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Author: James B. Hendryx

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SNOWDRIFT

A Story of the Land of the Strong Cold

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

AUTHOR OF

"The Gold Girl," "The Gun Brand," "The Texan,"
"Prairie Flowers," "The Promise," etc.

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BY
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The Promise	The Gold Girl
The Gun Brand	Prairie Flowers
The Texan	Snowdrift
North	Without Gloves

At the Foot of the Rainbow

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SNOWDRIFT

A PROLOGUE

I

Murdo MacFarlane, the Hudson's Bay Company's trader at Lashing Water post, laid aside his book and glanced across the stove at his wife who had paused in her sewing to hold up for

inspection a very tiny shirt of soft wool.

"I tell you it's there! It's bound to be there," he announced with conviction. "Just waitin' for the man that's man enough to go an' get it."

Margot nodded abstractedly and deftly snipped a thread that dangled from a seam of a little sleeve. She had heard this same statement many times during the three years of their married life, and she smiled to herself as Molaire, her father, who was the Company's factor at Lashing Water, laid aside his well thumbed invoice with a snort of disgust. She knew her two men well, did Margot, and she could anticipate almost word for word the heated argument that was bound to follow. Without rising she motioned to Tom Shirts, the Company Indian, to light the great swinging lamp. And as the yellow light flooded the long, low trading room, she resumed her sewing, while Molaire hitched his chair nearer the stove and whittled a pipeful of tobacco from a plug.

"There ye go again with ye're tomrot an' ye're foolishness!" exploded the old Frenchman, as he threw away his match and crowded the swelling tobacco back into the bowl of his pipe. "Always babblin' about the gold. Always wantin' to go an' find out for ye'reself it ain't there."

"But I'm tellin' you it *is* there," insisted MacFarlane.

"Where is it, then? Why ain't it be'n got?"

"Because the right man ain't gone after it."

"An' ye're the right man, I suppose! Still lackin' of twenty-five years, an' be'n four years in the bush; tellin' me that's be'n forty years in the fur country, an' older than ye before ever I seen it. Ye'll do better to ferget this foolishness an' stick to the fur like me. I've lived like a king in one post an' another—an' when I'm old I'll retire on my pension."

"An' when I'm old, if I find the gold, I'll ask pension of no man. It ain't so much for myself that I want gold—it's for them—for Margot, there, an' the wee Margot in yon." He nodded toward the door of the living room where the year-old baby lay asleep.

Molaire shrugged: "Margot has lived always in the bush. She needs no gold, an' the little one needs no gold. Gold costs lives. Come, Margot, speak up! Would ye send ye're man to die in the barrens for the gold that ain't there?"

Margot paused in her sewing and smiled: "I am not sending him into the barrens," she said. "If he goes, I go, and the little Margot, too. If one dies, we all die together. But there must be gold there. Has not Murdo read it in books? And we have heard rumors of gold among the Indians."

"Read it in books!" sniffed Molaire. "Rumors among Injuns! Ye better stick to fur, boy. Ye take to it natural. There's no better judge of fur in all the traders I've had. Before long the Company'll make ye a factor."

As young Murdo MacFarlane filled and lighted his pipe, his eyes rested with burning intensity upon his young wife. When finally he spoke it was half to himself, half to Molaire: "When the lass an' I were married, back yon, to the boomin' of the bells of Ste. Anne's, I vowed me a vow that I'd do the best 'twas in me to do for her. An' I vowed it again when, a year later, the bells of Ste. Anne's rang out at the christening of the wee little Margot. Is it the best a man can do—to spend his life in the buyin' of fur for a wage, when gold 'twould pay for a kingdom lies hid in the sands for the takin'?"

Molaire's reply was interrupted by a sound from without, and the occupants of the room looked at each other in surprise. For it was February and the North lay locked in the iron grip of the strong cold. Since mid-afternoon the north wind had roared straight out of the Arctic, driving before it a blue-white smother of powder-dry snow particles that cut and seared the skin like white-hot steel filings. MacFarlane was half way across the floor when the door opened and a man, powdered white from head to foot, stepped into the room in a swirl of snow fine as steam. With his hip he closed the door against the push of the wind, and advancing into the room, shook off his huge bear-skin mittens and unwound the heavy woolen scarf that encircled his parka hood and muffled his face to the eyes. The scarf, stiff with ice from his frozen breath, crackled as it unwound, and little ice-chips fell to the floor.

"Ha, it's Downey, who else? Lad, lad, what a night to be buckin' the storm!" cried the trader.

Corporal Downey, of the Royal North-West Mounted Police, grinned as he advanced to the stove. "It was buck the storm to Lashin' Water post, or hole up in a black spruce swamp till it was over. She looks like a three days' storm, an' I prefer Lashin' Water."

"Ye're well in time for supper, Corporal," welcomed Molaire, "and the longer the storm lasts the better. For now we'll have days an' nights of real whist. We've tried to teach Tom Shirts to play, but he knows no more about it now than he knows about the ten commandments—an' cares less. So we've be'n at it three-handed. But three-handed whist is like a three-legged dog—it limps."

Neseka, the squaw, looked in from the kitchen to announce supper, and after ordering Tom to attend to the Corporal's dogs, Molaire clapped his hands impatiently to attract the attention of MacFarlane and Downey who were beating the snow from the latter's moose hide parka. "Come," insisted the old man, "ye're outfit'll have plenty time to dry out. The supper'll be cold, an' we're losin' time. We've wasted a hand of cards already."

"Is the gold bug still buzzin' in your bonnet, Mac?" asked Downey, as Molaire flourished the keen bladed carving knife over the roasted caribou haunch.

"Aye," answered the young Scotchman. "An' when the rivers run free in the spring, I'll be goin' to get it."

A long moment of silence followed the announcement during which the carving knife of Molaire was held suspended above the steaming roast. The old man's gaze centered upon his son-in-law's face, and in that moment he knew that the younger man's decision had been made, and that nothing in the world could change it. The words of Margot flashed through his brain: "If he goes, I go, and the little Margot, too. If one dies, we all die together." His little daughter, the light of his life since the death of her mother years before—and the tiny wee Margot who had snuggled her way into his rough old heart to cheer him in his old age—going away—far and far away into the God-knows-where of bitter cold and howling blizzard—and all on a fool's errand! The keen blade bit the roast to the bone, raised, dripping red juice, and bit again.

"*Mon Dieu*, what a fool!" breathed the old man, and as if in final appeal, turned to Corporal Downey, who had known him long, and who had guessed what was passing in his mind. "Tell him, Downey, you know the North beyond the barrens. Tell him he is a fool!"

And Downey who was not old in years but very wise in the ways of men, smiled. He liked young Murdo MacFarlane, but he was a Scotchman himself and he knew the hard-headedness of the breed.

"Well, a man ain't always a fool because he goes huntin' for gold. That's accordin'. Where is this gold, Mac? An' how do you know it's there?"

"It's there, all right—gold and copper, too. Didn't Captain Knight try to find it? And Samuel Hearne?"

"Yes," broke in Molaire, "an' Knight's bones are bleachin' on Marble Island with his ships on the bottom of the Bay, an' Hearne came back empty handed."

"That's why the gold is still there," answered MacFarlane.

"Where 'bouts is it?" insisted Downey.

"Up in the Coppermine River country, to the north and east of Bear Lake."

"How do you know?"

"The Injuns had chunks of it. That's what sent Knight and Hearne after it."

"How long ago?"

"Captain Knight started in 1719, an' Hearne about fifty years later."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Downey. "Ain't that figurin' quite a ways back?"

"Gold don't rot. If it was there then, it's there now. It's never been brought out."

"Yes—*if* it was there. But, maybe it ain't there an' never was—what then?"

"I talked with an Injun, a year back, that said he had seen an Injun from the North that had seen some Eskimos that had dishes made of yellow metal."

"He was prob'ly lyin'," observed Downey, "or the Injun that told him was lyin'. I've be'n north to the coast a couple of times, an' I never seen no Injuns nor Eskimos eatin' out of no gold dishes yet."

"Maybe it's because you've stuck to the Mackenzie, where the posts are. Have you ever crossed the barrens straight north—between the Mackenzie an' the Bay?"

"No," answered Downey, dryly, "an' I hope to God I don't never have to. You've got a good thing here with the Company, Mac. If I was you I'd stick to it, anyways till I seen an Injun with some gold. I never seen one yet—an' I don't never expect to. An' speakin' of Injuns reminds me, I passed a camp of 'em this forenoon."

"A camp of 'em!" exclaimed Molaire, in surprise. "Who were they? My Injuns are all on the trap lines."

"These are from the North somewheres. I couldn't savvy their lingo. They ain't much good I guess. They're non-treaty Injuns—wanderers. They wanted to know where a post was, an' I told 'em. They'll prob'ly be in to trade when the storm lets up."

That evening old Molaire played whist badly. His heart was not in the game, for try as he would to keep his mind on the cards, in his ears was the sound of the dull roar of the wind, and his thoughts were of the future—of the long days and nights to come when his loved ones would be somewhere far in the unknown North, and he would be left alone with his Company Indians in the little post on Lashing Water.

All night the storm roared unabated and, as is the way of Arctic blizzards, the second day saw its fury increased. During the morning the four played whist. There had been no mention of gold, and old Molaire played his usual game with the result that when Neseka called them to dinner, he and MacFarlane held a three-game lead over Downey and Margot. The meal over, they returned to the cards. The first game after dinner proved a close one, each side scoring the odd in turn, while the old Frenchman, as was his custom, analyzed each hand as the cards were being shuffled for the next deal. Finally he scored a point and tied the score. Then he glared at his son-in-law: "An' ye'd of finessed your ten-spot through on my lead of hearts we'd of made two points an' game!" he frowned.

"How was I to know?" MacFarlane paused abruptly in the midst of his deal and glanced in surprise toward the door which swung open to admit four Indians who loosened the blankets that covered them from head to foot and beat the snow from them as they advanced toward the stove. Three of them carried small packs of fur. The fourth was a young squaw, straight and lithe as a panther, and as she loosened the moss-bag from her shoulders, a thin wail sounded from its interior.

"A baby!" cried Margot, as MacFarlane made his way to the counter, his eyes upon the packs of fur. She stooped and patted her own little one who was rolling about upon a thick blanket spread on the floor. The squaw smiled, and fumbling in the depths of the bag drew forth a tiny brown-red mite which ceased crying and stared stolidly at the cluster of strange white faces. "What a terrible day for a baby to be out!" continued the white woman, as she pushed a chair near to the stove. Again the squaw smiled and seating herself, turned her back upon the occupants of the room and proceeded to nurse the tiny atom.

Meanwhile MacFarlane was trying by means of the Cree language to question the three bucks who stood in solemn line before the counter, each with his pack of fur before him. Downey tried them with the Blackfoot tongue, and the Jargon, while old Molaire and Tom Shirts added half a dozen dialects from nearer the Bay. But no slightest flicker of comprehension crossed the face of any one of them. Presently the young squaw arose and placed her baby upon the blanket beside the white child where the two little mites sat and stared at each other in owlish solemnity. As she advanced toward the counter MacFarlane addressed her in Cree. And to the surprise of all she spoke to him in English: "We buy food," she said, indicating the packs of fur.

"Where did you come from?" queried the trader. "An' how is it that you talk English an' the rest of 'em can't talk nothin'?"

"We come from far to the northward," she answered. "I have been to school at the mission. These are Dog Ribs. They have not been to school. I am of the Yellow Knives. My man was drowned in a rapids. He was name Bonnetrouge. He was a Dog Rib so I live with these."

"Why don't you trade at your own post?" asked MacFarlane, suspiciously. "Is it because you have a debt there that you have not paid?"

"No. We have no debt at any post. We are only a small band. We move about all the time. We do not like to stay in one place like the rest. We see many new rivers, and many lakes, and we go to many places that the others do not know. We have no debt at any post, we trade as we go and pay with skins for what we buy."

"One of them wanderin' bands," observed Downey. "I've run across two or three of 'em here an' there. They camp a while somewheres an' then, seems like, they just naturally get restless an' move on."

The squaw nodded: "The police is right. We do not like to stay and trap in one place. I have seen many new things, and many things that even the oldest man has not seen."

MacFarlane opened the packs and examined their contents, fur by fur, laying them in separate piles and paying for each as he appraised it in brass tokens of made beaver. The three bucks looked on in stolid indifference but MacFarlane noted that the eyes of the squaw followed his every movement.

As a general rule the agents of the Hudson's Bay Company deal fairly with the Indians in the trading of the common or standard skins, and MacFarlane was no exception. It was in a spirit of fun, to see what the squaw would do, that he counted out thirty made beaver in payment for a large otter skin.

The Indian woman shook her head: "No, that is a good otter. He is worth more." And with a smile the Scotchman counted ten additional tokens into the pile, whereat the squaw nodded approval and the trading proceeded. When at last it was finished the squaw took entire charge of the purchasing, pausing only now and then, to consult one or the other of the Indians in their own tongue, and in her selection of only the essentials, MacFarlane realized that he was dealing with that rarest of northern Indians, one who possessed sound common sense and the force of character to reject the useless trinkets so dear to the Indian heart.

While the bucks were making up their packs the squaw plunged her hand into the bottom of the moss-bag from which she had taken the baby, and drew out a single skin. For a long time she stood holding the skin in one hand while with the other she stroked its softly gleaming surface. MacFarlane and Molaire gazed at the skin in fascination while Margot rose from the blanket where she had been playing with the two babies, and even Corporal Downey who knew little of

skins crowded close to feast his eyes on the jet black pelt whose hairs gleamed with silver radiance. In all the forty years of his trading Molaire had handled fewer than a dozen such skins—a true black fox, taken in its prime, so that the silvered hairs seemed to emit a soft radiance of their own—a skin to remember, and to talk about. Then the squaw handed the pelt to MacFarlane and smiled faintly as she watched the trader examine it almost hair by hair.

"Where did you get it?" he asked.

"I trapped it far to the northward, in the barren grounds, upon a river that has no name. It is a good skin."

"Did you trap it yourself?"

