious to pounce on the notes that voiced this heart-song of a lost happiness.

Jim aroused from the trance of memory. He looked to the fire, and rolled into the bunk.... He had heard, that day, in a native iglook, of a find of gold on Forgotten Creek. He recalled the fact drowsily as sleep fell on him.

"I'll take a look across the valley in the morning," he thought. "There's sure to be a stampede."

So it came about on the day following the marriage of Nell Ross and Jack Reeves that there was a watcher who looked out over the valley through which the long line of dogs and men hurried toward the possible riches of Forgotten Creek.

Jim seated himself on the trunk of a fallen spruce, high on the mountainside. From this point, he overlooked the whole length of the valley. He saw at last the animate line darting out of the distance, and watched as it became definite, with a smile of cynical amusement.... These were the hunters of gold. And gold—Bah! There were only two things in the world: love and vengeance.

From his seat on the fallen spruce, Jim Maxwell stared out over the valley. For hours he sat there. He saw the breaking up of the company, as its members scattered in various directions, now that they were come into the region of possible wealth. At the last, the valley showed clear of the human invaders.... And, just then, Jim Maxwell heard a sound, which already he had learned to know, there in the Northland. It was a gentle sound, but with a sibilance that held a threat of danger—like the hiss of a gigantic serpent.

As he heard, Jim instinctively let out a great shout of fear in the presence of this peril so close upon him. In the same moment, without pausing to look up, he dropped from the log on which he had been sitting, and crowded as closely under it as he could, to make it serve as a bulwark—though, indeed, he well knew the futility of such a protection against the avalanche that was now crashing down the slope. Crouched there beneath the log, Jim awaited the issue with an unuttered prayer for escape in his heart—if escape should be possible.



CROUCHED THERE BENEATH THE LOG, JIM AWAITED THE ISSUE.

In another instant the din of the snow-slide burst on his ears in its full fury. And, along with that thunderous noise, the daylight was blotted out. In the darkness, the man felt the soft, yet inexorable weight of the massed snow crushing upon him, holding him as in a vise. There was a tiny free space still beneath the log, and as yet he had no lack of air. But he was powerless to stir. He realized that there was no possibility of digging his way out through the heaped bulk of snow within which he lay entombed. He could find no room for hope. He resigned himself to meet the end with what fortitude he might. A wave of wrath swept through him that he must die thus futilely, with his vengeance unaccomplished. The emotion passed presently, and in its stead came a vast and poignant yearning for the woman he loved. By a fierce effort of will, he fought down such desires, which he deemed weakness at this time, and strove to look Death in the face calmly, with resignation and without fear.

Jack Reeves and his bride, despite the excellence of the young prospector's dog-team, lagged behind the others in the long line of the stampede, for the young husband had his own ideas concerning a location likely to yield the best results, and meant to let the crowd precede him, in order that he might pursue his course unmarked. So it came about that, after the straggling procession of gold-hunters had passed from the sight of Jim Maxwell, the newly married pair entered the valley, riding at ease behind the leisurely moving dogs. Jim Maxwell, from his position on the mountainside, held his gaze turned toward where the last of the stampeders had vanished, and so failed to observe the newcomers. Thus, when the avalanche swept down upon him, he had no thought that his wild, instinctive cry for succor could be heard.

But it was. A quarter of a mile away, Jack Reeves heard the despairful shout; and Nell, too, heard it. Jack's quick gaze, darting in the direction of the sound, caught a glimpse of moving

shadow against the white surface of the slope, as Jim dropped from the log to take shelter beneath it. At the same time, there came to Jack's ears the first noise of the avalanche's descent, and he understood fully how great was the peril of the unknown, whose cry for help he had heard. He called to his dogs savagely, and sent them forward toward the slope at speed. Before he had time to explain to the startled Nell, the rush and roar of the snow-slide made clear the situation to her, familiar as she was with this peril of the mountains. Yet, ere the hurtling masses of snow buried the spot where he had seen the moving shadow, Jack marked its location precisely by means of an outcropping ledge, just to the right of the tree-trunk. As he went forward swiftly, he noted with relief that the slide, which soon ceased, was a comparatively small one, though of a size sufficient to prove fatal to its victim, unless aided from without.

At the foot of the slope, some distance to the right of the freshly heaped-up snow, the sled was halted. Jack and Nell put on their snow-shoes, and, with a couple of spades from the pack, made their way with some difficulty to the jutting point of the ledge, which still protruded a little beyond the new covering of snow. A few feet to the left of this, they began to dig, working with feverish haste. They progressed rapidly, for the prospector was in the full prime of his manhood, with muscles like steel, and the girl, if less strong, was in equally perfect condition, and with training enough in the arduous life of the frontier to make the toil simple to her.

They had dug down perhaps a score of feet, and had reached, as Jack judged, almost to the ground, so that he feared lest he might have mistaken the location, when suddenly Nell rested motionless.

"Listen!" she commanded. Her tense face was radiant.

Jack ceased shoveling, and listened as he had been bidden.

There came a faint, strangely muffled sound. It came again—an indistinguishable, inarticulate mutter from somewhere under the snow at their feet.

Jack shouted triumphantly.

"By cricky, Nell," he cried joyously, "we've struck him, sure as sin!" He raised his voice to its full volume in a cheerful bellow, meant to reach the ears of the imprisoned man below:

"Buck up, old pal! We'll have you out in a jiffy." Then the bridal pair betook themselves to shoveling with the enthusiasm inspired by success.

There was no difficulty in the completion of the work of rescue. Very soon, the excavation reached the log under which Jim Maxwell was sheltered, and he was able to crawl forth with some difficulty, owing to cramped and aching muscles, but safe and sound. He was a little dazed over his escape, when he had resigned himself to hopelessness. It seemed to him as if a miracle had been wrought in his behalf by the timely appearance of these two, where he had believed there was none to aid him. His feeling of wonder was increased by the fact that one of these two who had saved him from death, and who now stood beside him supporting him, was a girl, whose dark, lovely face beneath the fur cap was alight with an almost maternal joy over the deliverance in which she had shared. The event seemed, somehow, to soften in a certain degree the nature of the man, embittered by long years of suffering under a grievous wrong. For almost the first time since the loss he had sustained at the hands of Dan McGrew, Jim Maxwell felt a warm emotion, which was close to tenderness. He continued to regard the two bewilderedly. But his voice, when at last he spoke, was firm, and vibrant with gratitude:

"You saved me—and I sha'n't forget it." He paused for a moment, then added whimsically: "I don't know who you are, or how you got here—unless you're two sure-enough angels, dropped plumb-straight down from heaven for this special occasion." The half-jesting note left his voice. "And I'll say just one thing: If you children ever need a friend, you can call on me, and I sha'n't fail you. In the meantime," he added briskly, "I want you to be my guests for the night. My cabin is near by—a little way up the gulch there."

Something in the dignity of his manner as he made the proffer of hospitality, some refinement of inflection in his tones, caused the listeners to look with new curiosity on this roughly dressed man, whose face was almost hidden beneath the thicket of beard. They were moved by a sudden, compelling respect for this uncouth-appearing dweller in the waste. It needed but a glance between husband and wife to ensure their acceptance of the invitation. So, presently, the three rode on together. They felt a certain unusual kindness in their relation as host and guests. They attributed it, as far as they thought of the matter at all, to the peculiar manner of their meeting.... They could not guess that strands woven by the Fates had caught them in a mesh for the final right weaving of a perfect design.

CHAPTER XIV

After the horses had been given up and sent back, Lou, by Dan's arrangement, continued the journey on the sled of some men who were not properly of the stampedeers, but were bound for Malamute. Dan himself, hardy as he was, had no difficulty in keeping up the pace with the best of the travelers on foot. He carried snow-shoes—for which he had no present need as the crust held

—and a light pack on his back. The others of the stampeders regarded him as one of themselves, without ulterior purpose beyond the legitimate finding of gold somewhere in the creek-beds, or within the ledges of the mountains. Only Lou guessed aught of the evil project cherished by her husband. She had little compunction, for her sensibilities had become hardened with the passage of the years, and she had long ceased to regard herself as in any wise the keeper of Dan's conscience.

Dan himself, as always, had no scruples, though he meant to add yet another to the list of his crimes. He went warily to his work. He held Sam Ward under close observation, but so discreetly that the victim of his watchfulness had no hint of it. As the train straggled out toward nightfall, Dan contrived to be near his intended victim, though not in company with him. Because of the information gathered by Lou, that the miner meant to steal away from the others during the night, Dangerous Dan had determined to keep a vigil during the hours of darkness, so that, when the miner slipped away by stealth, thinking himself unobserved by any one, he would be able to follow as stealthily, and thus to trace the owner to the secret mine.

To one of Dangerous Dan McGrew's accomplishments the task was very simple. The night was clear, and he became aware at once when Sam Ward prepared to set forth. He allowed the miner to proceed for a considerable distance before following. Against the white surface of the snow, the moving form was distinguishable for a long way, and, since it alone in the expanse moved at all, it was not to be mistaken. But, while the miner was so distinctly visible to his pursuer, Dan McGrew had little fear of being himself observed, since no eyes were seeking his presence there. So, separated by a considerable distance, the two men advanced through the night, ascending at a smart pace from the level reaches of the valley to the lower slopes of the mountains. Here the spruce cast black shade, and often gorges lay deep in shadow. Dan was forced to lessen the distance between himself and the one he followed. Often, he was hard put to it to keep close enough on his quarry to be sure of the man's movements, without revealing his own presence on the trail. Some risks he took, since needs must. But the danger of discovery did not trouble Dangerous Dan, for he had never lacked courage, whatever his other vices.

It was in the gray of the dawn when at last Sam Ward halted, with a grunt of satisfaction, which the listening man, crouched behind a stump fifty yards away, plainly heard through the motionless chill air. The miner cast off the pack that he had carried throughout most of the day and all of the night, and began hasty preparations for pitching camp.... It was evident that Sam Ward had reached his destination.

Assured that this was the end of the journey, Dangerous Dan silently withdrew to a sheltered nook within the trees, a full quarter of a mile from the other's camp. Here he built a fire, without any fear of its light being seen by Sam Ward; for, besides the screen of trees, a high ridge intervened between the two camps. Dan, owing to the unusual mildness of the night, did not trouble with piling green logs against which to stack his fire, but contented himself with selecting a spot where a steep bank at his back aided in the retention of the heat.

Tired as he was, Dangerous Dan gathered sufficient fuel ready at hand, so that he might replenish the blaze, arousing instinctively from sleep as the flames died down. He guessed that the miner would sleep late, after the fatigue of the trip. But he allowed himself only two hours of rest; for he had yet much to do, and weariness must await leisure. Dan McGrew could sacrifice selfish desires for the time being in order to attain to selfish ends.

The sun was well above the horizon, when Dan McGrew at last arose reluctantly, and stamped out the dying embers. He rolled up his pack, but left it where he had camped. He carried a revolver with him, but he had no intention of using it, lest the report attract the attention of some chance prospector in the vicinity. He was not quite sure, even, that he meditated violence—it might not be necessary. But, before setting forth, he drew from its sheath, hidden within his bosom, a long, wicked-looking knife, the blade of which he examined approvingly, testing its edge with a bare thumb. When he had returned the weapon to its place of concealment, he went forward very cautiously, his feet leaving hardly a trace of their passage over the snow-crust. He took advantage of the shelter afforded by bushes and trees, so that his approach might not be detected. Thus, he came finally to a vantage point behind a clump of bushes, which grew on a little knoll. Below this, hardly a score of yards away, was Sam Ward's camp.

The miner was just arousing from sleep, when Dan reached this point of observation. While the hidden man watched attentively, Sam Ward replenished the fire, and hastily prepared a breakfast, which he devoured even more hastily. Forthwith, then, he set about the serious business of the day. To the watcher's surprise, the miner removed a heap of firewood, which had been stacked against the sloping bank, some distance above a tiny frozen stream. When the branches had been thrown aside, there was revealed an opening through the snow, and on into the earth itself. It was evident that the miner had already tunneled into the ledge.

Now, he got dynamite from his pack, and set it carefully where it might thaw out within the radius of heat from the fire. Thereafter, he crawled into the tunnel, and was occupied out of the watcher's sight for some time. On emergence, he examined the dynamite, and, satisfied with its condition, took it, along with caps and fuse, on his return into the tunnel. This time, he was gone for only a short interval. Presently, came a dull rumble as the explosive detonated within the earth. The miner reëntered the tunnel, carrying a bag. When he brought this forth, he was staggering under the weight it contained.



DAN MCGREW, STARING DOWN WITH HUNGRY EYES, SAW THE MINER.

Dan McGrew, staring down with hungry eyes, saw the miner pound the fragments of rock to powder in a roughly contrived mortar, which was set beside the fire. Dangerous Dan had learned enough of gold-mining to understand that the miner had chanced on a quartz lead of the richest sort. Undoubtedly, it was a vein of considerable size which would assay thousands of dollars to the ton. It was free-milling ore. The rough method employed by the miner was sufficient to secure the golden treasure. Now, when he had made an end of crushing the bits of rock, Sam descended to the creek, where he chopped a hole through the ice, and so, after great labor, was able to winnow the dust. Dan McGrew was able to see the golden stream of tiny flakes that the miner at last poured into his poke, with chuckles of glee. The watcher's steady eyes narrowed and grew savage, for black envy and avarice filled his heart. Of a sudden, his vague purpose became crystallized.... He would have this mine for his own—at any cost.

Dangerous Dan looked over the scene carefully, as he made his plans. The little stream, above which the miner had encamped, ran straight between shallow banks out into a broad valley beyond. Dan was sure that he could advance to a point on the slope where he would be just above his unsuspecting prey. Thence, he could drop down on the miner, who, all unconscious of any peril, squatted before the fire gloating over his treasure. A single blow of the knife would put a term to his ownership of the mine. Afterward, it would be a simple matter to conceal the body in some cranny where only the wolves would be likely to scent it out. And Dan McGrew would have the treasure-house for his own.