"Yes. I am a good trapper. My man was a good trapper and he showed me how. These are good trappers, too," she indicated the three Indians, "And all the rest who are with us. There are thirty of us counting the women and children. But we have not had good luck. That is all the fur we have caught," she pointed to the skins MacFarlane had just bought, "Those and the little black fox. When the storms stops we will go again into the barren grounds, and we must have food, or, if we have bad luck again, some of us will die."

"Why do you go to the barren grounds?" asked MacFarlane. "The trappin' is better to the eastward, or to the westward."

The squaw shrugged: "My man he had been to school a little, but mostly he had worked far to the westward along the coast of the sea—among the white men who dig for gold. And he heard men talk of the gold that lies in the barren grounds and northward to the coast of the frozen sea. So he went back to the country of his people, far up on the Mackenzie, and he told the men of the gold and how it was worth many times more than the fur. But the old men would not believe him and many of the young men would not, but some of them did, and these he persuaded to go with him and hunt for the gold. It was when they were crossing through the country of my people that I saw him and he saw me and we were married. That was two years ago and since then we have traveled far and have seen many things. Then my husband was drowned in a rapids, and I have taken his place. I will not go back to my people. They were very angry when I married Bonnetrouge, for the Yellow Knives hate the Dog Ribs. Even if they were not angry I would not go back, for my husband said there is gold in the barren grounds. He did not lie. So we will go and get the gold."

"There's your chance, Mac," grinned Corporal Downey, "You better throw in with 'em an' get in on the ground floor."

But MacFarlane did not smile. Instead, he spoke gravely to the woman: "An' have you found any gold in the barrens?"

The squaw shrugged, and glanced down at the babies. When she looked up again her eyes were upon the little fox skin. "How much?" she asked.

MacFarlane considered. Holding the pelt he stroked its glossy surface with his hand. Here was a skin of great value. He had heard many traders and factors boast of the black, and the silver grey fox skins they had bought at ridiculously low price—and they were men who did not hesitate to give full value for the common run of skins. Always, with the traders, the sight of a rare skin arouses a desire to obtain it—and to obtain it at the lowest possible figure. And MacFarlane was a trader. He fixed upon a price in his mind. He raised his eyes, but the squaw was not looking at him and he followed her glance to the blanket where the two babies, the red baby and the white baby—his own baby and Margot's, were touching each other gravely with fat pudgy hands.

He opened his lips to mention the price, but closed them again as a new train of thought flashed through his mind. How nearly this woman's case paralleled his own. The imagination of each was fired by the lure of gold, and both were scoffed at by their people for daring to believe that there was still gold in the earth to be had for the taking. Then, there was the matter of the babies——

When finally MacFarlane spoke it was to mention a sum three times larger than the one that he had fixed upon in his mind—a sum that caused old Molaire to snort and sputter and to stamp angrily up and down the room.

The squaw nodded gravely: "You are a good man," she said, simply. "You have dealt fairly. Sometime, maybe you will know that Wananebish does not forget."

Two hours later, when the price of the pelt had been paid and the supplies all made into packs and carried to the toboggans that had been left before the door, the Indians wrapped their blankets about them and prepared to depart.

As the Indian woman wrapped the baby in warm woolens, Margot urged her to remain until the storm subsided, but the woman declined with a smile: "No. These are my people. I will go with them. Where one goes, all go."

"But the baby! This is a terrible storm to take a baby into."

"The baby is warm. She does not know that it storms. She is one of us. Where we go, she goes, too."

As the Indians filed through the door into the whirling white smother the young squaw stepped to the counter for a last look at her black fox skin. She raised it in her hand, drew it slowly across her cheek, stroked it softly, and then returned it to the counter, taking deliberate care to lay it by itself apart from the other skins. Then she turned and was swallowed up in the storm as MacFarlane closed the door behind her.

"Ye could of bought it for half the price!" growled old Molaire, as his son-in-law returned to the card table.

"Aye," answered the younger man as he resumed his cards. "But the Company has still a good margin of profit. They're headin' for the barrens, an' if, as she said, they have bad luck some of 'em would die. An' you know who would be the first to go—it would be the babies. I'm glad I done as I did. I'll sleep better nights."

"And I'm glad, too," added Margot, as she reached over and patted her husband's hand, "And so is papa way down in his heart. But he loves to have people think he is a cross old bear—and bears must growl."

Corporal Downey grinned at the twinkle that appeared in old Molaire's eyes, and the game proceeded until Neseka called them to supper. MacFarlane paused at the counter and raised the fox skin to the light. And as he did so, a very small, heavy object rolled from its soft folds and thudded upon the boards. Slowly MacFarlane laid down the skin and, picking up the object, carried it close under the swinging lamp, where he held it in his open palm. Curiously the others crowded about and stared at the dull yellow lump scarcely larger than the two halves of a split pea. For a long moment there was silence and then MacFarlane turned to Corporal Downey: "What was it you said," he asked, "about sticking to my job until I saw an Injun with some gold?"

III

The north wind moaned and soughed about the eaves of the low log trading post on Lashing Water. Old Molaire rose from his place by the stove, crossed the room, and threw open the door. Seconds passed as he stood listening to the roar of the wind in the tree tops, heedless of the fine powdering of stinging snow particles that glistened like diamond points upon his silvery hair and sifted beneath his shirt collar. Then he closed the door and returned to his chair beside the stove. Corporal Downey watched in silence while the old man filled his pipe. He threw away the match and raised his eyes to the officer: "It was a year ago, d'ye mind, an' just such a storm—when that squaw came bringin' her black fox skin, and her nugget of damned gold."

"It would be about a year," agreed Downey, gravely nodding his head. "I made this patrol in February."

"It's just a year—the thirteenth of the month. I'll not be forgetting it."

"An' have you had no word?"

The old factor shook his head: "No word. They left in May—with the rivers not yet free of running ice. Two light canoes. Margot could handle a canoe like a man."

"You'll prob'ly hear from 'em on the break-up this spring. Maybe they'll give it up an' come back."

Molaire shook his head: "Ye don't know Murdo MacFarlane," he said, "He'll never give up. He swore he would never return to Lashin' Water without gold. He's Scotch—an' stubborn as the seven-year itch."

"I'm Scotch," grinned Downey, hoping to draw the old man into an argument and turn his thoughts from the absent ones. But he would not be drawn. For a long time he smoked in silence while outside the wind howled and moaned and sucked red flames high into the stovepipe.

"She'd be two years old, now," Molaire said, "An' maybe talkin' a bit. Maybe they've taught her to say grand-père. Don't you think she might be talkin' a little?"

"I don't know much about 'em. Do they talk when they're two?"

The old factor pondered: "Why—it seems to me *she* did—the other Margot. But—it's a long time ago—yet it seems like yesterday. I'm gettin' old an' my memory plays me tricks. Maybe it was three, instead of two when she begun to say words. D'ye mind, Downey, a year ago we played whist?"

"Two-handed cribbage is all right," suggested the Corporal. But the old man shook his head and for a long, long time the only sound in the room was the irregular tapping of contracting metal as the fire died down unheeded in the stove. The old man's pipe went out and lay cold in his hand. The bearded chin sagged forward onto the breast of his woolen shirt and his eyes closed. Beyond the stove Corporal Downey drowsed in his chair.

Suddenly the old man raised his head: "What was that?" he asked sharply.

Downey listened with his eyes on the other's face. "I hear nothing," he answered, "but the booming of the wind."

The peculiar startled look died out of Molaire's eyes: "Yes," he answered, "It is the wind. I must

have be'n dozin'. But it sounded like bells. I've heard the bells of Ste. Ann's boom like that—tollin'—when some one—died." Stiffly he rose from his chair and fumbled upon the counter for a candle which he handed to Downey. "We'll be goin' to bed, now," he said, "It's late."

IV

Upon a bunk built against the wall of a tiny cabin of logs five hundred miles to the northward of Lashing Water post the sick woman turned her head feebly and smiled into the tear-dimmed eyes of the man who leaned over her: "It's all right, Murdo," she murmured, "The pain in my side seems better. I think I slept a little."

Murdo MacFarlane nodded: "Yes, Margot, you have been asleep for an hour. In a few days, now, I'm thinkin' you'll be sittin' up, an' in a week's time you'll be on your feet again."

The woman's eyes closed, and by the tightening of the drawn lips her husband knew that she was enduring another paroxysm of the terrible pain. Outside, the wind tore at the eaves, the sound muffled by its full freighting of snow. And on the wooden shelf above the man's head the little alarm clock ticked brassily.

Once more Margot's eyes opened and the muscles of the white pain-racked face relaxed. The breath rushed in quick jerky stabs between the parted lips that smiled bravely. "We are not children, Murdo—you and I," she whispered. "We must not be afraid to face—this thing. We have found much happiness together. That will be ours always. Nothing can rob us of that. We have had it. And now you must face a great unhappiness. I am going to die. In your eyes I have seen that you, too, know this—when you thought I slept. To-day—to-night—not later than to-morrow I must go away. I am not afraid to go—only sorry. We would have had many more years of happiness, Murdo—you—and I—and the little one—" The low voice faltered and broke, and the dark eyes brimmed with tears.

The man's hands clenched till the nails bit deep into the palms. A great dry sob shook the drooped shoulders: "God!" he breathed, hoarsely, "An' it's all my fault for bringin' you into this damned waste of snow an' ice, an' bitter cold!"

"No, Murdo, it is not your fault. I was as anxious to come as you were. I am a child of the North, and I love the North. I love its storms and its sunshine. I love even the grim cruelty of it—its relentless snuffing out of lives in the guarding of its secrets. Strong men have gone to their death fighting it, and more men will go—why then should not I, who am a woman, go also? But, it would have been the same if we had stayed at Lashing Water. I know what this sickness is. I have seen men die of it before—Nash, of the Mounted—and Nokoto, a Company Indian. It is the appendicitis, and no doctor could have got to Lashing Water in time, any more than he could have got here. They sent the fastest dog-team on the river when Nash was sick, and before the doctor came he was dead. It is not your fault, my husband. It is no one's fault. There is a time when each of us must die. My time is now. That is all." She ceased speaking, and with an effort that brought little beads of cold sweat to her forehead, she raised herself upon her elbow and pointed a faltering forefinger toward the little roughly made crib that stood close beside the bunk. "Promise me, Murdo," she gasped, "promise me upon your soul that you will see—that—she—*that she shall go to school!* More than I have gone, for there are many things I do not know. I have read in books things I do not understand."

"Aye, girl," the deep voice of MacFarlane rumbled through the room as he eased his wife back onto the pillow, "I promise."

The dark eyes closed, the white face settled heavily onto the pillow, and as MacFarlane bent closer he saw that the breathing was peaceful and regular. It was as though a great load had been lifted from her mind, and she slept. With her hand still clasped in his the man's tired body sagged forward until his head rested beside hers.

MacFarlane awoke with a start. Somewhere in the darkness a small voice was calling: "Mamma! Daddy! I cold!" For a moment the man lay trying to collect his befuddled senses. "Just a minute, baby," he called, "Daddy's comin'." As he raised to a sitting posture upon the edge of the bunk his fingers came in contact with his wife's hand—the hand that he suddenly remembered had been clasped in his. Rapidly his brain cleared. He must have fallen asleep. The fire had burned itself out in the stove and he shivered in the chill air. Margot's hand must have slipped from his clasp as they slept. It was too cold for her hand to lie there on top of the blankets, and her arm protected only by the sleeve of her nightgown. He would slip it gently beneath the covers and then build up a roaring fire.

A low whimpering came from the direction of the crib: "Daddy, I cold."

"Just a minute, baby, till daddy lights the light." He reached for the hand that lay beside him there in the darkness. As his fingers clutched it a short, hoarse cry escaped him. The hand was icy cold—too cold for even the coldness of the fireless room. The fingers yielded stiffly beneath his palm and the arm lay rigid upon the blanket.

MacFarlane sprang to his feet and as he groped upon the shelf for matches his body was shaken by great dry sobs that ended in low throaty moans. Clumsily his trembling fingers held the tiny flame to the wick of the candle, and as the light flickered a moment and then burned clear, he crossed to the crib where the baby had partly wriggled from beneath her little blankets

and robes. Wrapping her warmly in a blanket, he drew the rest of the covers over her.

"I want to get in bed with mamma," came plaintively from the small bundle.

MacFarlane choked back a sob: "Don't, don't! little one," he cried, then lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper, he bent low over the crib. "S-h-s-h, don't disturb mamma. She's—asleep."

"I want sumpin' to eat. I want some gravy and some toast."

"Yes, you wait till daddy builds the fire an' then we'll be nice an' warm, an' daddy'll get supper."

Silently MacFarlane set about his work. He kindled a fire, put the teakettle on, and warmed some caribou gravy, stirring it slowly to prevent its scorching while he toasted some bread upon the top of the stove. Once or twice he glanced toward the bed. Margot's face was turned away from him, and all he could see was a wealth of dark hair massed upon the pillow. That—and the hand that showed at the end of the nightgown sleeve. White as snow—and cold as snow it looked against the warm red of the blanket. MacFarlane crossed and drew the blanket up over the hand and arm, covering it to the shoulder. Bending over, he looked long into the white face. The eyes were closed, MacFarlane was glad of that, and the lips were slightly parted as though in restful slumber. "Good bye—Margot—lass—" his voice broke thickly. He was conscious of a gnawing pain in his throat, and two great scalding tears rolled down his cheeks and dropped to the mass of dark hair where they glistened in the steady glow of the single candle like tiny globes of fire. He raised the blanket to cover the still face, lowered it again and crossed to the table where he laid out a tincup for himself and a little thick yellow bowl into which he crumbled the toast and poured the gravy over it. Then he warmed a tiny blanket, wrapped the baby in it and, holding her on his lap, fed her from a spoon. Between the slowly portioned spoonfuls he drank great gulps of scalding tea. There were still several spoonfuls left in the bowl when the tiny mite in his arms snuggled warmly against him. "Tell me a 'tory," demanded the mite. MacFarlane told the "'tory"—and another, and another. And then, in response to an imperious demand, he sang a song. It was the first time MacFarlane had ever sung a song. It was a song he had often heard Margot sing, and he was surprised that he had unconsciously learned the words which fell from his lips in a wailing monotone.

MacFarlane's heart was breaking—but he finished the song.

"I sleepy," came drowsily from the blanket. "I want to kiss mamma."

"S-h-s-h, mamma's asleep. Kiss daddy, and we'll go to bed."

"I want to kiss mamma," insisted the baby.

MacFarlane hesitated with tight-pressed lips. Then he rose and carried the baby to the bedside. "See, mamma's asleep," he whispered, pointing to the mass of dark hair on the pillow. "Just kiss her hair—and we—won't—wake—her—up." He held the baby so that the little pursed lips rested for a moment in the thick mass of hair, then he carried her to her crib and tucked her in. She was asleep when he smoothed the robe into place.

For a long time he stood looking down at the little face on the pillow. Then he crossed to the table where he sat with his head resting upon his folded arms while the minutes ticked into hours and the fire burned low. As he sat there with closed eyes MacFarlane followed the thread of his life from his earliest recollection. His childhood on the little hillside farm, the long hours that he struggled with his books under the eye of the stern-faced schoolmaster, his 'prenticeship in the shop of the harness-maker in the small Scotch town, his year of work about the docks at Liverpool, his coming to Canada and hiring out to the Hudson's Bay Company, his assignment to Lashing Water as Molaire's clerk, his meeting with Margot when she returned home from school at the mission—and the wonderful days of that first summer together. Then—his promotion to the position of trader, his marriage to Margot—step by step he lived again that long journey from Lashing Water to Ste. Anne's. For it was old Molaire's wish that his daughter should be married in the old Gothic church where, years before, he had married her mother.

MacFarlane raised his head and listened, his wide-staring eyes fixed upon the black square of the window—that sound—it was—only the moan and the muffled roar of the wind—but, for a moment it had sounded like the tone of a deep-throated bell—like the booming of the bells of Ste. Anne's. Slowly the man lowered his head to his arms and groped for the thread of his thought where he had left it. Lingeringly, he dwelt upon the happiness that had been theirs, the coming of the little Margot—the infinite love that welled in their hearts for this soft little helpless thing, their delight in her unfolding—the gaining of a pound—the first tooth—the first half-formed word—the first step. He remembered, too, their distress at her tiny ills, real and fancied. Then, his own desire to seek gold—not for himself, but that these two loved ones might enjoy life in a fullness undreamed by the family of a fur trader. He recollected Molaire's opposition, his arguments, his scoffing, and his prediction that by the end of a year he would be back at Lashing Water buying fur for the Company. And he recollected his own retort, that without the gold he would never come back.

And here, in this little thick walled cabin far into the barren grounds, he had come to the end of the long, long trail. MacFarlane raised his head and stared at the crib. But, was it the end? He knew that it was not, and he groped blindly, desperately to picture the end. If it were not for her—for this little one who lay asleep there in the crib, the end would be easy. The man's glance sought the rifle that rested upon its pegs above the window. It was out of the question to think of

returning to Lashing Water, if he would—the baby could not stand five hundred miles of gruelling winter-trail. He could not keep her here and leave her alone while he prospected. He could not remain in the cabin all winter and care for her—he must hunt to live—and game was scarce and far afield. He shuddered at the thought of what might happen if he were to leave her alone in the cabin with a fire in the stove—or worse, of what might eventually happen if some accident befell him and he could not return to the cabin.

MacFarlane sat bolt upright. He suddenly remembered that a few days before, from a high hill some thirty miles to the westward, he had seen an Indian village nestled against a spruce swamp at a wide bend of a river. It was a small village of a dozen or more tepees, and he had intended to visit it later. Why not take the baby over there and give her into the keeping of some squaw. If he could find one like Neseka all would be well, for Neseka's love for the little Margot was hardly less than his own. And surely, in a whole village there must be at least one like her.

MacFarlane replenished his fire, and groping upon the shelf, found a leather covered note book and pencil. The guttered candle flared smokily and he replaced it with another, and for an hour or more he wrote steadily, filling page after page of the note book with fine lined writing.

When he had finished he thrust the note book into his pocket and again buried his face in his arms.

V

Toward morning the storm wore itself out, and before the belated winter dawn had tinted the east MacFarlane set out for the Indian village. The cold was intense so that his snowshoes crunched on the surface of the flinty, wind-driven snow. Mile after mile he swung across the barrens that lay trackless, and white, and dead, skirting towering rock ledges and patches of scraggly timber. The sun came out and the barrens glared dazzling white. MacFarlane had left his snow-goggles back in the cabin, so he squinted his eyes and pushed on. Three times that day he stopped and built a fire at the edge of a thicket and heated thick caribou gruel which he fed by spoonfuls to the tiny robe-wrapped little girl that snuggled warm in his pack sack. Darkness had fallen before he reached the high hill from which he had seen the village. He scanned the sweep of waste that lay spread before him, its shapes and distances distorted and unreal in the feeble light of the glittering stars. He hardly expected a light to show from a village of windowless tepees in the dead of winter, and he strove to remember which of those vague splotchy outlines was the black spruce swamp against which he had seen the tepees. Suddenly the silence of the night was broken by the sharp jerky yelp of a stricken dog. The sound issued from one of the dark blotches of timber, and was followed by a rabble of growls and snarls. MacFarlane judged the distance that separated him from the vague outline of the swamp to be three or four miles, but the shrill sounds cut the frozen air so distinctly that they seemed to issue from the foot of the hill upon which he stood. A dull spot of light showed for a moment, rocketed through the air, and disappeared amid a chorus of yelps and howls. An Indian, disturbed by the fighting dogs, had thrown back the flap of his tepee and hurled a lighted brand among them.

Swiftly MacFarlane descended the slope and struck out for the black spruce swamp. An hour later he stood upon the snow-covered ice of the river while barking, snarling and growling, the Indian dog pack crowded about him. It seemed a long time that he stood there holding the dogs at bay with a stout spruce club. At length dark forms appeared in front of the tepees and several Indians advanced toward him, dispersing the dogs with blows and kicks and commands in hoarse gutterals. MacFarlane spoke to them in Cree, and getting no response, he tried several of the dialects from about the Bay. He had advanced until he stood among them peering from one to another of the flat expressionless faces for some sign of comprehension. But they returned his glances with owlish blinking of their smoke reddened eyes. MacFarlane's heart sank. These were the people in whose care he had intended to leave his little daughter! Suddenly, as a ray of starlight struck aslant one of the flat bestial faces, a flash of recognition lighted MacFarlane's eyes. The man was one of the four who had come to trade a year before at Lashing Water.

"Where is the squaw?" he cried in English, grasping the man by the shoulder and shaking him roughly, "Where is Wananebish?"

At the name, the Indian turned and pointed toward a tepee that stood slightly apart from the rest, and a moment later MacFarlane stood before its door. "Wananebish!" he called. And again, "Wananebish!"

"Yes," came the answer, "What does the white man want?"

"It is MacFarlane, the trader at Lashing Water. Do you remember a year ago you sold me a black fox skin?"

"I remember. Did I not say that Wananebish would not forget? Wait, and I will let you in, for it is cold." The walls of the tepee glowed faintly as the squaw struck a light. He could hear her moving about inside and a few minutes later she threw open the flap and motioned him to enter. MacFarlane blinked in surprise as she fastened the flap behind him. Instead of the filthy smoke-reeking interior he had expected, the tepee was warm and comfortable, its floor covered thickly with robes, and instead of the open fire in the center with its smoke vent at the apex of the tepee, he saw a little Yukon stove in which a fire burned brightly.

Without a word he removed his pack sack and tenderly lifting the sleeping baby from it laid her

on the robes. Then, seating himself beside her he told her, simply and in few words what had befallen him. The squaw listened in silence and for a long time after he finished she sat staring at the flame of the candle.

"What would you have me do?" she asked at length.

"Keep the little one and care for her until I return," answered the man, "I will pay you well."

The Indian woman made a motion of dissent. "Where are you going?"

"To find gold."

Was it fancy, or did the shadow of a peculiar smile tremble for an instant upon the woman's lips? "And, if you do not return—what then?"

"If I do not return by the time of the breaking up of the rivers," answered the man, "You will take the baby to Lashing Water post to Molaire, the factor, who is the father of her mother." As he spoke MacFarlane drew from his pocket the leather notebook, and a packet wrapped in parchment deer skin and tied with buckskin thongs. He handed them to the squaw: "Take these," he said, "and deliver them to Molaire with the baby. In the book I have instructed him to pay you for her keep."

"But this Molaire is an old man. Suppose by the time of the breaking up of the rivers he is not to be found at Lashing Water? He may be dead, or he may have gone to the settlements."

"If he has gone to the settlements, you are to find him. If he is dead—" MacFarlane hesitated: "If Molaire is dead," he repeated, "You are to take care of the baby until she is old enough to enter the school at some mission. I'm Scotch, an' no Catholic—but, her mother was Catholic, an' if the priests an' the sisters make as good woman of her as they did of her mother, I could ask no more. Give them the notebook in which I have set down the story as I have told it to you. The packet you shall open and take out whatever is due you for her keep. It contains money. Keep some for yourself and give some to the priests to pay for her education."

The squaw nodded slowly: "It shall be as you say. And, if for any reason, we move from here before the breaking up of the rivers, I will write our direction and place it inside the caribou skull that hangs upon the great split stump beside the river."

MacFarlane rose; "May God use you as you use the little one," he said, "I'll be going now, before she wakes up. It will be better so." He stooped and gazed for a long time at the face of the sleeping baby. A hot tear splashed upon the back of his hand, and he brushed it away and faced the squaw in the door of the tepee: "Goodbye," he said, gruffly, "Until the rivers break up in the spring."

The Indian woman shook her head: "Do not say it like that," she answered, "For those were the words of my man when he, too, left to find gold. And when the river broke up in the spring he did not come back to me—for the grinding ice-cakes caught his canoe, and he was crushed to death in a rapids."

VI

For four long nights and four short days MacFarlane worked at the digging of a grave. It was a beautiful spot he chose to be the last resting place of his young wife—a high, spruce-covered promontory that jutted out into a lake. The cabin and its surroundings had grown intolerable to him, so that he worked furiously, attacking the iron-hard ground with fire, and ice-chisel, and spade. At last it was done and placing the body of his wife in the rough pole coffin, he placed it upon his sled and locking the dogs in the cabin, hauled it himself to the promontory and lowered it into the grave. Then he shoveled back the frozen earth, and erected a wooden cross upon which was burned deep her name, and returning to the cabin, slept the clock around.

If MacFarlane had been himself he would have heeded the signs of approaching storm. But he had become obsessed with desire to leave that place with its haunting memories, where every mute object seemed to whisper to him of his loved ones. He was talking and mumbling to himself as he harnessed his dogs and headed into the North at the breaking of a day.

Three hours after MacFarlane hit the trail he left the sparsely timbered country behind and struck into a vast treeless plain whose glaring white surface was cut here and there by rugged ridges of basalt which terminated abruptly in ledges of bare rock.

At noon he made a fireless camp, ate some pilot bread, and caribou meat. The air was still—ominously dead and motionless to one who knew the North. But MacFarlane gave no heed, nor did he even notice that though there were no clouds in the sky, the low-hung sun showed dull and coppery through a steel-blue fog. He bolted his food and pressed on. Before him was no guiding landmark. He laid his course by the compass and held straight North across the treeless rock-ribbed plain. The man's lean face looked pinched and drawn. For a week he had taken his sleep in short fitful snatches, in his chair beside the cabin stove, or with his back against a tree while he waited for the fire to bite a few inches deeper into the frozen ground as he toiled at the lonely grave. On and on he mushed at the head of his dogs, his eyes, glowing feverbright, stared fixedly from between red-rimmed lids straight into the steel blue fog bank that formed his northern horizon. And as he walked, he talked incessantly—now arguing with old Molaire, who predicted

dire things, and refused to believe that there was gold in the North—now telling Margot of his hopes and planning his future—and again, telling stories to little Margot of Goldilocks and the three little bears, and of where the caribou got their horns.

The blue fog thickened. From somewhere far ahead sounded a low whispering roar—the roar of mightly wind, muffled by its burden of snow. When the first blast struck, MacFarlane tottered in his tracks, then lowering his head, leaned against it and pushed on. Following the gust was a moment of calm. Behind him the dogs whimpered uneasily. MacFarlane did not hear them, nor did he hear the roar of the onrushing wind.

Around a corner of a rock ledge a scant two hundred yards ahead of him, appeared a great grey shape, running low. The shape halted abruptly and circled wide. It was followed by other shapes —gaunt, and grey, and ugly, between whose back-curled lips white fangs gleamed. The wolf pack, forty strong, was running before the storm, heading southward for the timber. Whining with terror, MacFarlane's dogs crowded about his legs in a sudden rush. The man went down and struggled to his feet, cursing, and laying about him with clubbed rifle. Then the storm struck in all its fury. MacFarlane gasped for air, and sucked in great gulps of powdery snow that bit into his lungs and seared his throat with their stinging cold. He choked and coughed and jerking off his mitten, clawed with bare fingers at his throat and eyes. While behind him, down wind, the great grey caribou wolves, stopped in their wild flight by the scent of meat, crowded closer, and closer.

In a panic, MacFarlane's dogs whirled, and dragging the sled behind them bolted. MacFarlane staggered a few steps forward and fell, then, on hands and knees he crawled back, groping and pawing the snow for his mitten and rifle. The sharp frenzied yelps as the dog team plunged into the wolf-pack sounded faint and far. The man threw up his head. He pulled off his cap to listen and the wind whipped it from his numbed fingers—but MacFarlane did not know. Moments of silence followed during which the man strained his ears to catch a sound that eluded him.

When the last shred of flesh had been ripped from the bones of the dogs the gaunt grey leader of the pack raised his muzzle and sniffed the wind. He advanced a cautious step or two and sniffed again, then seating himself on his haunches he raised his long pointed muzzle to the sky and gave voice to the long drawn cry of the kill—and the shapes left the fang-scarred bits of bone and sniffed up-wind at the man-scent.