His decision made, Dan acted upon it at once. It came about according to his calculations—with two exceptions:

The first was that, as he leaped upon his victim from behind, some faintest sound of movement, or some subtle instinct in the victim, gave warning. Sam Ward sprang to his feet, whirling as he rose. The lust of gold was in him, too. On the instant, he understood the death that threatened and the cause of it. He fought for his life and his gold with all the strength that was in him. He got his hands to his assailant's throat, and the fingers clutched in a clutch meant to kill. Dangerous Dan's eyes goggled from his head as he strangled within that grip. But he did not forget, even in his anguish, either his purpose or his advantage. He thrust the knife with all his power into the miner's breast. For a second that seemed to endure for an eternity, Dan was still held in the vice-like grasp. Then abruptly, there came a gurgling moan from Sam Ward's lips. The clenched fingers relaxed. Dan thrust the form of his adversary from him. The haft of the knife, which he still held in his right hand, was broken from the blade by the wrench of the inert body, as it fell and went limply sliding down the slope toward the creek.



HE FOUGHT FOR HIS LIFE AND HIS GOLD WITH ALL THE STRENGTH THAT WAS IN HIM.

Dan McGrew gazed on the grim descent with eyes that were dull still from the deadly grapple. His breath came in sobs. He was triumphant, but he realized how close he had been to failure.

Then, a minute later, when his brain and his sight were clear again, he suddenly uttered a frightful curse....

In the wide expanse of the valley into which the creek flowed, a sled moved rapidly, as the dogs strained in their harness. And it was coming straight toward the creek—toward the place where he stood. Dangerous Dan McGrew cursed yet once again—and more horribly. Then, he leaped down the slope to where the dead body had halted. He stooped over it—searched with desperate rapidity. A moment later, with the poke of gold and a few papers from the dead man, Dangerous Dan raced back up the bank, and on, flying from the spot where he had committed a crime so great for a reward so small.

CHAPTER XV

The bridal pair were at once astonished and gratified by the entertainment offered them in this remote wilderness. There was nothing remarkable in their surroundings at the cabin. The fare provided was of the simplest. The effect on the two visitors was produced wholly by the personality of the man himself. As the men sat in easy communion over their pipes, while Nell listened eagerly, Jim Maxwell, still under the influence of that softer feeling aroused by gratitude to the two who had rescued him, relaxed from the usual aloofness toward his fellows, and talked of many things in a manner of singular charm. Jack Reeves had had excellent advantages in education, before ever the spirit of adventure drove him toward the Arctic. As he perceived the extent of the older man's experience, he plied his host with questions. To these, Jim responded readily—at first from courtesy, and then, moved by patent interest on the part of his hearers, with a certain enthusiasm. He found a long-forgotten pleasure in thus speaking at ease of the things he felt to sympathetic auditors. In the years of his wandering and suffering, the man's nature had deepened and mellowed, even though it was shut within the crust of bitterness. So, to-night, he gave himself unreservedly to this new mood of genial intercourse. He marveled over his own changed mood, but indulged it to the full, nevertheless. In a gentle, unfamiliar fashion, Jim Maxwell was almost happy to-night—almost happy, for the first time in twelve years.

Nell's presence moved him deeply, though she sat silent for the most part. Her close attention was a compliment greater than any words she could have uttered. Jim Maxwell felt this, and yielded to the inspiration of it. He was by no means unaware of the piquant loveliness of the girl. His critical appreciation was betrayed by many swift, penetrating glances at the rapt face. The dusk, lucent beauty of her eyes especially appealed to him. In them, he glimpsed her soul, full of the joy of life, a-thrill with expectation of the happiness that awaited, pure and undaunted by any fear of evil. As he looked on her, Jim's admiring gaze was always a little wistful. Since the tragedy in his life, women had had no interest for him, because he had lost her whom he loved. To-night, somehow, it was different. He felt himself strangely drawn to this unknown girl. His heart stirred toward her. It was not an emotion of which even a bridegroom could complain—it was something utterly untouched by any instinct of sex, something subtle and exquisite. Jim himself could not understand his feeling in the least. Only, he yielded to the spell of it with delight.

The host left his guests in possession, when it came the hour for retiring. He was deaf to their remonstrances, and betook himself to an outbuilding, which had been his first shelter in this place, before the making of the cabin.

Left alone with her husband, Nell spoke musingly, very softly:

"What a wonderful man, Jack! He is the sort of man I should like—" She broke off, staring with vaguely puzzled, unseeing eyes at the glowing stove.

"Now, what do you mean by that?" the bridegroom demanded, with asperity.

Nell aroused from introspection at the shortness of the husband's tone. Then she laughed.

"Don't be absurd, goosie!" she bantered. "I actually believe you'd like to be jealous of the first man I've met on our honeymoon." Her voice softened. "Well, you needn't be. But he is a dear, all the same."

Something in her tone quelled the young husband's impulse of alarm. Straightway, he spoke his own admiration, without further jealousy.

"He sure is a wonder," he declared emphatically. "He's one of the sort who could make himself at home—and make himself the center of attraction, too—anywhere around the world, with high or low or Jack or the game."

A little later, he spoke again, reflectively:

"I wonder what he did!"

"What he did!" Nell repeated, bewildered.

"Whether he robbed a bank, or just murdered somebody," Jack explained.

Nell flared.

"He's not that sort!" she flung at him. Then, her eyes grew dreamy again.

"But," she added—and there was a note of sympathetic tenderness in her voice—"perhaps it was something that somebody else did."

"Eh?" Jack demanded, perplexed in his turn.

"I mean," Nell said, half-apologetically, "perhaps it was something—some crime even—some one else did that made Mr. Maxwell come away off here, to live alone in the mountains. A man like him!"

Next morning, Jack and Nell went on their way, almost regretfully, so great was the impression made upon both by this man whom they had rescued from death. Still without haste, Jack drove his dogs over the level valley-crust. As it drew toward night, he selected for his camp a point where a few stunted spruce grew a little way up the slope.

"I guess we're alone in our glory," he commented, as his eyes swept the scene. "Not a stamper in sight—and I'm glad of it. You see," he continued, as Nell looked at him inquiringly, "I've been over this way before. There's a creek flows in here from the other side of the valley. I was up it once. It showed some prospects. I'd like another look at it—without any stampers by. And there's not a one in sight."

"I wonder!" While Jack went to straighten out the over-lively dogs, Nell took the field-glasses from their case, and amused herself with a careful scrutiny of this white world over which now lay a purpling glamour as the sun sank wearily below the horizon.

Suddenly, there was a moving blur, a fleeting black shadow, in the line of vision. Hitherto, there had been no sign of life anywhere. This trace of activity, in the stillness of the snow-clad wild, interested her, even startled her a little, though she had no thought that it could be more than a glimpse of some stamper plodding through the distance.

Nell adjusted the glasses, and sought again. Then, in a flash, she saw clearly—a camp-fire burning, a man squatted close to the flames. There was nothing out of the ordinary in the scene. It was not the sight of camp-fire and man beside it that caused Nell's cheek to pale, that caused her hand to shake, until for a moment the vision was blurred, that caused the little gasp from her lips. It was another figure thus revealed there in the far distance that so affected her—another figure high up on the slope, which moved with a craftiness and stealth that were in themselves sinister. These were the slinking movements of a beast of prey. But the figure was that of a man.

Nell called to Jack—softly, as if she feared lest, across the valley-space, that skulking man might hear her cry.

When Jack came to her, Nell put the glasses in his hands.

"Look there!" she directed, and pointed. Afterward, she sat tensed and apprehensive in her place on the sled, while her husband stood at her side, and looked as she had bidden him.

An ejaculation burst from Jack as his eyes caught the action in that drama across the valley. Through a long minute, and another, he rested rigid, silent. Suddenly, with an imprecation, he tossed the glasses toward Nell. He pointed desperately across the valley, then sprang to the dogs, and straightened them out, his voice so harsh that they cringed under it.



HE POINTED DESPERATELY ACROSS THE VALLEY.

"Mush!" he yelled savagely, and the whiplash hissed its message to the leaders.... They were off at full speed.

"Too late!" Jack groaned, as the dogs bounded forward. "Oh, damn him! I hope he hangs for it—the dirty murderer!"

It was, indeed, too late. When they were come up the lesser valley, through which the creek ran, to a point near where the body of Sam Ward was lying, Jack halted the dogs, and went forward alone. He would not yield to Nell's pleadings that she be allowed to accompany him. He was not minded that she should thus look on the assassin's victim.

Jack returned very soon.

"Dead as a door-nail!" he said shortly. His face was a little pale under the bronze of open-air living. "A knife-blade in his chest—handle broken off. We've seen the chap. It was Sam Ward. Had a secret mine, they said."

Jack chose a camp-site close at hand, to which he removed the body of the murdered man, so that it would be protected from any prowling wolf. He brought down to his camp the dead man's pack, and he covered the still and rigid shape decently with one of the blankets that had been

Sam Ward's. He made no attempt to trace the assassin. To have done so would have been useless in itself, and would have been to risk the like death. Nor did he make even a cursory search for the secret mine. He had no wish for personal profit out of this grewsome event. On the contrary, he was willing to delay his operations in the mountains, in order that he might deliver the corpse to the authorities, and make known to them the facts in the case.

"We'll put him on the sled in the morning," he said to Nell, who was very quiet, and who turned her eyes from time to time fearfully toward a place just on the edge of the firelight, where flickering shadows danced grotesquely over a deeper shadow—a shadow huge and misshapen and menacing.

"We'll take him up to Kalmak. It's a little place on the way to Malamute. But they have a sheriff, and that's what we need."

And neither he nor his wife, who looked from time to time affrightedly toward the shadows, had any hint as to the irony that the Fates had put into the husband's concluding words.

CHAPTER XVI

Dan McGrew, from a point of safe concealment, watched the coming of the sled with keen interest. He was still furious over the miscarriage in his plans caused by this arrival. There was no longer possibility of his holding the secret of the mine for himself. In return for the blood on his hands, he had gained a single poke of gold-dust. His chief concern now was the evading of any possible suspicion against himself. His thoughts were busy with this problem of safety. At his distance, and in the darkening light, he could not make out the identity of the man who examined the body of Sam Ward, and afterward removed it. Since Nell did not leave the sled, he did not guess even that one of the two was a woman. But it did occur to him that, since the arrival of these persons had thwarted his evil hopes, it would be fitting that they themselves should serve his need as the scape-goats of suspicion.

Once this idea had stirred in his brain, Dangerous Dan found little difficulty in planning the accomplishment of his designs. He remained in hiding, without venturing even to light a fire though he was hard put to it to resist the numbing cold. It was not till some hours after nightfall, when he judged the two in their camp safely asleep, that Dangerous Dan acted on the plan he had formed.

He crept with the utmost caution down the slope, and made a wide détour, so as to come near the camp to windward of the point where he heard the little yelps and whinings of dogs restless in their sleep. The night was clear, and, even within the shadows of the trees about the camp, Dan could see distinctly where the sled stood outside the limit of the firelight. Toward this, with increased care and slowness in the progress, Dan made his way.

He had almost reached the sled, when he stumbled over what he had deemed merely a deeper shadow beside it, and sprawled forward. To save himself from falling, he thrust out his right hand. The palm touched something cold—with a coldness beyond that of the arctic air. It was the face of the man whom he had slain, from off which his rough contact had thrust the blanket. And Dan McGrew knew the thing for what it was.

Strong man that he was, he was sickened. For a little, he stood there shivering, unnerved by the grisly encounter. But it was only the shock that had unmanned him. Presently, his courage rose again. He grinned to himself, standing there in the dark over the dead body. Here was nothing to be afraid of, he said to himself in brutal disdain of his own weakness. So, soon, he went on again, quite undismayed, to carry out his purpose.

Noiselessly, Dangerous Dan fumbled over the pack on the sled for some minutes. Once, he put a hand in his pocket, and drew forth something, which he disposed within the wrappings of the pack. Finally, he readjusted everything, as nearly as he could by the sense of touch, to the condition in which he had found it. Only, there was something added to the contents. For once in his life, Dangerous Dan had not been a robber. Yet, never had his intent been more deadly.

His task thus accomplished, the man withdrew as silently as he had come. Nevertheless, despite his bravado, he was at pains to tread aside, lest he brush a second time against that blanketed form.

Jack and Nell were up and away early. They made good speed with the grewsome burden on the sled. They ran easily without snow-shoes, for the crust still held. Jack was distressed that his bride should be unable to ride luxuriously on their honeymoon. But for this Nell cared not at all. In her youth and perfect health, the physical activity was, in truth, a pleasure, rather than a toil. But she was disturbed by the presence of that grim thing which they escorted. She could not avoid yielding in some measure to superstition. The radiant joy of her bridal was quenched by this tragedy that had followed so close upon it, and into association with which they had been

forced by circumstance. Her mood was oppressed with forebodings. She was all anxiety to reach Kalmak, where they might be rid of this ill-omened clay. So, she urged Jack often to increase the pace. And he, for his part, hardly less sensitive to this malignant influence at such a time, consented readily enough, hurrying on the dogs with whip and voice.... The train swung into Kalmak in mid-afternoon—at least an hour sooner than it would have made the distance with a lighter load.



SHE WAS DISTURBED BY THE PRESENCE OF THAT GRIM THING WHICH THEY ESCORTED.

Jack halted the dogs before the very unpretentious structure that was inappropriately designated the Grand Hotel. At sound of the arrival, those within hurried forth, eager for any interruption of the day's monotony. Among the others came a tall, lank man, with a lantern-jawed face and a drooping, melancholy mustache, whom Jack recognized as Hal Owens, the sheriff. He himself, however, was not known to Owens, or to any of those present, nor was Nell, as they were speedily to learn to their sorrow. Another face in the group was vaguely familiar to both the young husband and his bride. Jack, for the moment, could not recall where he had seen this stalwart, handsome man, who stood with a masterful erectness, emphasized by his frank and fearless gaze. But Nell, in the instant of seeing the stranger, recollected him perfectly, though she had seen him but once in a fleeting glance. She remembered how he had appeared on her wedding-day, and how he had regarded her with that cynical smile, which had aroused in her an inexplicable sense of dismay, a fear of mysterious disasters, past or to come. It seemed to her appropriate enough that now this man should be present to welcome her and her husband as they brought in their ghastly load. Again, she experienced a curious repugnance in meeting the steady stare that seemed to probe into her soul with a mocking amusement. Nell wrenched her eyes from his, and turned away with a little shudder of revulsion. Then, the natural buoyancy of her spirits asserted itself. After all, this man, who affected her so strangely, was nothing to them—could be nothing to them. And they were at last free of the horrible incubus that had been thrust upon them. The dead body was now gone out of their charge, was become the property of the law. She smiled, a little wanly, while her eyes moved over the roughly garbed cluster of men. She was glad—oh, so glad!—that miserable interruption of their honeymoon was done and over.

Jack addressed the sheriff briskly, himself almost as anxious as Nell to have done with this wretched matter.

"This is your business, Sheriff. I've brought in the body of a chap who got killed out Forgotten Creek way, yesterday afternoon."

The sheriff nodded with what he took to be the dignity befitting his authority.

"The coroner should set on the corpse," he said gravely, pleased at this display of his familiarity with legal phrases. "In his absence—bein' there hain't none—I reckon I'll do the best I kin."

He strode to the sled, and pulled aside the blanket that had concealed the dead man's face. He turned to the men who had crowded around.

"Anybody know him?" he demanded, authoritatively.

There was a chorus of grunts in negation.

Then, as the others fell silent, Jack spoke again:

"I knew him by sight, though I never spoke to him. His name was Sam Ward. They said he'd struck it rich—a secret mine somewhere in the mountains."

"Know anything more about him?" The sheriff's voice was heavy with responsibility.

Jack made an impatient gesture.

"He was in the stampede that came up to Forgotten Creek day before yesterday. You know?"

"I know," the sheriff assented. "What else do you know?"

"I know he's dead," Jack snapped. He was heartily sick of this business, and his temper grew strained. "If you have any doubt about it," he added sarcastically, "why, I saw him killed."

There was a general start of surprise over this bald announcement. The sheriff, however, preserved his official composure.

"That ought to help some," was his response. "Supposin' now, you fire ahead, an' tell all you know about this corpse o' your'n."

"No corpse of mine!" Jack retorted gruffly, more than ever annoyed, while Nell felt a qualm of new dread at the sheriff's ambiguous words. But Jack curbed his impatience, and related in detail

what he knew concerning the incidents of the tragedy.

His hearers listened intently. There were features in this murder that gave it a certain distinction. The fact that it had been witnessed from such a distance through the field-glasses gave it a charm of novelty that a mere murder must otherwise have lacked. The men, who had hitherto been stealing many a sly glance toward the young woman with the dainty face and glowing eyes, now stared at her with open admiration for the one who had first seen the assassin's advance upon his victim, and had guessed his deadly purpose. All those present accepted the truth of the narrative without question. The young man's frank expression and the simplicity of his story, strange as it was, carried conviction. Moreover, it was well-nigh impossible to suspect this beautiful girl of any complicity in crime. So, the account was accepted by all hearers as truth, and it occurred to none even to question it.... To none, save one. And that one was he who, of his own knowledge, best knew that it was truth. Yet, he would question, and to some purpose—for his own safety's sake.

The formalities of the occasion thus fully satisfied, the sheriff ordered the corpse removed to a back room in the hotel, where it was laid out on the table. Before replacing the blanket, the sheriff withdrew the blade of the knife from the dead man's breast.



THE FORMALITIES FULLY SATISFIED, THE SHERIFF ORDERED THE CORPSE REMOVED.

"It's a clew," he explained, with obvious admiration for his own sagacity, as he wiped the blackened blood from the blade upon the blanket.

Dan McGrew had followed the four men who, at the sheriff's direction, carried the body into the hotel. He was known here, as through most of the region round about, where he was regarded as an honest gambler—for his methods had improved in the twelve years since his discomfiture by Fingie Whalen.

To be here at this time, Dangerous Dan McGrew had employed the resources of both mind and body. His reasoning had convinced him that Kalmak would be Jack's destination in the trip. He had been obliged to risk the correctness of this conclusion in order that he might be free to start for the village at once, after completing his night-visit to the young man's camp. Since he must travel on foot, and slowly because of increasing fatigue, he had need of all the time he could gain for the journey, in order to reach the scene first. He had succeeded. Even, he had had time for an hour's sleep, which was craved by every atom in his body after a day and two nights of almost constant exertion.

So, now, Dan McGrew was on the spot, alert and arrogant with evil purpose. He stepped close to the sheriff, and spoke so that the others could not overhear. He knew the harmless vanity of the official, and meant to play upon it for his own ends, by letting the other take credit on himself for great shrewdness.

"You think that youngster's story is a bit fishy, I see!" Dan remarked; and there was deep admiration in his voice.

The sheriff, who had thought nothing of the sort, immediately assumed an air of suspicion, and nodded assent.

"Fishy—very!" he agreed.

"Of course," Dan continued deprecatingly, as if even to question this were an impertinence on his part, "you'll search that young man's pack?"

The sheriff nodded glumly.

"It's my sworn duty to do jest that."

Dan sauntered away, well content. He went out of the hotel, and stood unobtrusively among the other idlers, watching while Jack and Nell, restored to the best of spirits by the completion of their unpleasant duty, were now laughing and chatting together as they busied themselves about the sled.

Presently appeared the sheriff. He approached the sled, and spoke with a harshness he had not hitherto displayed.

"Young feller, I'll jest take a look through your pack."

Jack and Nell glanced up in amazement at the tone no less than at the words.

"But what—what the devil do you mean?" Jack demanded, wrathfully.

"Never you mind what I mean, young feller," was the offended retort. The sheriff threw back

the lapel of the heavy outer coat he wore, and showed a silver shield. "There's my authority," he sternly announced. "I'll jest take a squint through your belongin's."

Jack and Nell protested, but their protests were in vain. The sheriff in explanation vouchsafed only a single word, most contemptuously uttered:

"Fishy!"

In the end, the young pair stood by in mute indignation, while the official search was prosecuted.... They had one consolation in the presence of this outrage: The search would prove its own absurdity.

The issue came on them like a thunderbolt. From somewhere in the pack, the sheriff's groping fingers drew forth an object, which he held up that all might see. It was undoubtedly the bone handle of a large knife. Without a word, the sheriff reached into a pocket of his coat, and brought forth the blade which had been in the dead man's breast. Still without a word, while all looked on in breathless tension, he put blade and haft together. They fitted perfectly.

The sheriff's mouth, under the drooping mustache, twisted in a triumphant grin. An amazed consternation held Jack and Nell silent for the moment in the face of this damning evidence against them. The sheriff moved forward a step, and laid his hand on Jack's shoulder.

"Young feller," he said heavily, "I arrest you in the name of the law, for the murder of Sam Ward, deceased. And don't say anythin'," he added, in paraphrase of the legal formula, "for what you say will be used agin ye."

CHAPTER XVII

The catastrophe that had thus put an end to the honeymoon, drove the unfortunate husband and wife almost to despair. The thing was monstrous, incredible. Nevertheless, it had occurred. Jack raged against the unjust accusation which Dan McGrew had caused to be laid against him; but neither his wrath nor his entreaties were powerful enough to create even a doubt on the part of the public of Kalmak as to his guilt. The evidence against him was, in fact, incontrovertible. His case was made the worse, also, by the absence of any one who could vouch for his character. Given time, he could easily enough summon witnesses in his behalf, though even then the issue might be uncertain. He had no plausible explanation to offer concerning the presence of the knife-handle among his effects. He could only deny all knowledge of how it came there. And such denial was utterly valueless, as Jack himself realized with utter discouragement.

As for Nell, there was only a single thing to mitigate her misery, and of this she was hardly conscious. It was that she herself was not subjected to the indignity of arrest. In this matter, the chivalry of the community worked in her behalf. These men of the Northland were not of a sort to war against women. They left such warfare to a more complex state of civilization.

But, in truth, no arrest was needed for the unhappy bride. Nothing could have tempted her to leave the place where her husband was in peril. Indeed, she was like a thorn in the side of the sheriff's ideas concerning official strictness and decorum—and rose as well as thorn; for the winsome loveliness of this suffering girl disturbed him greatly, so that he was fain to grant her privileges which ill accorded with his conception of official etiquette. It was owing to this laxness under Nell's persuasion that she was permitted to interview her husband, though separated from him by the heavy grating in the cell-door, and though fretted by the presence of the sheriff himself, who sat within ear-shot, and forbade secret communication.... Those interviews harrowed the souls of the lovers, for, though each strove to cheer the other, neither could understand how this calamity had come to pass. Nell occupied the intervals between visits to her husband in frantic efforts to devise some means of proving Jack's innocence, or in pitiable weeping, shut within her squalid hotel-room.



NELL WAS PERMITTED TO INTERVIEW HER HUSBAND.

It was in the forenoon of the day following his arrest that the prisoner had his first glimmer of hope. It came to him while he was surveying for the thousandth time the roughly-hewn timbers that made the walls of his cell. He had long ago admitted the uselessness of trying to break out, inasmuch as he had not even a penknife with which to work. Yet, now, as his glance roved the tiny room, his eyes lighted with hope.

Forthwith, Jack began plotting escape. He understood that his situation was most desperate. The sheriff, who from pride in his office had added the cell to his log-house at his own expense, was fond of sitting on guard in the adjoining room; not so much for the sake of precaution against the prisoner's escape, as for pleasure in receiving visitors, in the full majesty of his office. And Jack had heard some of the low-spoken remarks of the visitors among themselves. He knew that these men of primitive emotions looked upon him as a murderer, and were disposed to end the affair in a lynching-bee. Only the sheriff interposed between him and such a fate, and the man was by no means strong enough to stand against a mob. Therefore, Jack was convinced that the only possibility of safety lay in flight. And that flight must be made at once, or it would be too late.

Little by little, the details of a plan were evolved. He went over the matter with every care, knowing well that he risked his life on the accuracy of each detail in his device. Some ideas he rejected; others, after much testing and readjustment, were approved. In the end, he became confident that his method might win success—confident that it would.

His preparations thus complete up to the point of action, the prisoner did not delay the action itself. For that matter, the opportunity he desired at the outset was offered to him almost immediately after he had decided upon his course.

The sheriff, who was a kindly soul, apart from the sternness compelled by his ideas of high office, repeated a favor he had already shown the prisoner, by coming to the grating, and thrusting forward a cigar.

"Smoke up, young feller," he said.

Jack took the cigar with due expressions of gratitude, and he was at pains to conceal the new hopeful eagerness that filled him.

"And here's the match, young feller," the sheriff continued, as he held it forth. It was one of the regulations formulated by himself that the inmates of the jail should not be allowed possession of matches.

Of that regulation, Jack was already aware, and to secure its evasion, he now acted. As the sheriff turned away, in pursuance of his principle of not encouraging familiarity on the part of a prisoner, Jack tossed the match to the floor, where it lay invisible in the light which shone in from the other room. Then he addressed the sheriff, with becoming humility.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff, but the match went out."

Dan McGrew, in the sheriff's place, would have demanded the return of that match. Instead, the official turned back promptly, and gave another, with which the prisoner succeeded in lighting his cigar. The sheriff, seated at his table, could not see the captive, who stooped and picked up from the floor the first match, and put it away in his pocket with extraordinary care.

Thereafter, still careful to escape observation by the sheriff, Jack got out a stub of pencil which he had been allowed to retain. He secured a small fragment of paper from the untidy litter on the floor of the cell. Then, he hastily scribbled a brief note. This was rolled up into a tiny cylinder with the writing on the inner side. By liberal moistening with his tongue he managed to make the roll retain its shape. Having accomplished all he could for the time being, the prisoner, with the cylinder in his pocket, awaited the coming of Nell.

The wife's advent was not long delayed. Within the hour, the girl appeared before the sheriff, softly appealing in voice, more softly appealing in the gaze of her misty eyes. The official strove to frown, but only succeeded in smirking shamefacedly.

"I suppose it can't do any harm to let you chin a little," he said grudgingly. "But remember now," he added, shaking a warning finger at the visitor, "no whispering, an' keep your hands in plain sight all the time. An' I'll have my eyes on you, you bet!"

With a murmur of thanks, Nell went forward to the grating, where she stood with her hands duly exposed against the metal bars. Husband and wife exchanged greetings as best they could, thus forced to speak aloud so that the sheriff could hear every word. Yet, without anything said to warrant it, Nell knew instantly that her husband's mood had changed. There was a light in his eyes, a smile on his lips. And, too, he nodded almost imperceptibly, very mysteriously. Nell felt her own spirits rise in response. They spoke of sending to Malamute for a lawyer. They spoke of securing proof against the actual murderer—at which the sheriff smiled.

But the sheriff, though he listened so intently, did not watch with equal closeness. He glanced over some of the papers lying before him.

It was Jack who watched carefully, for much was now at stake. As he saw the sheriff's gaze averted, he parted his lips, and with his tongue pushed forward the tiny cylinder of paper, which on the instant of Nell's arrival, he had placed in his mouth.

The wife perceived the protruding roll in astonishment. Jack moved his head forward, puckering his lips as for a kiss. Nell understood. She turned instinctively. The sheriff's eyes were still on his papers. At once, then, the girl put her own lips to the opening in the grating, where Jack's waited. The mouths of the two met in a kiss that lingered. The sheriff looked up, and saw the kiss. He noted that the hands of the two were duly exposed, as required by the regulation in such case made and provided.



THE MOUTHS OF THE TWO MET IN A KISS THAT LINGERED.

Nell took her departure forthwith. Her murmur of thanks to the sheriff for his kindness was a trifle indistinct. That excellent officer observed the fact. Also, he was inclined to believe that the unfortunate young woman appeared somewhat cheered by her visit to the murderer—though what there could be cheering in such a situation, the sheriff could not guess.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the solitude of her bleak chamber, Nell hastened to take from her mouth the cylinder of paper that Jack had given her. Moist as it was, when unrolled it lay flat, and the writing on the inner side was decipherable without difficulty.

The note lacked address or signature, since neither was needed. But the curt words filled Nell with rapture:

Have found way to escape. Go to Maxwell, ask him for help. Have him somewhere near the village on his side by eleven o'clock to-night.

With the reading, Nell took new heart of hope. She could not guess the means that her husband had devised for his escape from the jail, but the confident tone in which he had written to her gave promise of success. Her own part in the plan was simple enough. It only required that she act promptly in its execution. It occurred to her that Mr. Maxwell might be absent from the cabin, following the line of his traps. The thought of possible delay in the performance of her mission struck a chill to the eager wife's heart. At once, then, she was in a fever of impatience to be off and away.

Nell made her preparations swiftly. At her order, the dogs were harnessed to the sled, and were ready at the door of the hotel, as she issued forth. The news that the murderer's bride was about to start out, spread through the village like wild-fire. The sheriff himself appeared on the scene, as Nell was at the point of departure. He shook his head dolefully; but, to the girl's

immense relief, he did not offer to detain her.



THE DOGS WERE READY—AT THE DOOR OF THE HOTEL—AS SHE ISSUED FORTH.