As the sound of the great wolf cry reached his ears above the roar of the wind, MacFarlane's face lighted with a smile of infinite gladness: "The bells," he muttered, "I heard them—d'you hear them, Margot—girl? It's for us—the booming of the bells of Ste. Anne's!" And with the words on his lips MacFarlane pillowed his head on the snow—and slept.

VII

Years afterward, after old Molaire had been gathered to his fathers and laid in the little cemetery within the sound of the bells of Ste. Anne's, Corporal Downey one day came upon a long deserted cabin far into the barren grounds upon the shore of a nameless lake. He closed the rotting door behind him, and methodically searching the ground, came at length upon the solitary grave upon the high promontory that jutted into the lake. Unconsciously he removed his hat as he read the simple inscription burned deep into the little wooden cross. His lips moved: "Margot—girl," he whispered, "if—if—" the whisper thickened and choked him. He squared his shoulders and cleared his throat roughly. "Aw hell!" he breathed, and turning, walked slowly back to his canoe and shoved out onto the water.

And during the interval of the years the little band of non-treaty Indians—the homeless and the restless ones—moved on—and on—and on——

CHAPTER I

COARSE GOLD

As Carter Brent pushed through the swinging doors of "The Ore Dump" saloon, the eyes of the head bartender swept with approval from the soles of the high laced boots to the crown of the jauntily tilted Stetson. "What'll it be this morning, Mr. Brent?" he greeted. "Little eye-opener?"

The young man grinned as he crossed to the bar: "How did you guess it?"

The bartender set out decanter and glasses. "Well, after last night, thought maybe you'd have a kind of fuzzy taste in your mouth."

"Fuzzy is right! My tongue is coated with fur—dark brown fur—thick and soft. What time was it when we left here?"

"Must have been around two o'clock. But, how does it come you ain't on the works this mornin'? Never knew you to lose a day on account of a hang-over. Heard a couple of the S. & R.'s tunnels got flooded last night."

Brent poured a liberal drink and downed it at a swallow: "Yes," he answered, dryly, "And that's why I'm not on the works. I'm hunting a job, and the S. & R. is hunting a new mining engineer."

"Jepson fired you, did he! Well, you should worry. I've heard 'em talkin' in here, now an' then—some of the big guns—an' they all claim you're one of the best engineers in Montana. They say if you'd buckle down to business you'd have 'em all skinned."

"Buckle down to business, eh! The trouble with them is that when they hire a man they think they buy him. It's none of their damn business what I do evenings. If I'm sober when I'm on the job—and on the job six days a week, and sometimes seven—they're getting all they're paying for."

"They sure are," agreed the other with emphasis, "Have another shot," he shoved the decanter toward the younger man and leaned closer: "Say Mr. Brent, you ain't—er, you don't need a little change, do you? If you do just say so, you're welcome to it." The man drew forth a roll of bills, but Brent shook his head:

"No thanks. You can cash this check for me though. Jepson was square enough about it—paid me in full to date and threw in a month's salary in advance. I don't blame him any. We quit the best of friends. When he hired me he knew I liked a little drink now and then, so I took the job with the understanding that if the outfit ever lost a dollar because of my boozing, I was through right then."

"What was it flooded the tunnels?"

"Water," grinned Brent.

"Oh," laughed the bartender, "I thought maybe it was booze."

"You'd have thought so all the more if you'd been there this morning to hear the temperance lecture that old Jepson threw in gratis along with that extra month's pay. About the tunnels—we get our power from Anaconda, and something happened to the high tension wire, and the pumps stopped, and there wasn't any light, and Number Four and Number Six are wet tunnels anyway so they filled up and drowned two batteries of drills. Then, instead of rigging a steam pump and pumping them out through Number Four, one of the shift bosses rigged a fifteen inch rotary in Number Six and started her going full tilt with the result that he ran the water down against that new piece of railroad grade and washed about fifty feet of it into the river and left the track hanging in the air by the rails."

"The damn fool!"

"Oh, I don't know. He did the best he could. A shift boss isn't hired to think."

"What did old Jepson fire *you* for? He didn't think you clim up an' cut the high tension wire did he? Or, did he expect you to set around nights an' keep the juice flowin'?"

Brent laughed: "Not exactly. But they tried to find me and couldn't. So when I showed up this morning old Jepson sent for me and asked me where I was last night. I could have lied out of it easy enough. He would have accepted any one of a half a dozen excuses—but lying's poor business—so I told him I was out having a hell of a good time and wound up about three in the morning with a pretty fair snootful."

"Bet he thinks a damn sight more of you than if you'd of lied, at that. But they's plenty of jobs fer you. You've got it in your noodle—what they need—an' what they've got to pay to get. You might drop around an' talk to Gunnison, of the Little Ella. He was growlin' in here the other night because he couldn't get holt of an engineer. Goin' to do a lot of cross tunnel work or somethin'. Said he was afraid he'd have to send back East an' get some pilgrim or some kid just out of college. Hold on a minute there's a bird down there, among them hard rock men, that looks like he was figgerin' on startin' somethin'. I'll just step down an' put a flea in his ear."

Brent's eyes followed the other as he made his way toward the rear of the long bar where three or four bartenders were busy serving drinks to a crowd of miners. He noticed casually that the men were divided into small groups and that they seemed to be talking excitedly among themselves, and that the talk was mostly in whispers.

"The Ore Dump" was essentially a mining man's saloon. Its proprietor, Patsy Kelliher, was an old time miner who, having struck it lucky with pick and shovel, had started a modest little saloon, and later had opened "The Ore Dump," in the fitting up of which he had gone the limit in expensive furnishings. It was his boast that no miner had ever gone out of his door hungry or thirsty, nor had any man ever lost a cent by unfair means within his four walls. Rumor had it that Patsy had given away thousands. Be that as it may, "The Ore Dump" had for years been the mecca of the mining fraternity. Millionaire mine owners, managers, engineers, and on down through the list to the humblest "hunk," were served at its long bar, which had, by common usage become divided by invisible lines of demarkation. The mine owners, the managers, the engineers, and the independent contractors foregathered at the front end of the bar; the hunks, and the wops, and the guineas at the rear end; while the long space between was a sort of no-man's-land where drank the shift bosses and the artisans of the mines—the hard-rock men, the electricians, and the steam-fitters. Combinations of capital running into millions had been formed at the front end, and combinations of labor at the rear, while in no-man's-land great mines had been tied up at the crooking of a finger.

On this particular morning Carter Brent was the only customer at the front end of the bar. He poured another drink and watched it glow like a thing of life with soft amber lights that played through the crystal clear glass as a thin streak of sunlight struck aslant the bar. The liquor in his stomach was taking hold. He felt warm, with a glowing, tingling warmth that permeated to his finger tips. In his mind was a vast sense of well being. The world was a great old place to live in. He drank the whisky in his glass and refilled it from the cut glass decanter. Poor old Jepson—fired the best engineer in Montana—that's what his friend, the bartender, had just told him, and he got it from the big guns. Well, it was Jepson's funeral—he and the S. & R. would have to stagger along as best they could. He would go and see Gunnison—no, to hell with Gunnison! Brent's fingers closed about the roll of bills in his trousers pocket. He had plenty of money, he would wait and pick out a job. He needn't worry. He always was sure of a good job. Hadn't he had five in the two years since he graduated from college? There were plenty of mines and they all needed good engineers. Brent smiled as his thoughts drifted lazily back to his four years in college. He wished some of the fellows would drop in. "They were a bunch of damned good sports," he muttered to himself, "And we sure did roll 'em high! Speedy Bennet was always the first to go under—about two drinks and we'd lay him on the shelf to call for when needed. Then came McGivern, then Sullivan, and about that time little Morse would begin flapping his arms around and proclaiming he could fly. Then, after a while there wouldn't be anyone left but Morey and me—good old Morey—they canned him in his senior year—and they've been canning me ever since."

Brent paused in his soliloquy and regarded the men who had been whispering among themselves toward the rear of the room. There were no small groups now, and no whispering. With tense faces they were crowding about a man who stood with hands palm down upon the bar. He wondered what it was all about. From his position at the head of the bar he could see the man's face plainly. Also he could see the faces of the others—the lined, rugged faces of the hard rock and the vapid, loose-lipped faces of the wops—and of all the faces only the face of the man who stood with his hands on the bar betrayed nothing of tense expectancy. Why were these others crowding about him, and why was he the only man of them all who was not holding in check by visible effort some pent up emotion? Brent glanced again into the weather-lined face with its drooping sun-burned mustache, and its skin tanned to the color of old leather—a strong face, one would say—the face of a man who had battled long against odds, and won. Won what? He wondered. For an instant the man's eyes met his own, and it seemed to Brent as though he had read the question for surely, behind the long drooping mustache, the lips twisted into just the shadow of a cynical grin.

The head bartender stepped to the back bar and, from beside a huge gilded cash register, he lifted a set of tiny scales which he carried to the bar and set down directly before the man with the sun-burned mustache.

In front of the bar men crowded closer, craning their necks, and elbowing one another, as their feet made soft shuffling sounds upon the hardwood floor. One of the man's hands slipped into a side pocket of his coat and when it came out something thudded heavily upon the bar. Brent saw the object plainly as the bartender reached for it, a small buckskin pouch, its surface glazed with the grease and soot of many campfires. He had seen men carry their tobacco in just such pouches, but this pouch held no tobacco, it had thumped the bar heavily and lay like a sack of sand.

The bartender untied the strings and stood with the pouch poised above the scales while his eyes roved over the eager, expectant faces of the crowd. Then he placed a small weight upon the pan of the scales and poured something slowly from the pouch into the small scoop upon the opposite side. From his position Brent could see the delicate scales oscillate and finally strike a balance. The bartender closed the pouch and handed it back to the owner. Then he picked up the scales and returned them to their place beside the cash register, while in front of the bar men surged about the pouch owner clawing and shoving to get next to him, and all talking at once, nobody paying the slightest attention to the bartenders who were vainly trying to serve a round of drinks.

The head bartender returned to his position opposite Brent, and reaching for the decanter, poured himself a drink. "Drink up and have one on the stranger—he just set 'em up to the house."

Brent swallowed the liquor in his glass and refilled it: "What's the excitement?" he asked, "A man don't ordinarily get as popular as he seems to be just because he buys a round of drinks, does he?"

"Didn't you see it? It ain't the round of drinks, it's—wait—" He stepped to the back bar and lifting the scoop from the scales set it down in front of Brent, "That's what it is—*gold*! Yes sir, pure gold just as she comes from the sand—nuggets and dust. It's be'n many a year since any of that stuff has been passed over this bar for the drinks. I've be'n here seven years and it's the first *I've* took in, except now and then a few colors that some *hombre's* washed out of some dry coulee or creek bed—fine dust that's cost him the shovelin' an' pannin' of tons of gravel. Patsy keeps the scales settin' around for a curiosity—that, an' because the old-timers likes to see 'em handy. Kind of reminds 'em of the early days an' starts 'em gassin'. But this here's the real stuff. Look at that boy." He poked with his finger at an irregular nugget the size of a navy bean, "Looks like a chunk of slag—an' that ain't all! He's got a bag full of 'em. I held it in my hand, an' it weighed *pounds*!"

As Brent stood looking down at the grains of yellow metal in the little scoop a strange uneasiness stirred deep within him. He picked up the nugget and held it in the palm of his hand.

One side of it was flat, as though polished by a thousand years of water-wear, and the other side was rough and fire-eaten as though fused by a mighty heat. Brent had seen plenty of gold—coined gold, gold fashioned by the goldsmith's art, and gold in bricks and ingots, in the production of which he himself had been a factor. Yet never before had the sight of gold moved him. It had been merely a valuable metal which it was his business to help extract from certain rocks by certain processes of chemistry and expensive machinery. Yet here in his hand was a new kind of gold—gold that seemed to reach into the very heart of him with a personal appeal. Raw gold—gold that had known the touch of neither chemicals nor machinery, but that had been wrested by the bare hands of a man from some far place where the fires of a glowing world and the glacial ice-drift had fashioned it. The vague uneasiness that had stirred him at sight of the yellow grains, flamed into a mighty urge at its touch. He, too, would go and get gold—and he would get it not by process of brain, but by process of brawn. Not by means of chemicals and machinery, but by slashing into the sides of mountains, and ripping the guts out of creeks! Carefully he returned the nugget to the scoop, and as he raised his eyes to the bartender's, he moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Where did he get it?" he asked, huskily.

"God, man! If I know'd that I wouldn't be standin' here, would I?" He jerked his thumb toward the rear of the room where men were frenziedly crowding the stranger. "That's what they all want to know. Lord, if he'd let the word slip what a stampede there'd be! Every man for himself an' the devil take the hindmost. Out of every hundred that's in on a stampede, about one makes a stake, an' ten gets their ante back, an' the rest goes broke. They all know what they're going up against—but the damned fools! Every one of 'em would stake all they've got, an' their life throw'd in, to be in on it."

"It's the lure of gold," muttered Brent, "I've heard of it, but I never felt it before. Are they damned fools? Wouldn't you?"

"Wouldn't I—what?"

"Wouldn't you go—along with the rest?"

"*Hell—yes!* An' so would anyone else that had any red guts in 'em!"

Brent poured himself a drink, and shoved the decanter toward the other, "Let's liquor," he said, "and then maybe if we can get that fellow away from the crowd where we can talk——"

The bartender interrupted the thought before it was expressed; "No chance. Take a look at him. Believe me, there's one *hombre* that ain't goin' to spill nothin' he don't want to. An' when a man makes a strike like that he don't hang around bars runnin' off at the chin about it—not what you could notice, he don't. Far as I can see we got just one chance. It's a damn slim one, but you can't always tell what's runnin' in these birds' heads. He asked me if Patsy Kelliher was runnin' this dump, an' when I told him he was, he had me send for him. Said he wanted to see him *pronto*. An' then he kind of throw'd his eyes around over the faces of the boys an' he says: 'You're all friends of Patsy's?' He seen in a minute how Patsy stood acehigh with them all, an' then he says; 'Well, just kind of stick around 'till Patsy gets down here an' it might be I'll explode somethin' amongst his friends that'll clean this dump out.' Now, you might take that two ways, but he don't look like one of these, what you might call, anarchists, does he? An' when he said that he laughed, an' he says: 'Belly up to the bar an' I'll buy a little drink—*an' I'll pay for it with coarse gold!*' Well, you seen how much drinkin' they done, an'—Here's Patsy, now!"

Brent turned and nodded greeting as the proprietor of "The Ore Dump" entered the door.

"Is it yersilf that sint fer me, Mister Brint, ye spalpeen?" he grinned, "Bein' a gintleman yersilf, ye'll be knowin' Oi'd still be at me newspaper an' seegar. Whut's on yer mind thot ye'll be dhraggin' a mon from the bossom of his family befoor lunch?"

"It ain't him," explained the bartender, "It's the stranger, I told him you didn't never show up till after dinner, but——"

"*Lunch! Damn it! Lunch!*" Kelliher's fist smote the bar, and as he scowled into the face of his head bartender, Brent detected a twinkle in the deep-set blue eyes. "Didn't the owld woman beat that same into me own head a wake afther we'd moved into the big house? An' she done ut wid a tree-calf concoordance to Shakspere wid gold edges thot sets on the par—livin' room table? 'Tis a handy an' useful weapon—a worthy substitute, as the feller says, to the pleebeen rollin' pin an' fryin' pan. Thim tree calves has got a hide on 'em loike the bottom av a sluice-box. Oi bet they could make anvils out av the hide av a full-grow'd tree-bull. G'wan now an' trot out this ill-fared magpie that must be at his chatterin' befoor the break av day!"

At a motion from the bartender the crowd parted to allow the stranger to make his way to the front, surged together behind him, and followed, ranging itself in a semicircle at a respectful distance. Thus with the two principals, Brent found himself included within this semicircle of excited faces.

The two eyed each other for a moment in silence, the stranger with a smile half-veiled by his sun-burned mustache, and Kelliher with a frankly puzzled expression upon his face as his thick fingers toyed with the heavy gold chain that hung cable-like from pocket to pocket of his gaily colored vest.

"I figured you wouldn't know me." The stranger's grin widened as he noted the look of perplexity.

"An' no more I don't," retorted the other, unconsciously tilting his high silk hat at an aggressive angle over his right eye. "Let's git the cards on the table. Who are ye? An' what ye got in ye're head that ye couldn't kape there till afther lunch?"

"I'm McBride."

Brent saw that the name conveyed nothing to the other, whose puzzled frown deepened. "Ye're McBride!" The tone was good-naturedly sarcastic, "Well, ye'd av still be'n McBride this afthernoon, av ye'd be'n let live that long. But who the divil's McBride that Oi shud come tearin' down to look into the ugly mug av um?"

The stranger laughed: "Nine years ago McBride was the night telegraph operator over in the yards. That was before you moved up here. You was still in the little dump over on Fagin street an' you done most of the work yerself—used to open up mornings. There wasn't no big diamon's shinin' in the middle of yer bald-face shirt them days—I doubt an' you owned a bald-face shirt, except, maybe, for Sundays. Anyhow, you'd be openin' up in the mornin' when I'd be goin off trick, an' I most generally stopped in for a couple of drinks or so. An' one mornin' when I'd downed three or four, I noticed you kind of givin' me the once-over. There wasn't no one else in the place, an' you come over an' leaned yer elbows on the bar, an' you says: 'Yer goin' kind of heavy on that stuff, son,' you says.

"'What the hell's the difference?' I says, 'I ain't got only six months to live an' I might's well enjoy what I can of it.'

"'Are they goin' to hang ye in six months?' you asks, 'Have ye got yer sentence?'

"'I've got my sentence,' I says, 'But it ain't hangin'. The doctors sentenced me. It's the con.'

"'To hell with the doctors,' you says, 'They don't know it all. We'll fool 'em. All you need is to git out in the mountains—an' lay off the hooch.'

"I laughed at you. 'Me go to the mountains!' I says, 'Why man I ain't hardly got strength to get to my room an' back to the job again—an' couldn't even make that if it wasn't for the hooch.'

"'That's right,' you says, 'From the job to the room, an' the room to the job, ye'll last maybe six months—but I'm doubtin' it. But the mountains is different.' An' then you goes on an talks mountains an' gold till you got me interested, an' you offers to grub-stake me for a trip into the Kootenay country. You claimed it was a straight business proposition—fifty-fifty if I made a strike, an' you put up the money against my time." The stranger paused and smiled as a subdued ripple of whisperings went from man to man as he mentioned the Kootenay. Then he looked Kelliher squarely in the face: "There wasn't no gold in the Kootenay," he said simply, "Or leastwise I couldn't find none. I figured someone had be'n stringin' you."

Patsy Kelliher shifted the hat to the back of his head and laughed out loud as his little eyes twinkled with merriment. "I git ye now, son," he said, "I moind the white face av ye, an' the chist bowed in like the bottom av a wash bowl, an' yer shoulders stuck out befront ye loike the horns av a cow." He paused as his eyes ran the lines of sinewy leanness and came to rest upon the sun bronzed face: "So ye made a failure av the trip, eh? A plumb clane failure—an' Oi'm out the couple av hundred it cost me fer the grub stake——"

"It cost you more than five hundred," interrupted the other. "I was in bad shape and there was things I needed that other men wouldn't of—that I don't need—now."

"Well—foive hundred, thin. An' how long has ut be'n ago?"

"Nine years."

Kelliher laughed: "Who was roight—me or the damn doctors? Ye've lived eighteen toimes as long as they was going to let ye live a'ready—an' av me eyes deceive me roight, ye ain't ordered no coffin yet."

"No—I ain't ordered no coffin. I come here to hunt you up an' pay you back."

Kelliher laughed: "There ain't nothin' to pay son. You don't owe me a cent. A grub-stake's a grub-stake, an' no one iver yit said Patsy Kelliher welched on a bargain. Besoides, Oi guess ye got all Oi sint ye afther. I know'd damn well they wasn't no gold in the Kootenay—none that a tenderfoot lunger cud foind."

McBride laughed: "Sure—I knew after I'd been there six months what you done it for. I doped it all out. But, as you say, a grub-stake's a grub-stake, an' no time limit on it, an' no one ever said Jim McBride ever welched on a bargain, neither. I ain't never be'n just ready to come back an' settle with you, till now. I drifted north, and farther north, till I wound up in the Yukon country. I prospected around there an' had pretty good luck. I'd got back my strength an' my health till right now there ain't but damn few men in the big country that can hit the trail with Jim McBride. But I wasn't never satisfied with what I was takin' out. I know'd there was somethin' big somewheres up there. I could *feel* it, an' I played for the big stake. Others stuck by stuff that was pannin' 'em out wages. I didn't. They called me a fool—an' I let 'em. I struck up river at last an' they laughed—but they ain't laughin' now. Me an' a squaw-man named Carmack hunted moose

together over on Bonanza. One day Carmack was scratchin' around the roots of a big birch tree an' just fer fun he gets to monkeyin' with my pan." The man paused and Brent could hear the suppressed breathing of the miners who had crowded close. His eyes swept their faces and he saw that every eye in the house was staring into the face of McBride as they hung upon his every word. He realized suddenly that he himself was waiting in a fever of impatience for the man to go on. "Then I come into camp, an' we both fooled with the pan—but we didn't fool long. God, man! We was shakin' it out of the grass roots! *Coarse gold!* I stayed at it a month—an' I've filed on every creek within ten miles of that lone birch tree. Then I come outside to find you an' settle." He paused and his eyes swept the room: "These men friends of yourn?" he asked. Kelliher nodded. "Well then I'm lettin' 'em in. Right here starts the biggest stampede the world ever seen. Some of the old timers that was already up there are into the stuff now—but in the spring the whole world will be gettin' in on it!"

Kelliher was the only self-possessed man in the room: "What'll she run to the pan?" he asked.

"*Run to the pan!* God knows! We thought she was *big* when she hit an ounce——"

"*An ounce to the pan!*" cried Kelliher, "Man ye're crazy!"

The other continued: "An' we thought she was *little* when she run a hundred dollars—two hundred! I've washed out six-hundred dollars to the pan! An' I ain't to bed rock!"

And then he began to empty his pockets. One after another the little buckskin sacks thudded upon the bar—ten—fifteen—twenty of them. McBride spoke to Kelliher, who stared with incredulous, bulging eyes: "That's your share of what I've took out. You're filed along with me as full pardner in all the claims I've got. They's millions in them claims—an' more millions fer the men that gets there first." He paused and turned to the men of the crowd who stood silent, with tense white faces, and staring eyes glued on the pile of buckskin sacks: "Beat it, you gravel hogs!" he cried, "It's the biggest strike that ever was! Hit fer Seattle, go by Dyea Beach an' over the Chilkoot, an' take a thousand pounds of outfit—or you'll die. A hell of a lot of you'll die anyhow—but some of you will win—an' win big. Over the Chilkoot, down through the lakes, an' down the Yukon to Dawson—" A high pitched, unnatural yell, animal-like in its nervous excitement broke from a throat in the crowd, and the next instant pandemonium broke loose in Kelliher's, and Carter Brent fought his way to the door through a howling mass of mad men, and struck out for his boarding house at a run.

CHAPTER II

ON DYEA BEACH

In a drizzle of cold rain forty men stood on Dyea beach and viewed with disfavor the forty thousand pounds of sodden, mud-smeared outfit that had been hurriedly landed from the little steamer that was already plowing her way southward. Of the sixty-odd men who, two weeks before had stood in Patsy Kelliher's "Ore Dump Saloon" and had seen Jim McBride toss one after another upon the bar twenty buckskin pouches filled to bursting with coarse gold in his reckoning with Kelliher, these forty had accomplished the first leg of the long North trail. The next year and the next, thousands, and tens of thousands of men would follow in their footsteps, for these forty were the forerunners of the great stampede from the "outside"—a stampede that exacted merciless toll in the lives of fools and weaklings, even as it heaped riches with lavish prodigality into the laps of the strong.

Jim McBride had said that each man must carry in a thousand pounds of outfit. Well and good, they had complied. Each had purchased his thousand pounds, had it delivered on board the steamer, and in due course, had watched it dumped upon the beach from the small boats. Despite the cold drizzle, throughout the unloading the forty had laughed and joked each other and had liberally tendered flasks. But now, with the steamer a vanishing speck in the distance and the rock-studded Dyea Flats stretching away toward the mountains, the laughter and joking ceased. Men eyed the trail, moved aimlessly about, and returned to their luggage. The thousand pound outfits had suddenly assumed proportions. Every ounce of it must be man-handled across a twenty-eight mile portage and over the Chilkoot Pass. Now and then a man bent down and gave a tentative lift at a bale or a sack. Muttered curses had taken the place of laughter, and if a man drew a flask from his pocket, he drank, and returned it to his pocket without tendering it to his neighbor.

When Carter Brent had reached the seclusion of his room after leaving Kelliher's saloon, he slipped his hand into his pocket and withdrawing his roll of bills, counted them. He found exactly three hundred and seventy-eight dollars which he rightly decided was not enough to finance an expedition to the gold country. He must get more—and get it quickly. Returning the bills in his pocket he packed his belongings, left the room, and a few minutes later was admitted upon signal to the gambling rooms of Nick the Greek where selecting a faro layout, he bought a stack of chips. At the end of a half-hour he bought another stack, and thereafter he began to win. When his innings totaled one thousand dollars he cashed in, and that evening at seven o'clock he stepped onto a train bound for Seattle. He was mildly surprised that none of the others from

Kelliher's were in evidence. But when he arrived at his destination he grinned as he saw them swarming from the day coaches ahead.

And now on Dyea beach he stood and scowled as he watched the rain water collect in drops and roll down the sides of his packages.

"He said they was Injuns would pack this here junk," complained a man beside him, "Where'n hell be they?"

"Search me," grinned Brent, "How much can you carry?"

"Don't know—not a hell of a lot over them rocks—an' he said this here Chilkoot was so steep you had to climb it instead of walk."

"Suppose we make a try," suggested Brent. "A man ought to handle a hundred pounds——"

"*A hundred pounds!* You're crazy as hell! I ain't no damn burro—me. Not no hundred pounds no twenty-eight mile, an' part of it cat-climbin'. 'Bout twenty-five's more my size."

"You like to walk better than I do," shrugged Brent, "Have you stopped to figure that a twenty-five-pound pack means four trips to the hundred—forty trips for the thousand? And forty round trips of twenty-eight miles means something over twenty-two hundred miles of hiking."

"Gawd!" exclaimed the other, in dismay, "It must be hell to be eggicated! If *I'd* figgered that out, *I'd* of stayed on the boat! We're in a hell of a fix now, an' no ways to git back. That grub'll all be et gittin' it over the pass, an' when we git there, we ain't nowheres—we got them lakes an' river to make after that. Looks like by the time we hit this here Bonanza place all the claims will be took up, or the gold'll be rotted with old age."

"You're sure a son of gloom," opined Brent as he stooped and affixed his straps to a hundred-pound sack of flour. "But I'm going to hit the trail. So long."

As Brent essayed to swing the pack to his shoulders he learned for the first time in his life that one hundred pounds is a matter not lightly to be juggled. The pack did not swing to his shoulders, and it was only after repeated efforts, and the use of other bales of luggage as a platform that he was at length able to stand erect under his burden. The other man had watched without offer of assistance, and Brent's wrath flared as he noted his grin. Without a word he struck across the rock-strewn flat.

"Hurry back," taunted the other, "You ort to make about four trips by supper time."

Before he had covered fifty yards Brent knew that he could never stand the strain of a hundred-pound pack. While not a large man, he was well built and rugged, but he had never before carried a pack, and every muscle of his body registered its aching protest at the unaccustomed strain. Time and again it seemed as though the next step must be his last, then a friendly rock would show up ahead and he would stagger forward and sink against its side allowing the rock to ease the weight from his shoulders. As the distance between resting places became shorter, the periods of rest lengthened, and during these periods, while he panted for breath and listened to the pounding of his heart's blood as it surged past his ear drums, his brain was very active. "McBride said a good packer could walk off with a hundred, or a hundred and fifty pounds, and he'd seen 'em pack two hundred," he muttered. "And I've been an hour moving one hundred pounds one mile! And I'm so near all in that I couldn't move it another mile in a week. I wonder where those Indian packers are that he said we could get?" His eyes travelled back across the flats, every inch of which had caused him bodily anguish, and came to rest upon the men who still moved aimlessly among the rain-sodden bales, or stood about in groups. "Anyway I'm the only one that has made a stab at it."