"I dunno," he remarked doubtfully, "what you git by goin', an' I dunno neither what you'd git by stayin', fer the matter o' that.

"Anyhow, a wife can't testify agin her husband, so I hain't got any call to hang on to ye."

That was his valedictory.

Nell wasted neither words nor smiles on the assembly. She had no kindly feeling toward these men, who had dared accuse her husband of crime. Her sole response to the sheriff's statement was a crack of the whip and a lively cry to the dogs, which leaped forward with a speed and surety of movement in the splendidly muscled bodies that made the watchers exclaim admiringly.

There was now no leisurely progress, such as had been that with which she and her husband had traversed the miles together, before death brought tragedy to their bridal-journey. Nell, in two years of her living in the North, had learned the management of these animals, on which transportation over the snowy expanses of the Arctic so depends. She knew well how to get from her team every ounce of speed, and she did not spare them in the least. The crust still held, so that the going was of the best. Mechanically, with the instinct that develops quickly in those who live among the wilds, Nell had noted each salient detail of the route followed by her and Jack. So, now, she was sure of her course, and drove the dogs at full speed on and on, following the levels of interwoven valleys with never a hint of hesitation.

It was late afternoon when, at last, Nell found herself passing along the valley where they had lingered behind the line of the stampede. Hope mounted higher here; for only a few miles still separated her from the man whose aid she sought.

In turn, despair smote her at thought of the possibility that this Mr. Maxwell might be absent—might even not return that night. She had a dreadful vision of Jack, escaped from his prison, yet helpless, without dogs or supplies, doomed to perish in the cold. She resolved that, should other help be wanting, she herself would return alone to meet him. She took a little encouragement from this determination, until it occurred to her that there were limits to the endurance of the dogs. Then, again, desolation fell on her. But, at least, they would be together!... Thus, her thoughts rioted in the stress of anxiety.

Anxiety became an anguished suspense, when, finally, she saw the tiny bulk of the cabin, showing darkly against the white of the valley-slope. As the dogs raced nearer, she stared with fierce eagerness to catch some sign of life. She was in terror when she made sure that no smoke issued from the chimney. One does not sit at home fireless in the Far North. A great fear was on her as she halted the dogs before the cabin-door, and none came forth to greet her.

Nell's misery, like that of most persons in this world of mistaken ideas, was of her own making. Hardly had she clambered down stiffly from the sled, when the cabin-door swung open, and Jim Maxwell stepped out. At sight of his visitor, whom he recognized in the first glance, he uttered an ejaculation of astonishment, and advanced toward her quickly. His thought on seeing her alone thus before his cabin was that some serious accident must have befallen her husband. He was deeply concerned over the girl's plight, and sympathy showed in his face with a sincerity of feeling that touched the girl deeply—so deeply, indeed, that for a few seconds after he was come to her, she could only stand wordless, with her hands in his firm clasp, her eyes glowing with the gratitude and the relief with which his presence inspired her.

Jim Maxwell's voice was softer than it had been in more than a decade of years.

"Why, child, what's the matter?" he asked soothingly. "Whatever it is, we'll make it come out all right. Tell me about it."

Nell choked down her emotion, and presently regained a fair degree of self-control.

"Oh, I'm so glad—so glad you're here, Mr. Maxwell!" Her voice throbbed with feeling. It stirred to a new life a joy long dead in the man's bosom—joy in the realization that some one wanted him. It had been twelve years since any one had wanted him.

"Tell me," he repeated. His tone was even gentler than before. The warmth of it cheered the girl like a draft of rich wine.

Nell fumbled at her bosom for a moment, and drew forth the note that Jack had written. She held it out, and Jim Maxwell took it from her, and read it through with growing astonishment.



JIM MAXWELL TOOK THE NOTE FROM HER AND READ IT THROUGH WITH GROWING ASTONISHMENT.

After he had scanned it for a second time, he looked up at the expectant girl, with a puzzled, though no less kindly, glance.

"But what does it all mean?" he asked. "I suppose the note is from your husband?"

"Yes," assented Nell hurriedly. "He's going to escape."

Jim patted the girl's hand reassuringly.

"Now, just take it easy," he counseled. "You must remember that I don't know a thing about it. So, you're going to tell me everything that's happened, and what your husband is going to escape from."

The calmness of the speaker's voice quieted Nell's excitement, and she proceeded to relate without confusion an outline of what had occurred.

"Poor little girl!" her listener said tenderly, when the narrative was concluded. "Well, he did right to send word to me. I owe you two more than I can pay. And don't you worry, my dear. This cloud will pass quickly. The sunshine will be all the brighter after the shadow." His manner changed, and he spoke briskly. "Now, you get into the cabin. I'd only just got back from my line and kindled the fire when you came. The stove, I guess, is about white-hot by now. I'll attend to the dogs."

Nell went obediently, full of happy reliance on the strength of this man, who was at once so courteous and so kind. She smiled over her distress of a few minutes before. Now, a thick column of smoke rose into the still air from the cabin-chimney.

Inside the tiny room, Nell glanced about her with a curious sense of contentment. There was something homelike in the aspect of the place, despite its bareness. It was plainly, even roughly, furnished with a few tables and chairs besides the stove and bunk. The only decorations were the skins that hung on the log-walls. An oil-lamp was on a small table in a corner. On the large table in the opposite corner were some tins of meat, a saucepan, a few pieces of heavy crockery, and the like. Nell could not interpret the strange effect wrought upon her by these surroundings. She had felt it, in some measure, on the occasion of her first visit to the cabin. Now, however, its force seemed vastly stronger. She puzzled over it in vain. She tried to think it was the sense of relief that so affected her. But she knew that this was not the explanation. She had that inexplicable feeling of being at home. There was no visible cause. Whatever the reason, it lay beneath the surface of things. It was something in the atmosphere, some psychic quality.

It seemed to Nell that the impression made upon her by this room in the cabin was intensified by the entrance of the dweller there, who greeted her with his friendly, gentle smile. Indeed, the kindness of that smile and the look in the grave eyes touched the girl anew to thankfulness that this man would devote himself to her service in the time of need. She thought to herself that Mr. Maxwell must always have been a very kindly man to all, because he smiled so easily, notwithstanding the sadness of his face in repose. She could not know that, through two-thirds of the years measuring her span of life, Jim Maxwell had not smiled at all.

"First," Jim commanded, "throw off the outside things, and make yourself at home. You're going to stay awhile."

Nell would have protested. But the man raised a monitory hand.

"It's no use your arguing about it," he said; and Nell recognized the masterful note in his voice, though he spoke as gently as before. She was rebellious, but she listened patiently while he went on to explain.

"You see, my dear, this is men's work. There might be a hitch somewhere. There might even be a bit of a mix-up. You'd only be in the way then, young lady. We may have our hands full, without you on them. Probably everything will be all right. Anyhow, we'll do our best, and to do it we mustn't be hampered by the presence of a non-combatant. We'll come straight here as fast as my dogs can bring us. That will give you a chance to rest up. You'll just have to wait here till we come. I don't say that that isn't the hardest part of the whole job. But that's woman's work—waiting."

Jim had spoken thus frankly and at length, in the hope of avoiding useless discussion of a matter concerning which discussion could avail nothing, and he succeeded; for Nell yielded at once, very meekly.

"You're right, of course," she said, unhappily. "And you're right, too, about my having the

hardest part in just sitting here with my hands folded, while I don't know what is happening to Jack."

"Better unfold them," Jim suggested with a chuckle, "and rustle yourself some grub." He waved his hand toward the larger table. "The larder is quite at your service. As for me, I'll get ready and start at once. That'll get me to the edge of Kalmak soon after dark, so that I'll be all ready and waiting—just like you!—for whatever's to happen."

"Yes," Nell said, and again there was the emphasis of anxiety in her voice, "you must start at once. You must be there, ready for Jack when he comes."

Yet, in spite of this decision on the part of both that the man should start immediately, it was ordained by the Fates that there should be some delay; for this was an hour fraught with momentous things for the two thus cast together in the solitary cabin on the mountainside.

It was as Jim Maxwell began his preparations for the journey that he chanced—or that he was guided—to stand close to the girl, facing her. His eyes were caught by a golden gleam, which seemed pulsing, as it moved in the rhythm of her breathing. His gaze rested there idly at first. And then, a moment later, his attention was drawn to a more careful scrutiny—just why, he did not know. Perhaps, as some maintain, a secret, tenuous vibration emanated from the metal, and moved to response a sleeping memory of old associations in the man's soul. Whatever the cause, Jim Maxwell's eyes were seized and held fast by the locket lying on Nell's breast.

Of a sudden, he started violently. He thrust his head forward, with a movement so abrupt, almost threatening in its seeming, that the girl, in her turn, was startled, and withdrew a step, half-fearful.

"I want to see that locket you are wearing." Jim Maxwell spoke in a tone that Nell had not heard before. It rang with a note of command not to be denied. She gazed affrighted at the change in his face. The kindness was fled from it. It was imperious, ruthless, with a trace of underlying savagery. The young wife was dazed by the metamorphosis in the man on whom depended now her husband's rescue. And she was afraid, as well—no longer with a doubtful fear, but with a real terror before the expression in that heavily lined face, out of which the eyes stared at her with a cruel insistence.

"I want to see that locket you are wearing," he repeated harshly, and held out his right hand with the palm upward to receive it.

Without a word, Nell took off the chain from her neck, and dropped it with the locket into the waiting palm. Then, she moved a little aside, shrinking from the new being with whom she found herself. But, after a few seconds, she forgot her own emotion, her alarm, her anxiety in behalf of her husband. For she was looking on the soul of a man, bared in agony. So great and so terrible was that revelation that, very quickly, she turned her gaze aside that she might not see.

Jim Maxwell remained with his eyes fixed on the little locket, which bore for an ornament an initial *N* traced in tiny pearls. He could not doubt. It was the locket that he had caused to be made for his daughter, for Nell—his little girl! Presently, he would open it, to see if the pictures of Lou and of himself were still within. But, in this first burst of emotion, he could only stand motionless there, racked by all the torments of memory. It was the tearing open of wounds, which, though they had never healed, had ceased to bleed. Now, they bled afresh, and it seemed to him that his soul was drowning in the blood.

The fierceness of his first emotion passed. Suddenly, it was as if a cloud lifted from his brain, and he became aware of himself standing there in the cabin. A moment before—or was it ages?—he had been in heaven—and in hell. Now, he was back in the cabin in the wilderness. And he was glad to be there, for it was home....

Again, his attention was caught by the gleam of the gold within his hands. He recognized the locket. But, at last, he was able to accept its presence with some degree of calm.

Jim Maxwell turned to the girl, and addressed her gently enough, but still with that dominant tone which would brook no denial.

"Where did you get this locket?"

"I have had it always," she answered. None could doubt her truth as she spoke, with the clear eyes meeting her questioner's stern gaze squarely.

The severity of the man's expression yielded a little.

"Who gave it to you?"

"I do not know."

Jim frowned at this check.

"But you must know," he insisted.

Nell shook her head resolutely.

"I do not remember who gave it to me," she repeated. "But I don't remember anything about myself when I was a very little girl. I've had the locket always, just as far back as I can remember."

"How far back can you remember?" It was a perfunctory question.

"Papa and Mamma Ross, who saved me from the river, guessed that I was five or six years old. They decided on calling it six."

"And you had the locket then?"

Nell nodded assent again.

"And how old are you now?"

"I'm just eighteen."

As his brain took in the figures, and made a mechanical calculation, Jim Maxwell's form, which had relaxed a little, grew tense again. His eyes searched the girl's face with a strange hunger in the intensity of the gaze. Twelve years! Twelve years ago, this girl here before him, who knew nothing as to her life prior to that time, had been saved from a river. And she had worn the locket that he had caused to be fashioned for his daughter, Nell. And twelve years ago his wife and his daughter, Nell, had vanished. The incredible crowded in his thoughts. Could mother and child, by an evil stroke of fate, have been caught somewhere in treacherous waters? Could one have perished, and the other have escaped? Could this girl, who stood there wondering at him—could she be that child, his little Nell, grown to this splendid womanhood? The thoughts electrified him. Was it possible that there was still left for him in life this supreme consolation—a creature whom he might love with all his heart, who would love him in return?

But Jim Maxwell dared not believe. He was afraid of hope, lest it become despair to destroy him. Yet, the chief influences that wrought upon him were his own desire that this miracle might be truth, and the new and singular yearning of his heart toward Nell.

Presently, Jim Maxwell approached the girl where she was standing a little aloof. He reached out and put his hand on her arm. The girl started at his touch, but, for some reason she could not understand, she did not shrink from him now. He spoke very softly; and in his voice there was a music that penetrated to the girl's soul.



THE GIRL STARTED AT HIS TOUCH BUT SHE DID NOT SHRINK FROM HIM NOW.

"You are my daughter—my little Nell!... God has given you back to me."

The girl did not doubt. As with the man, her own yearning bore witness. She offered no resistance, but yielded with a reverent joy to the caress, as her father turned her about until she faced him, then stooped and kissed her on the forehead.

CHAPTER XIX

In the tedious hours of waiting after parting from Nell, Jack Reeves was infinitely cheered by the consciousness that he would have for an ally in this crisis one such as Jim Maxwell. Often, there came into the prisoner's thought a memory of how he had last seen the trapper. He had turned for a look back as the sled dropped to the level of the valley. The solitary dweller in that wild place had been standing erect and motionless before the cabin—a splendid figure of a man, posed in unconscious majesty.



A SPLENDID FIGURE OF A MAN, POSED IN UNCONSCIOUS MAJESTY.

There was, of course, the risk that Jim Maxwell might be away from the cabin and so not available to render assistance. That risk, however, could not be avoided, since there was no one else to whom appeal might be made. But Jack was able to hold an optimistic frame of mind. Somehow the effect made upon him by the stranger whom he and Nell had rescued from death was such that he felt a certain confidence as to the outcome of his plan, merely because it depended vitally on the coöperation of Jim Maxwell. Jack was sure that he could have secured this assistance, even had there been no sense of obligation to bind the stranger to his service. With Jim Maxwell's obvious and profound gratitude for having been rescued from death, there could be no doubt concerning his response to the prisoner's call for help.

Though he was busy with thoughts concerning his projected flight, Jack found the day dragging endlessly. It seemed an eternity before at last the shadows lengthened into night. Then, indeed, when patience was least needed, it became most difficult. Now that the time was so near at hand, the minutes crawled with a sluggishness that was exasperating. It seemed to Jack that the sheriff purposed to sit in the adjoining room throughout the night. It was only when he looked at his watch that the fretting captive learned how anxiety deceived him, for it yet lacked a half-hour of the official's usual retiring time.

Finally, since all things have an end, the sheriff stood up, and, after an amiable but formal good-night, went out into the living-quarters of the house. Followed an hour that was still more laggard than any of those that had preceded it in this most laggard day. Jack had decided that there could be no need of waiting until late at night before making his attempt. There were only two classes among the citizens of the town. One went to bed early; the other went very late—if at all. The prisoner hoped that the first class would sleep too soundly to have any knowledge of his undertaking until too late to thwart it; that the second class would be too drunk for serious interference.

When he deemed it time to begin his preparations for escape, Jack gathered the most inflammable parts of the litter on the floor. There was more than sufficient for his purpose, since the sheriff, however great his other official virtues, was by no manner of means a tidy person. This collection of fragments of paper and wood was stacked against the partition that separated the cell from the outer room, midway on one side of the door. The prisoner was at pains to use only paper and splinters, which would burn with little smoke. He had chosen the only possible point of attack for his purpose. The other three walls of the cell were of heavy timbers, which could have been set on fire only with difficulty, and, once well alight, would have assuredly roasted to death any one in the place, since there could have been no possibility of breaking through them.

The situation was different as to the wall in which the door was set. This was made of boards, instead of logs. They were too heavy to be broken through by blows from the heavy chair, which was the only tool available to the prisoner. Jack had conceived the possibility of setting fire to some of the lower boards, and thus weakening them to a point where they would yield to his attack. So, now, when he had placed his kindling in position, he made ready with the match.

Never was a match struck more carefully. It was the only one, and on its aid at the outset the whole attempt of escape rested. Jack breathed a prayer of thanksgiving as the match sputtered and flared to a steady flame. Next moment paper and sticks were burning briskly. The fire mounted, lapping gently at the boards of the wall.

Jack, kneeling closely, watched earnestly. There was nothing more for him to do now; he had only to wait for his servant, the fire, to prepare the way. He shuddered a little at the thought that the servant might become the master—that in the end he might perish miserably in a fire-trap of his own devising.

He stood up, and, by an effort of will, thrust the thought from him, lest fear drain him of the energy needed for the flight to come. He forced himself to think of anything else, rather than of a failure so horrible—of Nell, who would be waiting for him in a mood of hope and despair intermingled; of Jim Maxwell, who would be ready in this time of need. He pictured the trapper

with his dogs, waiting patiently on the snow where the spruce shadows fell.



THE TRAPPER, WITH HIS DOGS, WAITING PATIENTLY ON THE SNOW.

The flame rose higher and higher. The dry boards in the partition were smoking. Little lines of sparks ran over the rough surface, then died. The smoke from the boards grew heavier. The acrid odor filled the cell. Jack coughed and dropped again to his knees, in order to avoid the worst of the fumes. The heat increased, but it was not sufficient to cause any particular discomfort. Jack had vastly more fear that the increasing volume of smoke might overcome him before he should have opportunity for carrying out his project. Presently, however, he was greatly heartened by observing that there was draft which carried the greater part of the smoke out of the cell through the grating in the door. As he looked, he saw that the other room was filled already with dense clouds of smoke. He took further comfort from the fact that the fumes were not apparently escaping into the main body of the house, where they might have given the alarm.

In the cell, the lower boards of the partition had burst into flame. The heat from them was now so great that Jack crawled away from it into the farthest corner. The tiny room was like an oven, and to add to the discomfort of it and the deadly danger, the smoke thickened visibly, notwithstanding the current passing out through the door.

Jack realized, with a thrill of horror, that here was a duel—a duel to the death. It was a duel between him and those fiercely darting flames. Rather, it was a duel between him and those blazing boards in the partition—a duel of endurance between him and them. Which would be the first to yield? If the boards should hold out the longer, then he—! Jack shuddered once again, with a wry smile over the irony of fate. Here, in this rigorous climate, men went often hand-in-hand with a Death whose scythe was edged with ice. Jack had contemplated the possibility of being some time struck down by the numbing cold. It had never occurred to him that in this Arctic land he might die in a hell of his own stoking.

The stifling prisoner dared hope that at last the blaze had weakened the boards sufficiently for his purpose. Whether or no, his suffering drove him to action. The heat was intolerable now. Sweat poured from him. The pungent smoke blinded him, and bit cruelly at throat and lungs. Still without rising to his feet, Jack laid hold of the chair, which was just beside him, and hobbled clumsily toward the partition, pushing the chair before him.

Even this comparatively slight exertion caused the perspiration to gush in new abundance, and here, closer to the flame, the temperature was well-nigh unbearable. Jack's head swam. He felt his senses failing. It was only by a tremendous effort that he regained control of himself. He was aware of his mortal peril. Any least weakening or faltering now would mean his destruction. It was, indeed, a duel to the death—a duel of endurance between him and a foe that knew no mercy.

Jack realized, as well, that there could be no delay in the issue. He must act at once, if he were to act at all. A minute later would be forever too late. His brain was reeling. His agonized flesh could not longer withstand the strain. He felt his energies flow out of him like water.... What he would do must be done instantly—or not at all.

Jack drew a long breath, sprang up, swung the chair, and brought it crashing against the boards of the partition where the flames burned most furiously. The wall did not break, though it seemed to yield a little under the blow. But, before he could try another assault, dizziness sent him staggering away from the unbearable heat and smoke of that spot. He dropped to the floor, where he lay stretched at full length, panting in choking breaths. For a few seconds he was in the grip of despair. He felt himself impotent, doomed to shameful death in this furnace-hole.

Nevertheless, the spirit of the young man, albeit fainting, was not dead. It aroused presently. And it quickened the flesh. Once again Jack acted. His brain was dulled. He was hardly conscious of thought. The whole strength of his being was concentrated in his will to make a last, supreme effort. Again, after a deep breath, he leaped to his feet, seized the chair and hurled it against the center of the flaming mass with every atom of his strength.

In the interval since his first attempt, the fire that threatened him with death had, notwithstanding, been working in his behalf, weakening still more the boards, his enemies in this duel of endurance. The heavy chair burst through the blazing barrier and fell noisily in the other room.

Joy surged in the prisoner. Under the stimulus of it, he forgot pain and feebleness. He rushed at the flaming wall and kicked clear a larger opening. Then he plunged through the flames.

Jack fell headlong on the floor of the sheriff's office. By instinct, he remained prostrate, with his face against the floor, else he must have strangled. But instinct urged him onward. He crept toward the window, which, fortunately, was on the side of the room where he had fallen. His eyes were shut fast now, for the smoke had blinded him. But his groping hand, upraised, found the window-sash. Once more Jack held his scant breath as he got to his feet. He drove his elbows through the panes. The zero air enwrapped him. The touch of it was bliss. It brought blessed life to the seared lungs. Jack took one great breath of it. Then he put a foot to the window-ledge, drew himself up and went through, amid the noise of rending glass and wood. Without an instant of pause, or a single glance backward, he was off, plowing his way through the heaped-up snow, which bordered the clear space beyond the buildings. In another minute he was on the solid crust. Thus he ran on in a line parallel with the one street of the village, but behind the buildings that straggled there. He passed the last of these, and saw before him the white reaches of the valley, without sign of life anywhere, beckoning him on to freedom. His stride quickened and he went forward jubilantly.



WITHOUT AN INSTANT PAUSE, HE WAS OFF, PLOWING HIS WAY THROUGH THE SNOW.

A hail came to Jack's ears. He looked in the direction of the sound and saw, a little to the right of the trail, a ghostly silhouette, even as he had pictured it—the trapper, with his dogs, waiting patiently on the snow where the spruce shadows fell.

CHAPTER XX

Nell, standing before the cabin-door, peered for the hundredth time that night across the valley. Her eyes seemed to catch in the far distance a hint of movement, a flickering shadow out there in the dim light of snow beneath starlight. It was gone in the same instant. It must have been a trickery of vision. No! there it was again—a shadow that moved, a tiniest speck, but real. Nell's hands went to her bosom convulsively. It could be none other than Mr. Maxwell—her father—coming there. Did he come alone? She stood with straining eyes in a torment of doubt. Soon she was able to make out that only one figure ran with the moving sled. It was as if the heart died in her. Then, in the next moment, she thought that she could distinguish vaguely the outlines of another form on the sled. She was a-tremble with hope. The sled rushed toward her up the slope, the wearied dogs mending their pace in the frantic delight of home-coming. It was certainty now. Nell could see the man on the sled. He waved a hand to her. A cry of rapture burst from her lips. Within the minute, she was clasped to her husband's breast—all sorrows forgot.

Presently, when the first excitement of the reunion was over, and the three were together in the cheery warmth of the cabin, Jack told his story very briefly, whereat Nell paled and trembled as she realized how near to death this night had been the man she loved. But, when the fugitive finished the story with his arrival at the point where Jim Maxwell waited, Nell suddenly rose and went to the older man and threw herself on his breast and kissed him.



WHEN THE FIRST EXCITEMENT OF THE REUNION WAS OVER, JACK TOLD HIS STORY.

"Father, if it hadn't been for you—!"

Jack regarded the scene in amazement, not untinged by disapproval. Gratitude was all very well, but it need not express itself too extravagantly. Then he almost forgot the embrace in wonder over the word—"father!"

"Eh?" he questioned confusedly. "You've adopted him? That is, he's adopted you?"

"Oh!" Nell exclaimed, drawing away from her father to regard him with consternation. "Didn't you tell him?"

Jim Maxwell smiled very tenderly.

"No, I didn't tell him. I thought maybe you'd like to do that yourself, dear."

Nell kissed her father again, with such enthusiasm that Jack's disapproval returned with increased bitterness.

"You're a darling, Father," she declared happily. In the reaction from her suffering, she was bubbling over with girlish gayety. "I'd just love to tell him. It will be such fun to see his eyes pop out."

It was fun—and something deeper and sweeter. Jack, for his part, welcomed the fact of this new relationship with the man so curiously and intimately brought into his life. He rejoiced for his own sake, and he rejoiced more for Nell's; since now she need no longer mourn over being a nameless waif, though the mystery of her life was only partly explained.

The hands of the two met in a warm clasp, and their eyes met no less warmly in a firm, honest gaze of mutual liking and respect.

"I reckon I've done a pretty good day's work," Jim said, with a whimsical smile to mask his emotion. "I've got a daughter and a son, too—both in one day. And I didn't have anybody before—not for twelve years." There was a pathetic intensity in his voice, which touched the two hearers to a new appreciation of this man's great loneliness. Then Jim Maxwell shrugged his shoulders, as if he would cast off the mood of emotion. He spoke rapidly now, with incisive directness.

"You must get across the Border as fast as you can. I'll tell you some short cuts." He had driven his dogs often to Malamute, and knew the ways by which the fugitives might gain advantage over their pursuers. "You've had an hour here, and it would be risky to wait any longer before starting out. They may be after you any minute."



HE HAD OFTEN DRIVEN HIS DOGS TO MALAMUTE.

"They may think I've been burned up in the fire," Jack suggested.

Jim shook his head in dissent.

"No. Those logs would take a good bit of burning. Somebody would give the alarm, and they'd tumble out to see the fire, and they'd see that window you'd smashed through."

"And I had to wade through some loose snow," Jack added. "They'd find my tracks fast enough."

"Tracks leading this way! I tell you, there's no time to be lost. You know the trails to Malamute. Make it as quick as you can. From there, strike across the Border."

He was interrupted by Nell, who exclaimed impulsively:

"But, Father, what about you? I can't bear the thought of leaving you now, when I've just found you after all these years."

Jim Maxwell smiled down on his daughter with deep fondness.

"When you're in Canada, write to me here—to Kalmak, telling me where you will be, and I'll join you very soon."

He turned to Jack and gave explicit directions as to how the route to Malamute might be shortened profitably. When he was sure that the young man had understood, he turned again to Nell.

"I'm not quite so poor as I look, little girl," he said, smiling. "When I join you I'll have a wedding-present ready for you—for you, and for the boy here." His glance went affectionately to Jack, who returned it with like affection.

Preparations for the departure of the two were speedily made. The farewells were uttered; father and daughter kissed tenderly; the men shook hands heartily. Then the dogs, in fine fettle after ample food and rest, leaped forward with joyous energy. The night was clear enough to see the way distinctly; there was no danger of mistaking the trail. On and on they flew over the frozen surface of the snow, following the valleys that trended to the east. Warmly clad and habituated to icy airs, the two did not suffer any discomfort from the bitter cold of the wind created by their rapid motion through the night. On the contrary, it set their blood tingling with the joy of life. Both were gloriously happy. The starlight was as noon-day since they had come out of the valley of the shadow.

Thus they went forward swiftly, Nell stretched at ease, Jack riding and running by turns. In the twilight of dawn, they came on a native family comfortably encamped, and here they halted for an hour, that the dogs might be fed and rested, and that they, too, might eat and rest. They basked contentedly in the cheery heat from the flames, and at last took leave of their stolid hosts almost reluctantly. Then, once again, they went skimming over the waste, as the pale-yellow sun crept languidly above the horizon. The slanting beams set all the scene a-shimmer with prismatic radiance from the snow crystals. Hitherto, the two had been content with silence, happy in the knowledge that they were together and that the speeding miles put peril far behind. Now, however, with the quickening life of day, the placid mood came to an end. They became lively, garrulous, demonstrative. Nell insisted that Jack should rehearse for her anew every detail of his escape from the jail. The husband, in turn, demanded a full account of how father and daughter had become known to each other. Both were curious to know the story of Jim Maxwell's life. They could not forbear many speculations as to the nature of the events that had driven this man, whom Jack liked and esteemed, and whom Nell had already grown to love, to isolate himself thus in the desolate North. But they could only guess, since the father had told nothing of himself, except the single fact of his relationship to Nell.

They made Malamute in mid-afternoon. Jack halted the dogs in front of the chief structure in the place, which, though nominally only a saloon, was in fact the hotel and trading post.

"Don't get out, Nell," Jack directed. "I'll have to get directions here for the next stage in the journey. Maybe we'll have to stay for the night, and maybe we won't. I'll be back in a minute." With that he hurried off and entered the saloon.