A sound behind him caused him to turn his head abruptly to see five Indians striding toward him along the rock-strewn trail. Brent wriggled painfully from his pack straps as the leader, a bigframed giant of a man, halted at his side and stared stolidly down at him. Brent gained his feet and thrust out his hand: "Hello, there, old Nick o' Time! Want a job? I've got a thousand pounds of junk back there on the beach, counting this piece, and all you gentlemen have got to do is to flip it up onto your backs and skip over the Chilkoot with it—it's a snap, and I'll pay you good wages. Do you speak English?"

The big Indian nodded gravely, "Me spik Eengliss. Me no nem Nickytam. Nem Kamish—W'ite man call Joe Pete."

Brent nodded: "All right, Joe Pete. Now how much are you and your gang going to charge me to pack this stuff up over the pass?"

The Indian regarded the sack of flour: "You *chechako*," he announced.

"Just as you say," grinned Brent, "I wouldn't take that from everybody, whatever it means, but if you'll get that stuff over the pass you can call me anything you want to."

"You Boston man."

"No—I'm from Tennessee. But we'll overlook even that. How much you pack it over the pass." Brent pointed to the flour and held up ten fingers.

The Indian turned to his followers and spoke to them in guttural jargon. They nodded assent,

and he turned to Brent: "Top Chilkoot fi' cent poun'—hondre poun', fi' dolla. Lak Lindermann, three cent poun' mor'—hondre poun' all way, eight dolla."

"You're on!" agreed Brent, "Thousand pounds, eighty dollars—all the way."

The Indian nodded, and Brent produced a ten dollar gold piece which he handed to the man, indicated that he would get the rest when they reached Lake Lindermann.

The Indian motioned to the smallest of his followers and pointing to the sack of flour, mumbled some words of jargon, whereupon the man stepped to the pack, removed Brent's straps and producing straps of his own swung the burden to his back and started off at a brisk walk.

As Brent led the way back to the beach at the head of his Indians he turned more than once to glance back at the solitary packer, but as far as he could see him, the man continued to swing along at the same brisk pace at which he had started, whereat he conceived a sudden profound respect for his hirelings. "The littlest runt of the bunch has got me skinned a thousand miles," he muttered, "But I'll learn the trick. A year from now I'll hit the trail with any of 'em."

Back at the beach the Indians were surrounded by thirty-nine clamoring, howling men who pushed and jostled one another in a frenzied attempt to hire the packers.

"No, you don't!" cried Brent, "These men are working for me. When I'm through with them you can have them, and not before."

Ugly mutterings greeted the announcement. "Who the hell do you think you are?" "Divide 'em up!" "Give someone else a chanct." Others advanced upon the Indians and shook sheaves of bills under their noses, offering double and treble Brent's price. But the Indians paid no heed to the paper money, and inwardly Brent thanked the lucky star that guided him into exchanging all his money into gold before leaving Seattle.

Despite the fact that he was next to useless as a packer Brent was no weakling. Ignoring the mutterings he led the Indians to his outfit and while they affixed their straps, he faced the crowding men.

"Just stay where you are, boys," he said. "This stuff here is my stuff, and for the time being the ground it's on is my ground."

The man who had sneered at his attempt to pack the flour crowded close and quick as a flash, Brent's left fist caught him square on the point of the chin and he crashed backward among the legs of the others. Brent's voice never changed tone, nor by so much as the flutter of an eye lash did he betray any excitement. "Any man that crosses that line is going to find trouble—and find it damned quick."

"He's bluffin'," cried a thick voice from the rear of the crowd, "Let me up there. I'll show the damn dude!" A huge hard-rock man elbowed his way through the parting crowd, his whiskey-reddened eyes narrowed to slits. Three paces in front of Brent he halted abruptly and stared into the muzzle of the blue steel gun that had flashed into the engineer's hand.

"Come on," invited Brent, "If I'm bluffing I won't shoot. You're twice as big as I am. I wouldn't stand a show in the world in a rough-and-tumble. But, I'm not bluffing—and there won't be any rough-and-tumble."

For a full half minute the man stared into the unwavering muzzle of the gun.

"You would shoot a man, damn you!" he muttered as he backed slowly away. And every man in the crowd knew that he spoke the truth.

Three of the Indians had put their straps to a hundred pounds apiece and were already strung out on the trail. Brent turned to see Joe Pete regarding him with approval, and as he affixed his straps to a fifty pound pack, the big Indian stooped and swung an extra fifty pounds on top of the hundred already on his back and struck out after the others. At the end of a half-mile Brent was laboring heavily under his load, while Joe Pete had never for an instant slackened his pace. "What's he made of? Don't he ever rest?" thought Brent, as he struggled on. The blood was pounding in his ears, and his laboring lungs were sucking in the air in great gulps. At length his muscles refused to go another step, and he sagged to the ground and lay there sick and dizzy without energy enough left at his command to roll the pack from his shoulders. After what seemed an hour the pack was raised and the Indian who had gone ahead with his first pack swung the fifty pounds to his own shoulders and started off. Brent scrambled to his feet and followed.

A mile farther on they came to the others lying on the ground smoking and resting. The packs lay to one side, and Brent made mental note of the fact that these packers carried much of the weight upon a strap that looped over their foreheads, and that instead of making short hauls and then resting with their packs on they made long hauls and took long rests with their packs thrown off. They were at least three miles from the beach, and it was nearly an hour before they again took the trail. In the meantime Joe Pete had rigged a tump-line for Brent, and when he again took the trail he was surprised at the difference the shifting of part of the load to his head made in the ease with which he carried it.

Two miles farther on they came upon the sack of flour where the Indian had left it and Joe Pete indicated that this would be their first day's haul. Six hundred pounds of Brent's thousand had

been moved five miles, and leaving the small Indian to make camp, the others, together with Brent returned for the remaining four hundred.

This time they were not molested by the men on the beach, many of whom they passed on the trail laboring along under packs which for the most part did not exceed fifty pounds weight.

On the return Brent insisted on packing his fifty pounds and much to his delight found that he was able to make the whole distance of three miles to the resting place. Joe Pete nodded grave approval of this feat and Brent, in whose veins flowed the bluest blood of the South, felt his heart swell with pride because he had won the approbation of this dark skinned packer of the North.

Into this rest camp came the erstwhile head barkeeper at Kelliher's, and to him Brent imparted the trail-lore he had picked up. Also he exchanged with him one hundred dollars in gold for a like amount in bills, and advised Joe Pete that when his present contract was finished this other would be a good man to work for.

Day after day they packed, and upon the last day of trail Brent made four miles under one hundred pounds with only one rest—much of the way through soft muskeg. And he repeated the performance in the afternoon. At Lindermann Joe Pete found an Indian who agreed to run Brent and his outfit down through the lakes and the river to Dawson in a huge freight canoe.

The first stampeders from the outside bought all available canoes and boats so that by the time of the big rush boats had to be built on the shore of the lake from timber cut green and whip-sawed into lumber on the spot. Also, the price of packing over the Chilkoot jumped from five cents a pound to ten, to twenty, to fifty, to seventy, and even a dollar, as men fought to get in before the freeze up—but that was a year and a half after Brent floated down the Yukon in his big birch canoe.

CHAPTER III

AT THE MISSION

Far in the Northland, upon the bank of a great river that disgorges into the frozen sea, stands a little Roman Catholic Mission. The mission is very old—having had its inception in the early days of the fur trade. Its little chapel boasts a stained glass window—a window fashioned in Europe, carried across the Atlantic to Hudson Bay in a wooden sailing vessel, and transported through three thousand miles of wilderness in canoes, York boats, and scows, and over many weary miles of portage upon the backs of sweating Indians. Upon its walls hang paintings—works of real merit, the labor of priestly hands long dead. A worthy monument, this mission, to the toil and self sacrifice of the early Fathers, and a living tribute to the labor of the grave Grey Nuns.

The time was July—late evening of a July day. The sun still held high above the horizon, and upon the grassed plateau about the buildings of the mission children were playing. They were Indian children, for the most part, thick bodied and swarthy faced but among them here and there, could be seen the lighter skin of a half breed. Near the door of one of the buildings sat a group of older Indian girls sewing. In the doorway the good Father Ambrose stood with his eyes upon the up-reach of the river.

Like a silent grey shadow Sister Mercedes glided from the chapel and seated herself upon a wooden bench drawn close beside the door. Her eyes followed the gaze of the priest. "No sign of the brigade?" she asked. "They have probably tied up for the night. Tomorrow maybe—or the day after, they will come." Ensued a long pause during which both studied the river. "I think," continued the Nun, "that when the scows return southward we will be losing Snowdrift."

"Eh?" The priest turned his head quickly and regarded Sister Mercedes with a frown. "Henri of the White Water? Think you he has——"

The Sister interrupted: "No, no! To school. She is nineteen, now. We can do nothing more for her here. In the matter of lessons, as you well know, she has easily outstripped all others, and books! She has already exhausted our meagre library."

The priest nodded. The frown still puckered his brow but his lips smiled—a smile that conveyed more of questioning than of mirth. Intensely human himself, Father Ambrose was no mean student of human nature, and he spoke with a troubled mind: "To us here at the mission have been brought many children, both of the Indians and of the Metis. And, having absorbed to their capacity our teachings, the Indians have gone stolidly back to their tepees, and to their business of hunting and trapping, carrying with them a measure of useful handicraft, a smattering of letters, and the precepts of the Word." The smile had faded from the clean-cut lips of the priest, and Sister Mercedes noted a touch of sadness in the voice, as she watched a slanting ray of sunlight play for a moment upon the thinning, silvery hair. "I have grown old in the service of God here at this mission, and it is natural that I have sought diligently among my people for the outward and visible signs of the fruit of my labor. And I have found, with a few notable exceptions that in one year, or two, or three, the handicraft is almost forgotten, the letters are but a dim blur of memory, and the Word?" He shrugged, "Who but God can tell? It is the Metis who are the real

problem. For it is in their veins that civilization meets savagery. The clash and the conflict of races—the antagonism that is responsible for the wars of the world—is inherent in the very blood that gives them life. And the outcome is beyond the ken or the conjecture of man. I have seen, I think, every conceivable combination of physical and mental condition, save the one most devoutly to be hoped for—a blending of the best that is in each race. That I have not seen. Unless it be that we are to see it in Snowdrift."

Sister Mercedes smiled: "I do not believe that Snowdrift is a half breed. I believe she is a white child."

Father Ambrose smiled tolerantly: "Still of that belief? But, it is impossible. I know her mother. She, too, was a child of this mission—long before your time. She is one of the few Indians who did not forget the handicraft nor the letters." The old man paused and shook his head sadly, "And until she brought this child here I believed that she had not forgotten the Word. For she continued to profess her belief, and among her people she waged war upon the rum-runners. Later, I, myself, married her to a Dog Rib, a man who was the best of his tribe. Then they disappeared and I heard nothing from her until she brought this child, Snowdrift, to us here at the mission. She told me that her husband had been drowned in a rapid, and then she told me—not in confessional, for she would not confess, that this was her child and that her father was a white man, but that he was not her husband."

"She may have lied. Loving the child, she may have feared that we would take her away, or institute a search for her people."

"She loves the child—with the mother love. But she did not lie. If she had lied, would she not have said that after the death of her husband she had married this white man? I would have believed her. But, evidently the idea of truth is more firmly implanted in her heart than—other virtues—so she told the truth—knowing even as she did so the light in which she would stand before men, and also the standing of her daughter."

"Oh, it is a shame!" cried the Nun, "But, still I do not believe it! I cannot believe it! Snowdrift's skin, where the sun and the wind have not turned it, is as white as mine."

"But her hair and eyes are the dark hair and eyes of the Indian. And when she was first brought here, have you forgotten that she fought like a little wild cat, and that she ran away and trailed her band to its encampment? Could a white child have done that?"

"But after she had been brought back, and had begun to learn she fought just as hard against returning to the tribe for a brief vacation. She is a dreamer of dreams. She loves music and appreciates its beauty, and the beauty of art and the poets."

"She can trail an animal through country that would throw many an Indian at fault."

"She hates the sordid. She hates the rum-runners, and the greasy smoke-blackened tepees of the Indians. In her heart there has been an awakening. She longs for something better—higher. She has consented to go to the convent."

"And at the same time we are in mortal dread lest she marry that prince of all devils, Henri of the White Water. Why she even dresses like an Indian—the only one of the older girls who does not wear the clothing of white women."

"That is because of her artistic temperament. She loves the ease and comfort of the garments. And she realizes their beauty in comparison to the ugliness of the coarse clothing and shoes with which we must provide them."

"Where is she now?"

"Hunting."

Father Ambrose laughed: "And I predict that she will not return until she has brought down her caribou, or her moose. Would your white maiden of nineteen be off hunting alone in the hills with her rifle? No. By our very contentions we have established the dual nature of her. In her the traits of civilization and savagery are not blended, but each in turn dominate and order her thoughts and actions. Hers is what one might term an alternating ego. And it is a thing that troubles me sore. What will happen down there—down at the convent, where they will not understand her, and where there is no hunting? To what end will this marvelous energy exert itself? For, it will not remain pent up within her breast. It will seek outlet. And then?"

"Who can tell?" answered the Nun, thoughtfully. "At least, I shall be glad indeed to know that she will be far from the baleful influence of Henri of the White Water. For, devil that he is, there is no gainsaying the fact that there is something attractive about him, with his bold free manner, and his handsome face, and gay clothing. He is a figure that might well attract a more sophisticated woman than our little Snowdrift. As yet, though, I think he has failed to rouse in her more than a passing interest. If she cared for him she would not be away hunting while everyone else is eagerly watching for the brigade."

Father Ambrose shrugged: "'Tis past understanding—the way of a maid with a man. But see, here she comes, now." Both watched the lithe form that swung across the clearing from the bush. The girl was hatless, her mass of black hair, caught up and held in place by an ingenious twist of bark. Her face and full rounded throat that rose gracefully from the open collar of a buckskin

hunting shirt showed a rich hazel brown in the slanting rays of the sun. Buckskin gloves protected her hands from the ever present mosquitoes. A knee-length skirt of heavy cloth, a pair of deer skin leggings tanned with the hair on, and Indian moccasins completed her costume.

"What luck?" greeted the priest.

The girl paused before them and flashing a smile, disclosed a set of teeth that gleamed like wet pearls: "Good luck," she answered, "A young bull caribou, and two wolves that were just closing in on a cow with a young calf. Every bullet went true. I shot three times. Has the brigade passed?"

The priest shook his head: "No, not yet. They will have camped before this for the night." As he spoke the girl's eyes strayed to the river, and at the extreme reach of glistening water, they held: "Look!" she cried, "They are coming, now!" Around the bend into view shot a scow, and another, and another, until the whole surface of the river seemed black with the scows. The playing children had seen them too, and with wild whoops of delight they were racing for the bank, followed by the older Indian girls, and by Father Ambrose. For the annual coming of the brigade is an event in the North, bringing as it does the mail and the supplies for the whole year to these lonely dwellers of the far outlands.

Sister Mercedes remained seated upon her bench and standing her rifle against the wall, Snowdrift sat down beside her, and in silence the two watched the scows swing shoreward in response to the strokes of the heavy steering sweeps, and listened to the exchange of shouted greetings.

Of all the rivermen, the bravest figure was that of Henri of the White Water. The two women could see him striding back and forth issuing orders regarding the mooring of scows and the unloading of freight. They saw him pause suddenly in his restless pacing up and down, and eagerly scan the faces of the assembled group. Then, his glance travelled back from the river and rested upon the two silent figures beside the door, and with a wave of his hand, he tossed the sack of mail to the waiting priest, and stepping past him strode rapidly up the bank in the direction of the mission.

The face of Sister Mercedes hardened as she noted the flaunting air of the approaching man, his stocking cap of brilliant blue, his snow-white *capote* thrown open to reveal the flannel shirt of vivid red and black checks.

With a royal bow, he swept the blue stocking cap from his head and saluted the two upon the bench: "Ah-ha, greetings, *ma chères*! From Henri of the White Water to the fairest flower of the North, and her—ah, guardian angel—*non*?" His lips flashed a smile, and he continued: "But, there are times when even a guardian angel is not desired to be. Come with me, Snowdrift, and we will walk yonder to the edge of the bank, where we will still be within sight of the ever watching eye of the church, but well out of hearing of its ever listening ear. You see, Sister *religieuse*, I am a respecter of your little laws!" He laughed aloud, "Ah, yes Henri of the White Water is a great respecter of laws, *voila*!"

Seating themselves upon the high bank of the river the two watched the sun dip slowly behind the scrub timber. And, as the twilight deepened, the man talked rapidly and earnestly, while the girl listened in silence. "And so," he concluded, "When the scows return, in one month from now, you shall leave this place forever. We shall go away and be married, and we will journey far, far up the rivers to the cities of the white men, and only upon occasion will we make flying trips into the North—to the trade."

"It is said that you trade hooch," said the girl, "I will not marry any man who trades hooch. I hate the traders of hooch."

"Ah-ha! *Ma chère!* Yes, I have now and then traded hooch. You see, I do not deny. Henri of the White Water must have adventure. But upon my soul, if you do not want me to trade hooch, I shall never trade another drop—*non*."

"When the scows return in a month, I shall go with them," answered the girl dispassionately, "But, not to be married. I am going to school——"

"To school! *Mon Dieu!* Have you not had enough of school? It is time you were finished with such foolishness. You, who are old enough to be the mother of children, talking of going to school! Bah! It is to laugh! And where would you go—to school?"

"To the convent, at Montreal."

"The devil take these meddlers!" cried the man, rising and pacing rapidly up and down before the girl. Then suddenly he paused and looking down upon her, laughed aloud. "Ha, ha! You would go to Montreal! And what will you do when you get there? What will you say when they ask you who is your father? Eh, what will you tell them?"

The girl looked at him in wide-eyed surprise. "Why, what do you mean? I shall tell them the truth—that my father is dead. Why should I not tell them that my father is dead. He was a good man. My mother has told me."

Again the man laughed, his laugh of cruel derision: "Such innocence! It is unbelievable! They will have nothing to do with you in the land of the white men. They will scorn you and look down

upon you. You never had a father——"

The girl was upon her feet, now, facing him with flashing eyes: "It is a lie! I did have a father! And he was a good man. He was not like the father of you, old Boussard, the drunken and thieving old hanger-on about the posts!"

"Aye, I grant you that the old devil is nothing to brag of. I do not point to him with the finger of pride, but he is nevertheless a produceable father. He and my Indian mother were married. I at least am no *enfant natural*—no *batarde*! No one can poke at me the finger of scorn, and draw aside in the passing, as from a thing unclean!"

The girl's face flamed red, and tears of rage welled from her eyes: "I do not know what you mean!" she cried, "But I do know that I hate you! I will find out what you mean—and then maybe I will kill you." In her rage she sprang at the man's throat with her bare hands, but he easily thrust her aside, and sobbing she ran toward the mission.

It was long after midnight that Snowdrift emerged from the room of Sister Mercedes. The girl had gone straight to the Nun and asked questions, nor would she be denied their answers. And so explaining, comforting, as best she could, the good Sister talked till far into the night. Snowdrift had gone into the room an unsophisticated girl—she came out from it a woman—but, a woman whose spirit, instead of being crushed and broken by the weight of her shame, rose triumphant and defiant above that shame. For in her heart was bitter hatred against the white men, whose code of ethics brought shame upon the innocent head of one whose very existence was due to the lust of a man of their own race.

Silently the girl crossed the clearing to the building in which was her room, and very silently she made up a pack of her belongings. Then, taking the pack, and her rifle, she stole silently out the door and crossing the broad open space, entered the bush. At the edge of the clearing she turned, and stood for a long time looking back at the mission with its little buildings huddled together in the moonlight. And then, with a choking sob that forced itself past her tight-pressed lips, she turned and plunged into the timber.

CHAPTER IV

ACE-IN-THE-HOLE

On the outskirts of Dawson, city of the tents and log buildings, Brent pitched his own tent, paid off his Indian canoeman, and within the hour was sucked into the mad maelstrom of carousal that characterized the early days of the big gold camp.

It was the city of men gone mad. The saloon was the center of activity—and saloons there were aplenty; Dick Stoell's Place, which was "the big game" of Dawson; "The Nugget" of uproarious fame; Cuter Malone's "Klondike Palace," where, nightly, revel raged to the *n*th power—where bearded men and scarlet women gave over to debauch magnificent in its wild abandon; and many others, each with its wheels of chance, its cards, its music, and its women.

And into the whirl of it Carter Brent plunged with a zest born of youth and of muscles iron-hard from the gruelling trail. And into it he fitted as though to the manner born. No invisible lines of demarkation divided the bars of Dawson as they had divided Kelliher's bar. Millionaires in blanket coats and mukluks rubbed shoulders with penniless watery-eyed squaw-men. Sourdoughs who spilled coarse gold from the mouths of sacks, misfit *chechakos*, and painted women, danced, and sang, and cursed, and gambled, the short nights through.

The remnant of Brent's thousand dollars was but a drop in the bucket, and he was glad when it was gone three days after his arrival. Not that he particularly wanted to be "broke." But in the spending of it, men had taken his measure—the bills and the coined gold had branded him as a man from the "outside," a *chechako*—a tenderfoot.

An hour after he had tossed his last yellow disk upon the bar in payment for a round of drinks he had hired out to Camillo Bill Waters to sluice gravel at an ounce a day. An ounce was sixteen dollars. Thereafter for the space of a month he was seen no more in Dawson.

Then one day he returned. He presented a slip of paper signed by Camillo Bill to the bartender at Stoell's and received therefor thirty ounces of gold—raw gold, in dust and nuggets. He bought a round of drinks glorying in the fact that at last he, too, was spending coarse gold. He bet ten ounces on an Indian foot race, and won. More drinks, and an hour later he bet his pile on a seven, a ten-spot, a deuce, and a king in a game of stud poker. Two players called the bet and he flipped over his hole card—it was a seven-spot and again he won.

He quit the game and danced for an hour, and between dances he drank whiskey. He got the hunch that this was his lucky day and that he could win, but the hunch called for quick big bets, and not for long continued play. He rode his hunch, and at Cuter Malone's wheel he tossed fifty ounces on Number 21. The ivory ball rolled slower and slower, hesitated on the 10 and then with a last turn settled into 21. He pocketed twenty-eight thousand dollars with a grin. The news of

the bet spread swiftly and Brent became a man of sorts. Four times more that night he placed big bets—and three of the times he won.

One of these plays also in a game of stud earned him the name by which he became known in the North. With a king, and a queen, showing in his own hand he mercilessly raised an exposed pair of Jacks. Of the six other players in the game five dropped out. The holder of the Jacks stayed for the last draw and checked the bet. Brent laid fifty thousand dollars on his cards, a king, a queen, an eight spot and a four spot. The other stared at the hand for a long time. He was a man known for his nerve and his high play, and he knew that Brent knew this. Whispers of the big bet had gone about the room and men and women crowded the table. At length the other turned down his cards in token of surrender, and with a laugh Brent turned his hole card face up. It was the Ace of Diamonds, and an audible gasp hissed from twenty throats. Thereafter Brent was known as Ace-In-The-Hole.

The next morning he deposited one hundred and thirty thousand dollars in Dick Stoell's safe, and his pockets still bulged with dust. For two days and nights he drank and danced, but not a card did he touch, nor did he lay any bet. When questioned he answered that his hunch was not working. The sourdoughs respected him and treated him as an equal. He spent dust lavishly but he did not throw it away.

Then suddenly he bought an outfit and disappeared. When the first snow flew he was back, and into Dick Stoell's safe went many sacks of raw gold. He drank harder than ever and spent gold more freely. His fame spread to other camps, and three men came up from Circle to relieve him of his pile. He was gambling regularly now, and in a game of stud he caught them at the trick by means of which they had won forty thousand dollars from him. Many miners, among them a goodly sprinkling of old timers, were watching the play, and many of them had already detected the swindle, but after the custom of the country they held their peace. Brent never batted an eye upon discovering the trick, but when a few moments later it was repeated, things happened in Stoell's—and they happened with the rapidity of light. One minute after the trouble started there was an ominous silence in the room. A circle of men stood and stared at the wreck of a table, across which sagged the body of a man killed with his own gun. Another man with his jaw shattered lay on the floor, and a third lay white and still across him with a wide red mark on his forehead where a sack of gold dust had caught him fair. And over all stood Brent with one leg jammed through the rungs of a broken chair.

The incident placed Ace-In-The-Hole in the foremost ranks of the big men of the North. He was regarded as the equal of such men as Old Bettles, Camillo Bill Waters, Swiftwater Bill, and McMann. Sourdoughs sought his acquaintance and *chechakos* held him in awe. When the snow lay deep he bought the best string of dogs he could find, hired an Indian musher, and again disappeared. He was back at Christmas for a two weeks carousal, and when he hit the trail again he carried with him several gallons of whiskey. The sourdoughs shook their heads and exchanged glances at this, but a man's business is his own. In July he sent his Indian down for ten men to work his sluices and much whiskey. In September he came down himself and he brought with him a half million in gold.

Others had cleaned up big during the summer, and that winter saw Dawson's highest peak of wild orgies and wild spending. Riding a hunch when he first hit town Brent doubled and trebled his pile, and then with Jimmie the Rough, McMann, Camillo Bill and a few others they inaugurated such a campaign of reckless spending as the North had never seen and never again did see.

Brent was never sober, now—and men said he never slept. He was the youngest and by far the strongest of the spenders, the urge of the game was in his blood, and he rode it as he rode his hunches—to the limit of his endurance. All men liked him—open hearted, generous to the fault, and square as a die in his dealings, he spent his money like a prince. And where the men liked him the painted women worshipped him—but they worshipped from afar. For despite the utmost blandishments of the most intriguing of them, he treated all alike—even Kitty, whom men called "The Queen of the Yukon," failed to hold him in thrall. This dancing girl who had taken the North by storm, who was the North's darling and beautiful plaything, whose boast it was that she had never sought any man, fell violently in love with Brent. Men saw it and marvelled, for it was known in the camps that she had spurned men who had laid fortunes at her feet. It was not that he feared women, rather he sought them. He danced with them, frolicked with them—and then promptly forgot them. His one real passion was gambling. Any game or device whereupon big bets could be laid found him an enthusiastic devotee. And his luck became a byword in the North.

"Sometime your luck will change," warned the dancing girl as the two sat one evening in the early fall at a little table in Stoell's and drank champagne which cost Brent fifty dollars the quart. "And then you'll be broke and——"

Brent who had been idly toying with the rings upon her fingers returned the slender hand to the table. "It can't change. It's a part of me. As long as I'm me, I'll be lucky. Look, I'll show you! You want to marry me—you've told me so. Well, I don't want to marry you, or anyone else—wouldn't know what to do with you if I did marry you. You want me to go back on the claim—well, here's a bargain—just to show you that I can't lose." He pulled a buckskin sack full of gold from his pocket and held it before the girl's eyes. "See this sack. It isn't very big. It can't cover many numbers. I'm going to stand up in this chair and toss it onto the roulette table over there, and play every number it touches. If I lose I lose the dust—Stoell will get that. But that isn't all I'll lose—I'll lose myself—to you. If one of the numbers that this sack falls on don't win, I marry you

tonight, and we hit for the claim tomorrow."

The girl stared at him, fascinated: "Do you mean that—you'll quit gambling—and you'll sober up and—and live with me?"

Again Brent laughed: "Yes, I'll quit gambling, and sober up, and live with you till—how does it go—till death us do part."