As the door swung open to admit the newcomer, the few men straggling along the bar, or lounging at the tables, looked up in mild curiosity to see who this might be. Only one showed any especial interest in the stranger. This single exception was a man who sat by a table placed against the wall at right angles to the bar. He had been lazily busy over a game of solitaire, while the woman seated across the table from him looked on listlessly. At Jack's entrance, he had looked up with languid attention. On the instant, he was transformed. All the indifference of his expression vanished. His face showed first an unbounded amazement, then rage. Finally, another emotion—hardly fear, but a furtive anxiety closely akin to fear. He watched covertly as the escaped prisoner went up to the bar, where, after ordering a drink, he began questioning the bartender concerning the most direct route to the Border.

Having secured the information he required, Jack went back to Nell, who sat waiting on the sled, snug within her furs.



JACK WENT BACK TO NELL, WHO SAT ON THE SLED, SNUG WITHIN HER FURS.

"We'd better stay here for the night," he explained, "and make an early start in the morning."

Nell got down from the sled obediently and accompanied her husband into the saloon, where arrangements for their entertainment were speedily concluded. It was only after the two had gone upstairs to the room assigned them that the man, who had held his head bent low over the spread-out cards of the solitaire game during their presence, looked up and beckoned to a tall, rough-featured individual standing alone at one end of the bar. This was the sheriff of Malamute. As he came near, Dan McGrew spoke, and his voice rasped.

"Did you recognize that chap with the girl?"

"Never laid eyes on him before," the official averred. "What about it?"

"When I was down at Kalmak the other day," Dangerous Dan answered impressively, "they arrested that fellow for murder. He's broken jail."

The sheriff grinned contentedly.

"Then right here's where he breaks in again. I'll see to that. You're sure there's no mistake?"

"No mistake!" was the terse assurance. "I'll swear to his identity if necessary. But probably there'll be somebody after him pretty soon, as they'd figure he'd take this way for the Border."

"I thought you were going in the morning," the sheriff objected. "I'll have to have you for a witness, if nobody else turns up."

"Oh, I'll stay, all right!" Dan laughed.

And the Fates must have laughed with him, and at him, in mockery; for, in this last malignant act, Dangerous Dan McGrew worked evil against himself and none other.... Lou, looking on apathetically, wondered why Dan should be so eager to deliver over a fugitive from justice. He was not usually so intolerant of crime!

CHAPTER XXI

Jim Maxwell, left alone in his cabin, had company a-plenty in thronging thoughts. His mood, on the whole, was nearer to one of happiness than any he had known before in the years since the wrecking of his home. The discovery of his daughter had filled him with pure delight. Had she been other than she was, this recovery of her would still have filled him with gladness. To find her so lovely and so winsome in her personality moved him to proud exaltation. He looked forward to companionship with her in the years to come, and thanked Providence for this assuagement of past loneliness and sorrow. He was grateful, too, for the fact that she had entrusted her life's happiness to one who seemed worthy, so far as any man might be, of such a treasure. Since he had no son of his own, Jim Maxwell rejoiced over this gift of his daughter's bringing to him.

Nevertheless, it was in this connection that the otherwise happy father found ground for anxiety, and that anxiety pressed upon him heavily. His understanding of the circumstances, which was wider than that of the young persons involved, made him appreciate the evil consequence that must ensue from the present situation. Either Jack would escape across the Border, or he would not. In the latter contingency, there would be immediate peril of his life on being brought back to Kalmak; for Jim had been told, what Nell had not, of the probable lynching by men impatient of the law's delay. But, with the fugitive's escape safely accomplished, there would remain always a stigma on the young man's reputation. Throughout his life, he would go in constant danger of being pointed out as a jail-breaker and murderer. Jim Maxwell would not tolerate such a fate for one near and dear to him, and dearest to his daughter. He made a last round of his traps, bringing them in and storing them in the cabin preparatory to his departure. And in his progress over the miles, his thoughts were grappling always with the problems by which he was confronted. It was not until nightfall, as he sat smoking cozily in the warm comfort of the cabin, which had been blest by his daughter's presence, that he at last reached a decision. He had little fear of a lynching in case of Jack's recapture; for he meant to take a hand himself in coming events, and he believed that the sheriff at Kalmak, though he knew the official to be of a spineless sort, would make a stand against the mob with his backing. So he dismissed any immediate concern over the retaking of the escaped prisoner. There remained, however, the matter of the stigma. He would not let his son-in-law, Nell's husband, whom she loved, be thus branded by the world. There was only one means of prevention. The young man's innocence must be proved. With the evidence against him such as it was, that innocence could be established in a single way, and in none other—by proving the identity of Sam Ward's actual slayer. Since this was so, Jim Maxwell decided that he himself must bend every energy to tracing out the truth concerning the crime of which Jack Reeves stood accused. Before he slept that night, he resolved that with the dawn he would start for Kalmak, there to begin his work.

In the morning, then, Jim Maxwell set forth on his quest. On arrival at Kalmak, he halted his dogs before the Grand Hotel, where he judged, from a slight acquaintance with the sheriff, that he would find the official in the bar-room. In this he was proven right; for, on entering the saloon, the first person his gaze encountered was the sheriff himself, who stood at the end of the bar facing the door, with an expression of profound melancholy upon his horse-like face. Jim, with

only a nod to the others, went straight to the sheriff, whom he greeted with an assumption of deference, since he was well aware of the fellow's pet vanity.

"And what's new?" he asked innocently, after he had given an order to the bar-tender.

The sheriff could hardly pause to drain his glass, so eager was he to pour out his woes to one who had not yet heard them. There was nothing in the narrative that increased the stock of information already possessed by the questioner. It was not until Jim Maxwell had pursued a cross-examination for some time that there came a revelation of importance. This, when it did come, crashed on him like a thunderbolt.

"Have there been any other strangers in the place lately?" he demanded, desirous of any clew to the possible murderer.

"Nary one," the sheriff responded dismally. "It's been dull as ditch-water all winter hereabouts. Hain't anybody come in for a month—leastways, only Dan McGrew, and he ain't a stranger exactly—not by a long shot!"

Dan McGrew! The name screamed in Jim Maxwell's brain. Dan McGrew, here—within reach of his two hands!

He stood motionless, unhearing, unseeing. Beneath the concealing beard, his cheeks were bloodless. His thoughts were chaos. The despair of the years seemed crystallized in this new anguish over the fact that the enemy had been here, almost within his grasp, and he had not known. He seemed to realize as never before the monstrousness of the crime committed against him. Hate more savage than he had known hitherto filled his heart with its black flood. It seemed the final crushing blow of fate, that the wrecker of his home should have come so nearly within his power and then have escaped unscathed. For, somehow, he sensed details given by the sheriff concerning Dan McGrew's going from Kalmak, though he heard not a word of the babbling voice.

Presently, Jim Maxwell aroused from this trance of rage. He found himself weak and shaken, and his tone was husky as he ordered more drinks for himself and for the gratified sheriff. He gulped the raw liquor hurriedly, and welcomed the sting of it. He regained his usual stern composure soon, and, immediately then, his thoughts took a new turn. He resumed the prosecution of his inquiries with increased eagerness. It may have been that the association of ideas drove him on. Dan McGrew was to him the epitome of crime. The presence of Dan McGrew in the neighborhood struck him as of possible significance. He was without a shred of evidence, in the matter of Sam Ward's death, against the man he hated. Yet, he felt a strange conviction that here was the clew for which he had been searching.... The sheriff was highly pleased by the manifest interest of this trapper, who, in their previous meetings, had shown no trace of geniality.

"You say this Dan McGrew—" Jim stumbled a little over the name—"was here when this Reeves chap came in?"

"Blew in that very self-same day, jest a little while before the murderer got here."

"I suppose he hadn't heard of the murder until he got here?" Jim suggested.

The sheriff shook his head.

"We didn't any of us know a thing about Sam Ward having been killed, until the young feller drove up and told that cussed yarn about seein' the murder through his glasses. The nerve of him! And he'd got away with it, too, if it hadn't been for Dan McGrew puttin' it into my head to search his pack."

The listener started perceptibly at this information.

"Oh, it was Dan McGrew who first directed suspicion against this young man, was it?"

The sheriff was deeply chagrined by his inadvertent revelation of the truth. He attempted to hedge.

"Why, not exactly. Maybe he was the first to speak right out plain, but I'd been thinkin' jest that same thing."

Jim did not care to press the point. He had no wish to wound the sheriff's sensibilities, at least while further information might be extracted from the man. But he regarded this news concerning the part Dan McGrew had played in the affair as of vital importance. While the sheriff maundered on, he rapidly reviewed the details of the case, so far as he knew them.

The murderer, according to Jack's account, must have seen the approach of the bridal pair. The fact was, indeed, proven by his hasty flight from the scene of the crime. Thereafter, he might have watched, and probably had watched, the arrival of the sled, and he doubtless had been aware that the newcomers camped on the creek for the night. Already, in previous study of the questions involved, Jim had arrived at these conclusions, which established a plausible explanation for the presence of the knife-handle in Jack's pack. Certainly, it could have been no difficult feat for the assassin to secrete this evidence during the night encampment. As certainly, there could have been no other opportunity. Nor could there be any doubt as to the motive for the action. It had been for the purpose of fixing guilt upon the innocent, that the guilty might go free.

Now, in addition to these conclusions already established, there appeared another and salient fact.

The person who first suggested the searching of the pack wherein the knife-handle lay concealed had been Dan McGrew. The inference was undeniable. It was made stronger still by the correlated fact that Dan McGrew had arrived at Kalmak only shortly before the coming of the alleged murderer. By further questioning, Jim drew from the loquacious sheriff additional data. Dangerous Dan had arrived on foot. He had talked of having been in the stampede; but he had

given no precise account of his movements, nor had he explained the reason for his coming to Kalmak, over which the sheriff had puzzled. The day following his arrival, he had set out for Malamute with a hired outfit.

A rapid survey of all these circumstances brought Jim Maxwell to the conviction that Dangerous Dan McGrew had added murder to his other crimes. The evidence was by no means conclusive, but it was sufficient to any one reasoning from the facts. Jim, sure of Jack's innocence, regarded the guilt of Dan McGrew as actually established. There remained the necessity of final proof, which would brand the murderer as such before the world and clear the innocent from unjust suspicion.

It was reasonable to suppose that the slayer of Sam Ward had taken to himself, in payment for his crime, anything of value on the dead man's body. Thus there was a possibility, even a probability, that Dangerous Dan McGrew now carried with him some tangible evidence that would serve to convict him. This evidence must be secured. In no other way could the innocence of Jack Reeves be proclaimed to the world. And Dangerous Dan had gone to Malamute. Jim smiled slowly, staring fixedly, as if his gaze reached out across the miles. The sheriff, though hardly a coward, shrank a little from some strange quality in that look.

Jim Maxwell, in truth, was wondering as to his exact purpose in going to Malamute. Was it to save Jack Reeves, or was it to kill Dangerous Dan McGrew? Both, perhaps.

He put a last question to the sheriff, who was puzzled by it—not the less so by reason of a certain hesitation in the questioner's voice as he spoke.

"There wasn't any—any woman with this—Dan McGrew?"

"Nope! He's been here three or four times for a game with the boys. He's square, Dan is. An' I hain't never seen him look at nary one of the gals."

Jim Maxwell turned away abruptly from the sheriff, without a word in parting. The careless words screeched in his brain, mocking devils of derision:

"He's square, Dan is."

Jim Maxwell set his face homeward, and urged the dogs to their best speed, for he had much to do and time pressed. He reached the cabin with the first shadows of dusk, and, after attending to the dogs, busied himself in collecting important papers, which must be carried with him, since he could hazard no guess as to when he might return to the cabin, if ever. His skins were to be left behind, though their total value was a considerable sum. He had put out his line of traps for the solace afforded by occupation, rather than for profit from the pelts. He would leave them with no regret over the loss involved. He cared little for money at any time—now, not at all. The only consideration was that he must travel fast and light.

With the dawn Jim Maxwell was off. At the last, he experienced a pang of regret over leaving this humble dwelling, where, though he had companioned so long with misery, he had, nevertheless, found soothing from the serenity and the silence, and where, in the end, he had found a daughter and a daughter's love. But this regret at parting from the familiar place was, after all, a trivial thing compared with the desire to hasten from it to the accomplishment of the work that awaited. He was obsessed by the purpose to avenge his own wrongs and those of his children, as he had already come to term Nell and Jack in his thoughts. The object of that vengeance was Dan McGrew. In these hours of pursuit after the man who had injured him and his so foully, his mood was all of fierce hatred. The tenderness that had stirred and wakened in his heart with the recognition of his daughter now slept again. A fury of rage filled him. This nearness to his enemy inflamed every passionate memory of wrong. Usually considerate of every creature, he was now merciless, and sent the dogs forward at top speed, cursing them when they lagged.

As the day advanced, heavy gray clouds covered the whole face of the heavens. The light wind which had been blowing from the east, veered to the north soon after mid-day, and quickened. It quickened more and more. Presently it was blowing a gale. And it came icy cold from the floes within the Circle. Jim, under the numbing touch, was compelled to go afoot oftener, in order to make the sluggish blood bestir itself. Yet his action was almost automatic, the result of habit formed in like experiences. He was hardly conscious of the changed conditions. Though his flesh felt the ice-lash of the air and fought against it, the brain inhibited sensation. His thought was all of the task that awaited. The chill of the body was nothing to him. He knew only the hot wrath that throbbed in his blood. He gave no heed, even when the powdery snow came in almost level flight. It was solely the slackening pace of the dogs that had power to arouse him. Sorely reluctant, he gave them a breathing spell, and fed them. He desired no food for himself. He was sustained by the spirit of vengeance which was flaming within him. He was not afraid of the cold, which grew momentarily more deadly; nor of the snow, though it fell so thickly that, when the journey was resumed, the dogs attained hardly half their former speed. The flakes flew in masses so dense that it was difficult to tell whether the darkness were of its own making or the night were come. He could still distinguish the peaks by which he set his course, and, since he went to his destination, nothing else mattered at all—except that the dogs dawdled. He cursed them again. His voice went out to them by turns raucously savage and imploring.

The dogs ran floundering through the snow, which deepened dangerously fast. Ever afterward, Jim Maxwell believed that, somehow, the power of righteousness had gone with him, triumphing in his behalf over the elements that would have barred his way. It seemed, indeed, that only a miracle could have carried him safely through the cold and storm. He had expected, by unsparing driving of the dogs, to reach Malamute well before dark. He himself now had no sense of time, only as it meant delay in coming face to face with Dan McGrew. As a matter of fact, it was ten o'clock at night when his eyes picked out faint yellow gleams twinkling through the snow-wrack,

which he knew to be the lighted windows of the Malamute saloon. The dogs understood that they were come to the journey's end. They strained at the breast-straps in a last desperate burst of speed, and then, unbidden, halted before the door of the saloon and dropped on their bellies, panting and slavering. Jim Maxwell with difficulty stirred his cold-stiffened muscles and clambered down from the sled. He stood dazed for a full minute, as if not yet fully conscious that he had reached the end of the way, that the hour of vengeance had at last struck.

Then, suddenly, Jim Maxwell straightened himself and squared his shoulders. He walked to the door of the saloon and opened it with a steady hand and stepped within, shaking the snow from his parka as he went. He halted just inside and stood quietly. At his entrance, silence had fallen on the noisy room and the eyes of all were turned on him.



HE HALTED JUST INSIDE AND STOOD QUIETLY.

CHAPTER XXII

For a time Jim Maxwell stood there without movement, blinking confusedly, while his body drank in the steaming warmth. The men in the room regarded the newcomer with frank stares of curiosity. He was unknown to any of them. They guessed him to be a miner just in from the creeks, dog-tired from his fight with the storm. Without being told, one of the hangers-on of the saloon hurried out to care for the dogs, since their owner seemed almost helpless. Very soon, in fact, a suspicion grew in the minds of the observers that something more than the cold had affected this stranger.

"Full of hooch!" was the verdict.

Presently, Jim's vision cleared. He cast one piercing glance about the room. He saw Dangerous Dan McGrew sitting at a table along the wall, a little way to his left. He had schooled himself for the sight. There was no betrayal of the emotion that shook his soul at first sight of the man who had robbed him of wife and child and happiness. He even noted with a savage satisfaction something constrained in the pose of his enemy, who sat half-turned toward him, a card suspended in mid-air. Dan McGrew had seen him—that was certain. And it was certain, too, that Dan McGrew would not make the opening move. Jim Maxwell was content. His foe hesitated—and hesitation is weakness. He had no doubt as to his own strength. He believed it adequate for every demand upon it.

He vaunted himself too soon. His eyes passed beyond the man he hated to the one who sat on the opposite side of the table. A darkness fell upon his spirit. He gazed steadily enough, for he had no power even to shift the direction of his eyes. There was no outward sign of the convulsion in his soul. He remained looking steadfastly at the woman who had been his wife, at the woman whom he had loved and lost. None of the onlookers dreamed that the sight of her meant anything to this stranger. It was natural that he should consider her attentively—she was a handsome woman, in a place where women were rare.

Jim Maxwell's heart died within him. He had tried so often throughout the years to believe that the wife, who had been tricked into deserting him, had at least never been beguiled into aught unfitting her womanhood. Now, he saw before him the damning proof that she had given herself to vileness, to Dangerous Dan McGrew, whom presently he would kill....

But the sight of her dear face! Notwithstanding all the horror, to see her once again in the flesh before his eyes was a rapture exquisite, yet torturing. Her face was the loved symbol of all his happiness. It was, as well, the symbol of all hideousness, which had swallowed up happiness. As he beheld her thus, ravening emotion devoured his strength. Suddenly he felt his knees sag. His eyelids fell of their own weight, so that sight of her was shut out. The shock of darkness, after the glory of her face, startled him to realization of his surroundings and steadied him. He asserted his will once again. He straightened and shuffled toward the bar. But he did not open his eyes until he had fairly turned his back on the pair at the table by the wall. Those observing him

sniggered and mumbled again of hooch, when he lurched against the bar, and clung to it for support as a drunken man might.... Jim Maxwell was drunken—drunken with grief and hate and love.

After a little he recovered some measure of composure. He drew from his pocket a buckskin bag, and poured some gold-pieces on the bar.

"Drinks for the house!" he commanded.

The bartender busied himself in dispensing this hospitality to the crowd, which surged forward thirstily at the welcome summons. The Rag-time Kid, a wan-faced youth with a cigarette dangling from his lower lip, who performed noisily on the piano which stood against one wall, left his instrument and came forward hastily. Jim saw that drinks were served to Dangerous Dan McGrew and the woman opposite him, as well as the few others that were seated at the tables. He nodded curtly when the company raised their glasses toward him before drinking. His manner, however, was so singular and so remote that none ventured to address him directly. They eyed him askance. They speculated among themselves concerning who the man might be; for now, in some mysterious fashion, they had come to perceive that this was not one of the ordinary miners from the creeks, with the mud of the bottoms still matted in his beard. But they could make no definite surmise to account for him. In some vague way, they felt the portentousness of his presence among them. It was as if he stood enveloped in an atmosphere of tragedy. They looked at him furtively, confused, wondering, half-fearful, at his aspect. They no longer deemed him merely a drunken man. But what he was, they could by no means understand. They drank again, for his money still lay on the bar. They raised their glasses toward him. But the mystery of his coming remained unsolved, and it grew more burdensome as minutes passed, pressing heavily upon their spirits. Jim Maxwell drank with the others the first time and the second. He might, perhaps, have drained a third glass, but, while he delayed, his eyes chanced to fall on the piano, for the wan-faced youth with the cigarette dangling from his lower lip, was still enjoying his respite and was making merry at the bar. It had been a long time since Jim had touched the keys, but now, in the travail of his soul, it seemed to him that in music he might find surcease for the warring emotions within his breast. He went toward the piano, striding firmly. When he was come to it, he threw off parka and cap and seated himself and laid his hands noiselessly on the keys in a touch gentle and fond as a caress.

As the first soft chord sounded, the pallid youth at the bar started as if struck. He wheeled, and thereafter gazed unfalteringly toward the man at the piano.

It had been long since Jim Maxwell had played. At the outset, his hands moved slowly, almost hesitatingly, for the muscles were still a little numb from the cold of outdoors. But they grew elastic quickly, and a great series of clanging harmonies echoed through the squalid room. The others looked now with the wan-faced youth, whose cigarette had fallen unheeded. There came the dainty scamper of cadenzas, a crashing chord, and silence. The youth, who played himself, though not like this, understood that the stranger had made ready. He waited, tremulous with eagerness; for he loved his art, although he debased it. He muttered to himself:

"God! how that man can play!"

Jim Maxwell's fingers sought the keys again, weaving strange harmonies. And through them ran a thread of melody. The listeners could not understand, though the spell of it held them. Only, they knew somehow that the one who played was a man, full of a man's passions—the primitive passions of love and hate. There was a harshness in the dissonances that told of bitter sorrows; there was a charm in the thread of melody that was all truth and tenderness.



JIM MAXWELL'S FINGERS SOUGHT THE KEYS AGAIN, WEAVING STRANGE HARMONIES.

Those who heard saw visions, each according to his kind. In this improvisation, Jim interpreted his thronging emotions. The coldness and the desolation of the North were made audible. Through sound itself, he made these dwellers in the lonely places realize again the silence of solitary wastes. The music cried out in sudden anguished longing, then broke in discords, like shrieks for vengeance. Some of the listeners stirred uneasily, uncomprehendingly, yet thrilled—for the soul is more intelligent than the brain. The Rag-time Kid shivered.

Dan McGrew, the cards of his solo-game unheeded on the table before him, watched the man at the piano with steady gaze. His face was expressionless. He had recognized Jim Maxwell at first sight, and he knew that the time of reckoning was at hand. He was dismayed, for he had come in the course of years to believe that they two would never meet. Now that they were met, he was ready for whatever might befall. But he dared do nothing to precipitate the crisis. He must wait

to be accused or attacked. If he could have followed his desire, he would have shot down the man he had wronged—would have shot him in the back, remorselessly, in cold blood. That he could not do. The code of the frontier forbids such murder. At such an act, these men about him would show no mercy beyond the short shrift of a rope. He could only await the issue with what patience he might, cursing inaudibly, so poised that he could draw at a second's warning.

Lou had not recognized Jim Maxwell on his entrance. She had given only a glance at this bearded stranger. She was infinitely weary of life. She hated this vulgar place, reeking with rank tobacco-smoke and the fumes of liquors. She felt, even through an apathy that had become habitual with her, shame from the leering glances of these men, who took her for the gambler's light-o'-love. She felt herself degraded more and more at her manner of life and by the associations thrust upon her. She knew the evil spirit of the man she had married, which daily and hourly she was compelled to tolerate. The life was become almost unendurable. Yet, she continued the sordid existence, partly because she lacked the courage to break away from him, partly because she could condone the wickedness of Dan McGrew to some extent in appreciation of his loyalty to her. She could not doubt the reality of his love for her. That his love was utterly selfish, she knew. But he gave her all that he could. The woman's instinct toward martyrdom made her feel it a duty not to desert him. Now, after the coming of the stranger, she felt, rather than saw, the change in Dan McGrew, and she wondered over it dully. Not for a moment did she suspect that her husband's emotion was connected with the advent of the bearded man, toward whom she glanced so idly.... Love, often, is not so shrewd as hate.

Her eyes followed Jim Maxwell as he went to the piano. She was still listless, wholly unsuspecting that aught impended. Even the first softly sounded notes did not arouse her. It was not until her ears caught the delicate thread of melody that her heart heard it, and answered, and she knew that this was the man she loved. Her hands clutched at her bosom in a spasmodic gesture. She swayed in her chair for a moment, then relaxed limply, and sat huddled in the corner between the table and the wall, her face ghastly beneath the rouge. But, lifeless as she seemed, she was listening through every atom of her being. In the varying phases of the music, she lived again the blisses and the torments. And, too, it was borne in upon her that, as she had suffered in the years since their parting, even so had he, who thus wove in sound the fabric of their lives. Yet, she could not believe that this man still loved her, though the music that grew under his fingers was like the talking together of their souls. A great wonder dawned in her, a greater fear, still greater hope. Could it be that the scales had fallen from his eyes, that he had freed himself from a degrading passion, that he had returned to his allegiance, that he loved her—her! Her body shook as with a palsy from the riot in her heart.

Abruptly, the music ceased. Then, in another instant, there came a series of noble chords, sonorous and serene. Followed the tripping dance of arpeggios, which deftly hinted of a melody to come. The Rag-time Kid quivered in ecstatic anticipation of something splendid, nor was he disappointed.

There sounded a lilting melody, a-throb with the joy of life. The notes rang with the calls of passion; they trembled into the sighings of exquisite tenderness. There was rapture in the magnificent harmonies that marched with this melody. It was like a song of two hearts glorious in the fulfillment of their love, with all the universe chanting praise of their happiness. It was the lyric of love triumphant.

The man at the piano raised his arms high, and brought his hands down on the keys in a great swoop. The flames in the smoking-oil lamps leaped and quivered at the devil's din of the discord. The nerves of those that heard leaped and quivered. The player got up from the stool. His eyes swept the staring faces, and he smiled—a smile like a curse.

"You don't know who I am, boys," he said. His voice, resonant, yet softly modulated, was very gentle—dangerously gentle the listeners might have thought, had they known him well.

Dan McGrew knew him well. He understood that the crisis was upon him. He shifted very slightly in his chair, that he might have greater freedom of movement when the need came. He darted a single glance at his wife, and saw her sitting erect again, gazing at the player with dilated eyes in which showed the hunger of a soul. Dan McGrew cursed beneath his breath, and did not look again. Instead, he held his whole attention on the man who had spoken, and who now spoke once more:

"I haven't anything to say to you, except that"—the voice deepened and roughened savagely—"one of you is a hound of hell! His name is—Dan McGrew!"

Two shots rang out, which almost blent as one—almost, not quite. The crowd scattered and dropped to the floor. The lights went out.



CHAPTER XXIII

Word had been sent to the sheriff of Kalmak of Jack Reeves' capture at Malamute, and he at once set forth to bring his prisoner back. He arrived hardly an hour in advance of Jim Maxwell. He took formal possession of the accused, and forthwith made it clear that he was not minded to run any risk of a second escape.

"That young feller ain't in no way safe in a jail," he explained to his brother official. "There's no tellin' what didoes he'd be up to—he's that ornery. I'll jest take him along with me to the saloon over night, an' I'll set up with him, an' nuss him like he was a baby."

Despite all arguments to the contrary, the sheriff had his way, and started to the saloon-hotel, where the distracted bride had already established herself. The officer and his captive were hardly a rod from the door, when the shots rang out, and, almost in the same second, the lights were extinguished. The sheriff uttered an excited exclamation, and hurried forward with his prisoner. They were just within the door, when the bartender, who had so discreetly shot out the lights, produced new chimneys and leisurely set the oil lamps going again.

As his eyes fell on the form stretched out upon the floor near the piano, Jack Reeves uttered a cry of alarm, and sprang forward. Kneeling, he caught Jim Maxwell's hand in his. He could not speak in the first shock of emotion, for he believed that the man was dead, who lay there so still and white, with closed eyes, and the blood trickling from a wound in his head.

Nell, in an adjoining room, had been shaken with fear at the noise of firing. But, in the stillness that followed, she heard a cry of distress in her husband's voice. She forgot fear then, and rushed into the saloon and to his side. The sight of her father there struck her dumb and motionless with horror. Thus it came about that she and her husband were passive spectators of the great heart-drama that now developed.

There was another in the group. It was Lou. Before the shots were fired, she had sprung to her feet, and forward, as if to forbid the deadly work. She had been too late. But she had plunged on, heedless of the weapons, reckless of her own life. The instinct of love had guided her through the sudden blackness. So, when the lights burned again, she was there on her knees, crooning heart-broken words to the ears that did not hear. She had no thought whatsoever of that other form which lay stark, crumpled on the floor by the table she had left. She supported Jim in her arms, with a passion of tenderness and mourning; for she, too, believed him dead, and it seemed to her that all the misery that had gone before were as nothing to this anguish over finding him, only to lose him forever. Then, of a sudden, Lou gave a gasp of pure rapture—for Jim Maxwell had opened his eyes, and lay staring placidly at the smoke-begrimed ceiling. She bent and kissed the bearded face, then raised a countenance that was transfigured. It was years younger in that illumination of joy.



JIM MAXWELL HAD OPENED HIS EYES AND LAY STARING PLACIDLY.

Nell, watching in startled wonder, recognized the face in the locket. She knew this woman to be her mother. She could understand nothing else. But there on the floor at her father's side was the mother whom she had never known. The mystery appalled her. Yet, a tremulous happiness stirred in her heart over this meeting, so unexpected, so inexplicable, so fraught with amazing possibilities.

Jim Maxwell spoke, very low, so that Lou held her ear close to listen.

"Get it from the pocket inside my shirt," he commanded.

"But your wound, Jim dearest," Lou pleaded. "Don't bother about anything else, whatever it is."

"Get it!" Jim repeated.

Lou yielded to the authority in his voice, and searched as he had bidden. She drew forth a bit of oil-skin, which she opened. In it was a sheet of notepaper, folded twice, and worn through along the creases.

"Read it," Jim directed her; and Lou read obediently, though slowly through scalding tears:

"I, Anne Weston, confess to tricking Jim Maxwell and deceiving his wife at the instigation of Dan McGrew."

That first sentence gave her understanding of the lie that had wrecked her life. She read on to the end of Anne Weston's confession, and knew for the first time the entire infamy of the man whose treachery had robbed her of home and husband and child. Hate flared in her. She turned to look behind her, and saw the ungainly heap on the floor, which was all that was left of Dangerous Dan McGrew. And she was glad!... She turned again to the man she loved.

"Forgive me, Jim—oh, forgive me, dearest!" she murmured.

"I've nothing to forgive," was the answer. "A scoundrel fooled you—that's all. You couldn't help but believe your own eyes. But he's paid at last, I guess. Hasn't he?"

"He's dead!" Lou replied; and there was no sorrow in her voice.

"And I'm alive!" Jim declared contentedly. "He only creased me." He sat up suddenly by his own strength. For the first time, he appeared to notice his daughter and Jack Reeves. He spoke briskly now, and his voice had its accustomed firmness.

"Help me up, Jack," he bade his son-in-law. And then, a minute later, when he stood firmly on his feet again, he turned to Lou, and spoke softly.

"I'm going to make you very happy, to make up for what you have suffered. And I'll start by giving you back the daughter you lost twelve years ago." He nodded toward the girl, who approached.

"Nell," he ordered, "I want you to take this lady to your room, and tell her who you are. Go now, both of you, and have a talk. Jack and I will come soon. We have something to attend to first."

The women yielded to the masterful air of the man they both loved, and went away together to that talk in which there would be many kisses and the mingling of happy tears.

No sooner were the women gone than Jim Maxwell faced the sheriff of Kalmak, who, throughout the excitement, had kept his attention unswervingly fixed on the prisoner, with an eye to possible didoes. But before Jim Maxwell could speak, he was interrupted by the local official, who detached himself from the group about the body of Dan McGrew, and now approached.

"You got him, stranger," he remarked to Jim, in a congratulatory tone. "And he mighty near got you. Pretty shootin' by cripes! And I suppose, Mister, you understand you're my prisoner?"

"Certainly," was the indifferent answer. "But I sha'n't try to get away, and there's something I want to have attended to right now. It has to do with my son-in-law, Jack Reeves here, who is accused of a crime he didn't commit. I want to prove his innocence, and there's a chance I may be able to do it. Dan McGrew killed Sam Ward. I know it. I want everybody else to know it. I'm hoping that somewhere among his things, or on him, there'll be the proof to connect him with the crime."

The sheriff of Kalmak protested against the possibility, and spoke concerning Jack's possession of the knife-handle. In answer, Jim made clear the reasoning by which he had come to suspect his enemy of Sam Ward's murder.

"And, anyhow," he concluded, "you'd search this dead man's effects. I'm only asking that you do it now, and in my presence. He had the opportunity to do the killing, and the circumstances must appear suspicious against him to you, though you didn't know him for the dog he was. It's an idiotic idea that this boy of mine, who was on his honeymoon, would stop off to kill a man he didn't know, for a pinch of dust he didn't need."

The Malamute official nodded assent.

"You're talkin' sense, Mister," he agreed. "I reckon Hal Owens thinks the same as I do." He regarded the sheriff of Kalmak inquiringly, who found himself exceedingly confused over this new turn to an affair already finally determined in his own mind. He vouchsafed a nod of acquiescence, but ventured nothing further. "And that being so," the other went on, "why, we'll just naturally take a squint at the corpse and his goods and chattels, and get a line, if so be, on what's what." Having thus spoken, he led the way to where the body of Dan McGrew was lying by the table; and with him went Jim Maxwell; and Jack Reeves and his guard followed them.

The Malamute sheriff, as became his authority, made the examination of the dead man's clothing. He went through the pockets painstakingly, sorting the articles, and laying each in turn on the table, while Jim Maxwell looked on with a close scrutiny that nothing escaped. But the collection of miscellany grew little by little without showing anything in the least significant. No one of the various objects disclosed could by any ingenuity be claimed as evidence that Dan McGrew had perpetrated the crime of which Jack Reeves stood accused. The hope that had sprung up in the young man's breast at Jim Maxwell's utterance quickly died. But Jim himself did not despair. Sure of his enemy's guilt, he was sure, too, that somehow it would be brought to light.

The searcher came at last to a pocket inside the waistcoat. In it was a tiny book, bound in paste-board covers. On the outside of the front cover were printed words and written. The sheriff gave a glance at these, and shouted exultantly:

"We've got him—cuss him!" And then he added, in a tone of disgust: "And to think of him carryin' the goods on him like that!" He handed the book to Jim Maxwell, who read in a glance,

with Jack looking over his shoulder:

"The Tacoma Savings Bank, in account with Sam Ward."

Jack's captor, also, who throughout had kept his hold on the prisoner's arm, read, and abruptly took his hand away. His voice revealed how great was the injury done to his dignity:

"The damn' skunk! An' him a-leadin' me on! I wish he'd come to life for five minutes, an' I'd show him that Hal Owens ain't to be made a fool of." And the sheriff's flashing eyes and scowling brows showed that he meant it.

Without a word, Jim Maxwell turned to his son-in-law, and put out his hand, and the two men shook hands joyously, yet with a certain gravity.

"This will be glorious news for Nell," Jack said, happily. Then the gladness went out of his face. "Now, we must think about you." He grinned ruefully. "I'll have to be trying to do for you what you've done for me."

The sheriff of Malamute regarded the young man jovially.

"Now, don't you worry a mite—not a mite, my lad," he said genially, clapping Jack Reeves on the back. "We'll have a court a-sittin' in this blessed saloon in about five minutes, with a judge and a jury all regular. From what the boys have been a tellin' me, it seems perfectly clear that the prisoner just naturally shot Dan McGrew in self-defense." He beamed good-naturedly on Jim. "I calculate, the sooner you're tried, the better you'd like it, and have the thing off your mind like."

His prisoner smiled in return.

"It can't be too quickly to suit me," he declared. As a matter of fact, the amiable manner of the officer, as well as the suggestion itself, afforded Jim Maxwell immense relief. Until within the hour, he had had no concern as to his fate. He had determined to take the law in his own hands in order to rid the world of a scoundrel. He had not troubled to think that his act might involve himself in destruction. But a change had been wrought in his attitude. That change had had its origin in the discovery of Lou. Her presence had turned his thoughts at the very outset to new hopes of happiness. He himself had scarcely realized this, until, with the approach of the sheriff, he awoke to appreciation of the fact that he stood in peril of his life. He had not been able to guess what the mood of these men might be toward him, a stranger to them, who had come among them to kill one whom they did know. Though he concealed it, he had experienced a considerable trepidation concerning the outcome. He was gratified accordingly now over the sheriff's announcement, which manifested the kindly disposition of the crowd toward him.... He turned to Jack.

"Go to Nell and her mother," he directed, "and keep them away from here. Tell Nell that your innocence has been proved." As the young man turned away, half in reluctance half in eagerness, Jim addressed the sheriff gravely:

"And now, sir, I am at your service."

The trial was of record shortness, but, in its way, it was formal, and it had the sanction of the law. There were no pleas, only the taking of evidence and the rendering of the verdict, on which the jury decided without leaving their places.

The verdict was justifiable homicide in self-defense.

CHAPTER XXIV

Jim thanked the court and the jury for their treatment of him, and shook hands heartily with each man of them. As he turned away, the barkeeper called to him:

"Hey, Mr. Maxwell! There's money comin' to you!"

Jim went toward the bar, smiling.

"Use it, and if you need more, I'll pay."

He turned toward the crowd in the saloon. "You're my guests to-night, boys, and I want you to whoop it up. You're all friends of mine. Perhaps, I'll look in again by-and-by. But I must go now. I was alone when I came here, but, thank God!"—his voice grew suddenly husky—"I'm not alone now."

In the adjoining room, the others were waiting for him anxiously. As he entered, Jack sprang to his feet.

"They've acquitted you!" he cried.

Jim nodded assent.

"I've been acquitted according to the law." His voice was grave, yet with an undernote of jubilation. "My conscience never accused me, I guess. Somehow, it seemed to me that I had to do what I did. And what about you? What's your verdict?"

Nell threw herself into her father's arms, and clung to him. He held her close, inexpressibly comforted by this contact with his own flesh and blood.

"As if any one could doubt that you did right!" she exclaimed, scornfully.

"I've heard the story," Jack interrupted. His voice was quivering with sympathetic anger. "Shooting was too good a death for this Dan McGrew."

"And you?" Jim spoke more softly now, with his eyes fixed on the woman, who had not risen. His voice was very wistful. His eyes were even more wistful, as they searched that dear face, which, though weary and worn, was still so beautiful.

The great, dark eyes, brilliant as a girl's in this hour of excitement, met his in frank adoration.

"Jim," she said, and the music of her voice seemed sweeter than he had ever heard it before, "you were right to kill him, of course. But whatever you do, always, will be right to me—just because you do it. I doubted you once, Jim. Never again!" She rose now, and came to him. And, at her coming, a feminine instinct caused Nell to slip from her father's embrace. Her mother stepped close, and raised her lips.

"Kiss me, Jim." Her voice was no more than a whisper, but it went echoing through all the chambers of the man's heart. He folded his arms about her with a reverent gentleness, yet strongly, as if he would never let her go. Then, he bent his head, and kissed her on the lips.... It was the sacrament of a new life in the old love.

Thereafter, the four talked of many things. Nell was compelled to tell again the story of her escape from the river. The mother was deeply stirred by gratitude to the kindly pair who had rescued and ministered unto her daughter through so many years. She turned to Jim, all eagerness, her eyes aglow, her lips curving in the gracious smile he knew so well.

"Oh, can't we go to visit them, and thank them? We must!"

Jim nodded.

"Yes," he answered, "we must, indeed. We owe them more than we can ever repay. We're proud of our daughter, and we bless them for it. Yes, we must tell them so. We'll help them in a material way, but we can never pay them our debt."

"Nell and I," Jack remarked, after a little interval of silence, "have about decided that we've had enough excitement for one honeymoon. We're ready to hike back. What about you folks going with us?"

Jim looked at Lou, who returned his glance in kind. The desire of the two was one. They nodded in silent acceptance of the suggestion. Then, for the first time in those many years, Jim Maxwell laughed gayly.

"Your daughter can chaperon you, Lou," he said.

She blushed like a girl.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, in embarrassment. "I had forgotten!"

All four, for the first time, were thinking of the complications that had arisen in this most curious situation; but a certain shyness held them silent. It was not until the younger pair had said good-night, and had gone to their room, that Lou at last spoke openly of the thing that was most in her thoughts. It was now that Jim learned of the divorce granted to his wife, of her marriage to Dangerous Dan McGrew. The news stunned him with its unexpectedness. But, too, it afforded him a mighty relief. There remained, however, the astounding fact that Lou was not his wife.

"Why," he ejaculated, "we'll have to be married over again."

"Yes," Lou assented, in some confusion. "It's not proper, of course, but—" She broke off, regarding Jim with puzzled eyes.

"There's nothing conventional about this affair," was the man's brisk comment. "For that matter, this is not a land of conventions, of the sort they set such store by down below. They go here by the right and wrong of things in themselves. That way is a good deal simpler, and, in most cases, it's a good deal better, I guess. By right, Lou, you're my wife. I'll make you so legally the first minute possible. It's right I should. Conventions don't go."

"I'm glad, Jim," Lou answered happily.

"There's the minister that married Nell and Jack. He'll be there where we're going to visit Papa and Mamma Ross. Nell says he's a fine old chap. It would be nice to be married by the minister that married Nell. What do you think?"

"Oh, splendid!" Lou agreed, with enthusiasm. She smiled and dimpled. "Why, Jim, I saw him. He has such a good face! Jim, you don't know! I saw Nell married—my own daughter, and I never knew it!" She told the story.

"In the morning, we'll hit a good pace on the trail," Jim said, decisively, "and get to that parson as fast as ever we can."

"Yes," Lou said again.

The morrow broke fair and warmer after the storm. The four were off early, with the whole town turned out to do them honor at their parting. Afterward, the cheering populace would attend the obsequies of Dan McGrew.

The going was slow; whereat Jim Maxwell fretted hugely. But there was no other flaw in his perfect happiness, or in that of the woman who sat with her face turned so that she might look up often into the bearded one of the man as he ran behind the sled. Both were content. Already,

yesterday was remote, with all its loneliness and grief. This was a new day, in a new life, the beginning of a happiness that would abide. The sorrows they had known had cleansed and strengthened them, and made them ready for a finer joy in their love. They spoke little together, for there was small need of words between them. Neither needed to tell the other of the torment endured during the years of separation. Neither wished to remember the evil that was gone. Why should they mourn when the cup of gladness was brimming at their lips? The past was dead. The scars from the old wounds would remain always. But they were hidden, and the wounds were healed by love's magic, and would ache no more. They set their faces to the future, where life shone radiant.



HE POINTED OUT—OVER THE BROAD-SWEEPING WHITENESS OF THE VALLEY—TOWARD THE SOUTHERN HORIZON.

On the crest of the hill, Jim halted the dogs for a brief rest. He pointed out over the broad-sweeping whiteness of the valley toward the southern horizon.

"Down there, Lou," he said, and his voice rang with a tender joyousness, "down there our home is waiting for us."

And the woman echoed very softly:

"Our home."

THE END

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Inconsistent punctuation corrected, e.g. "," vs "."

Inconsistencies retained such as:

- (1) bartender used five times, bar-tender used three times.
- (2) barkeeper used two times, bar-keeper used two times.

On Page 296 "babby" changed to "baby".

On Page 304 "acquiescence" replaced with "acquiescence".

End of book advertisements:

"War field" changed to "Warfield"

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