"Toss it!" The words of the girl came short, with a curious indrawing of the breath, and her fingers clutched at the edge of the table till the knuckles whitened. The men who were crowded about the wheel glanced toward the table at the sound, and standing in his chair Brent waved them to fall back. Then he told them of his bet—while the dancing girl sat with parted lips, her eyes fastened upon his face. The men at the wheel surged back to give room. The proposition caught their fancy. Ace-In-The-Hole, prince of gamblers, was betting himself—with the odds against him! And every man and woman in the room knew that if he lost he would keep his word to the last letter.

Carefully measuring the distance, Brent balanced the sack in his hand, then with a slow movement of his arm, tossed it onto the table. It struck almost squarely in the center, covering Numbers 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, and 20. The croupier spun the wheel, and sent the ivory ball spinning on its way. The men who had been playing, and the men from the bar, crowded close, their eyes on the whirling wheel. Brent sat down in his chair, lighted a cigarette, and filled the two empty champagne glasses from the bottle. He glanced across at Kitty. She was leaning forward with her face buried in her arms. Her shoulders were heaving with quick, convulsive sobs. In Brent's heart rose sudden pity for this girl. What to him had been a mere prank, a caprice of the moment, was to her a thing of vital import. The black fox fur had fallen away from about her neck exposing a bare shoulder that gleamed white in the light of the swinging lamp. She looked little and helpless, and Brent felt a desire to take her in his arms and comfort her. He leaned toward her, half rose from his chair and then, at a sound from the table, he settled back.

"Number 13 wins," announced the croupier, and the room was suddenly filled with the voices of many men. The croupier scribbled a notation upon a piece of paper and together with the sack of dust laid it upon the table between Brent and the girl. A moment later she raised her head and stared, dry eyed into Brent's face.

"Here, little girl," he said gently. "Forgive me. I didn't know you really felt—that way. Here, this is all yours—take it. The bet paid six to one. The weigher will cash this slip at the bar."

With a swift motion of her hand the girl swept sack and slip to the floor. "Oh, I—I hope you *die*!" she cried hysterically, and gathering her wrap about her, she sped from the room.

CHAPTER V

LUCK TURNS

Before the advent of the tin-horns, who invaded the Yukon at the time of the big rush, a "limit" in a poker game was a thing unknown. "Table stakes" did not exist, nor did a man mention the amount he stood to lose when he sat in a game. When a player took his seat it was understood that he stood good for all he possessed of property, whatever or wherever it might be. If the play on any hand ran beyond his "pile" all he had to do was to announce the fact and the other players would either draw down to it, or if they wished to continue the play, the pot, including the amount of the "short" player's last bet was pushed aside until the last call was made, the "short" player only participating in the portion of the pot so set aside. If, in the final show-down his hand was the highest he raked in this pot and the next high hand collected the subsequent bets.

Stud poker was the play most favored by Brent, and when he sat in a game the table soon became rimmed with spectators. Other games would break up that the players might look on, and they were generally rewarded by seeing plenty of action. It was Brent's custom to trail along for a dozen hands or more, simply calling moderate bets on good hands, or turning down his cards at the second or third card. Then, suddenly, he would shove out an enormous bet, preferably raising a pair when his own hand showed nothing. If this happened on the second or third card dealt it invariably gave the other players pause, for they knew that each succeeding bet would be higher than the first, and that if they stayed for the final call they would stand to lose heavily if not be actually wiped out. But they knew also that the bet was as apt to be made on nothing as on a good hand, and should they drop out they must pass up the opportunity to make a killing. Another whim of Brent's was always to expose his hole card after the play, a trick that aggravated his opponents as much as it amused the spectators.

The result was that many players had fallen into the habit of dropping out of a game when Ace-In-The-Hole sat in—not because they disliked him personally, but because, as they openly admitted, they were afraid of his play. Many of these spent hours watching his cards. Not a man among them but knew that he was as square as a die, but every man among them knew that his phenomenal luck must sometime desert him, and when that time came they intended to be in at the killing. For only Brent himself believed that his luck would hold—believed it was as much a

part of himself as the color of his hair or his eyes.

Among those who refused to play was Johnny Claw, from whom Brent had won ten thousand dollars a month before on three successive hands—two cold bluffs, and a club in the hole with four clubs showing, against Claw's king in the hole with two kings showing. Unlike the others who had lost to him, Claw nursed a bitter and secret hatred for him, and he determined that when luck did turn he would profit to the limit of his pile.

Johnnie Claw was one of the few old timers whom men distrusted. He was a squaw-man who had trapped and traded in the country as far back as any man could remember. With the coming of more white men, and the establishment of saloons along the river, Claw had ceased his trapping, and had confined his trading to the illicit peddling of hooch, for the most part among the Indians of the interior, and to that uglier, but more profitable traffic that filled the brothels and the dance halls of the Yukon with painted women from the "outside." So Claw moved among his compeers as a man despised, yet accepted, because he was of the North, and of the civilization thereof a component part.

Brent's luck held until the night before Thanksgiving, then the inevitable happened—he began to lose. At the roulette wheel and the faro table he lost twenty-five thousand dollars, and later, in a game of stud, he dropped one hundred thousand more. The loss did not worry him any, he drank a little more than usual during the play, and his plunges came a little more frequently, but the cards were not falling his way, and when they did fall, he almost invariably ran them up against a stronger hand.

Rumor that the luck of Ace-In-The-Hole had changed at last spread rapidly through the camp, and late in the afternoon of Thanksgiving day, when the play was resumed, spectators crowded the table ten deep. Men estimated Brent's winnings at anywhere from one to five millions and there was an electric thrill in the air as the players settled themselves in their chairs and counted their stacks of chips. The game was limited to eight players, and Camillo Bill Waters arriving too late to be included, promptly bought the seat of a prospector named Troy, paying therefor twenty-thousand dollars in dust. "We're after yer hide," he grinned good-naturedly at Brent, "an' I'm backin' the hunch that we're a-goin' to hang it on the fence this day."

"Come and get it!" laughed Brent. "But I'll give you fair warning that I wear it tight and before you rip it off someone's going to get hurt." Cards in hand he glanced at the tense faces around the board. "I've got a hunch that this game is going to make history on the Yukon," he smiled, "And it better be opened formally with a good stiff round of drinks." While they waited for the liquor his eye fell upon the face of Johnny Claw, who sat at the table, the second man from his right. "I thought you wouldn't sit in a game with me," he said, truculently.

"An' I wouldn't, neither, while yer luck was runnin'—but, it's different, now. Yer luck's busted—an' you'll be busted. An' I'm right here to git my money back, an' some of yourn along with it."

Brent laughed: "You won't be in the game an hour, Claw. I don't like you, and I don't like your business, and the best thing you can do is to cash in right now before the game starts."

A moment of tense silence followed Brent's words, for among the men of the Yukon, open insult must be wiped out in blood. But Claw made no move except to reach out and finger a stack of chips, while men shot sidewise glances into each other's faces. The stack of chips rattled upon the cloth under the play of his nervous fingers, and Kitty, who had taken her position directly behind Brent with a small slippered foot upon a rung of his chair, tittered. Claw took his cue from the sound and laughed loudly: "I'll play my cards, an' you play yourn, an' I'll do my cashin' in later," he answered. "An' here's the drinks, so le's liquor an' git to goin'." He downed his whiskey at a gulp, the bartender removed the empty glasses, and the big game was on.

The play ran rather cautiously at first, even more cautiously than usual. But there was an unwonted tenseness in the atmosphere. Each man had bought ten thousand dollars worth of chips, with the white chips at one hundred dollars, the reds at five hundred, and blues at a thousand—and each man knew that his stack was only a shoestring.

After five or six deals Camillo Bill, who sat directly across the table from Brent tossed in a red chip on his third card which was a queen. Claw stayed, the next man folded, and Brent, who showed a seven and a nine-spot raised a thousand. The others dropped, and Camillo Bill saw the raise. Claw, whose exposed cards were a ten-spot and a jack, hesitated for a moment and tossed in a blue chip. Camillo Bill's next card was an ace, Claw paired his jack and Brent drew a six-spot. With a grin at Brent, Claw pushed in a blue chip, and without hesitation Brent dropped in four blue ones, raising Claw three thousand. Camillo Bill studied the cards, tilted his hole card and glanced at its corner, and raised Brent two thousand. Claw, also surveyed the cards:

"Yer holdin' a four-straight damn high," he snarled at Brent, "but I've got mine—my pair of jacks has got anything you've got beat, an' Camillo hain't got no pair of queens or he'd of boosted yer other bet. I'd ort to raise, but I'll jest stay." And he dropped five blue chips into the pot. Camillo Bill paired his ace with the last card, Claw drew a deuce, and Brent a ten spot. Camillo Bill bet a white chip, Claw stared at Brent's cards for a few moments and merely called, and Brent laughed:

"Here's your white chip, Bill, and I'll just lift it ten thousand—I'm that much light in the pot for a minute."

Camillo Bill called after a moment's deliberation, and Claw sat staring at the pot. He had just two blue chips left before him. "I ain't got ten thousan'," he whined, "I figger I've got about five thousan' outside this here stack, an' if I call fer that an' lose I'm busted flat." His hand pushed the two blue chips toward the pot, hesitated, and was quickly withdrawn. "Damned if I do!" he snarled, "My jacks-up ain't worth it—not agin luck like yourn." He turned over his hole card which was a deuce, and again Brent laughed and flipped his hole card over. It was the king of spades.

"I haven't got a damned thing, and I never did have. What have you got buried, Bill, another ace?"

Camillo Bill grinned and shook his head: "Nope, my down card's a king, too. All I got is them pair of aces. Where's yer guts, Claw?"

Claw glared at Brent as the latter bought a new stack of chips, scribbled an I.O.U. for ten thousand upon a scrap of paper, and tossed it across to Camillo Bill. Then clutching his two chips he rose from the table: "You jest done that to git me!" he growled, "I ain't got no show in this game—if you can't beat me yerself you'll run me up agin a better hand till I'm busted, if you lose money doin' it!"

"You've got it doped right, Claw," said Brent, evenly. "I told you you wouldn't last an hour, and if you'd have listened to me you'd have been eight thousand better off. Your hour isn't up yet, we've got plenty of time to get the rest of it."

"You'll raise hell gittin' the rest of it!" muttered the man, and as he walked toward the bar, Troy, who had sold his seat to Camillo Bill, slipped into the vacated chair.

The incident served to liven the game up, and thereafter red and blue chips outnumbered the white ones in nearly every pot.

There was no thought of stopping for supper, and when the game broke up long past midnight Brent had lost three hundred thousand dollars. He turned to Kitty, who had never left her post at the back of his chair: "Come on, girl, let's go find something to eat and some fuzzy water," he smiled. "They sure had my number, tonight, but I'll go after them tomorrow."

Brent ordered and drank three glasses of whiskey, while waiting for the meal to be served, and after it was over, the girl leaned back in her chair and studied him as she sipped her champagne.

"You're different than you were a year ago," she said.

Brent laughed: "Sure, I was a poor man, then——"

The girl straightened in her chair and interrupted him abruptly, "And you'll never amount to a *damn* until you're a poor man again!" she exclaimed, with such feeling that Brent stared at her in surprise.

"What! What do you mean?"

"I mean just what I said. A year ago you were *some man*. Folks say you're a mining engineer—educated in a college. What are you now? You're a gam., that's what you are, and the hooch is putting its mark on you, too—and it's a shame."

"What in the world is the matter with you, Kitty?" The man stared at her in surprise, "The hooch don't hurt me any—and I only play for the fun of the game——"

"No you don't! You play because its got into your blood, and you can't help playing. And you'll keep on playing till you're busted and it'll be a good thing when you are! Your luck has changed now, and they'll get you."

"I'm still playing on their money," retorted Brent a little nettled at the girl's attack. "If they clean me out, all right. They'll only win the half million I took out of my two claims—the rest of it I took away from them. Anyway, whose business is it?" he asked sullenly.

"It ain't nobody's business, but yours. I—I wish to God it was mine. Everybody knows the hooch is getting you—and that is just what they all say—it's a shame—but it's his own business. I'm the only one that could say anything to you, and I'm—I'm sorry I did."

"They're right—it's my business, and no one else's. If they think I'm so damned far gone let them come and get my pile—I'll still have the claims, and I'll go out and bring in another stake and go after them harder than ever!"

"No you won't—they'll get the claims, too. And you won't have the nerve, nor the muscles to go out and make another strike. When you once bust, you'll be a bum—a has-been—*right*."

"I suppose," sneered Brent, thoroughly angry now: "that I should marry you and hit out for the claim so we could keep what's left in the family—and you'd be the family."

The girl laughed, a trifle hysterically: "No—I wouldn't marry you on a bet—now. I was foolish enough to think of it, once—but not now. I've done some thinking since that night you tossed that sack of dust on the board. If you married me and did go back to where you were—if you quit the cards and the hooch and got down to be what you ought to be—where would I stand? Who am I, and what am I? You would stick by your bargain—but you wouldn't want me. You could never go

back outside—with *me*. And if you wouldn't quit the cards and the hooch, I wouldn't have *you*—not like you are now—flabby, and muddy-eyed, an' your breath so heavy with rot-gut you could light it with a match. No, that dream's busted and inside of a week you'll be busted, too." Setting down her glass the girl quitted the table abruptly, leaving Brent to finish the bottle of champagne alone, after which he sauntered down to Cuter Malone's "Klondike Palace" and made a night of it, drinking and dancing.

The week that followed was a week of almost unbroken losses for Brent. In vain, he plunged, betting his cards more wildly, and more recklessly than ever before, in an effort to force his luck. But it only hastened the end, which came about midnight upon the Thursday following Thanksgiving Day, at the moment he looked into the eyes of Camillo Bill Waters and called a bet of fifty-thousand: "That's good," he announced, as Bill showed Aces-up. "And that just finishes me—I held the claims at a million—and that's the last of it."

CHAPTER VI

THE DEALER AT STOELL'S

On the morning after the final game of stud in which he had slipped the last dollar of his fortune across the green cloth, Brent threw back his blankets and robes and sat upon the edge of his bunk. He had long since discarded his tent for a cabin and his eyes took in the details of the rough furnishings in the grey light that filtered through the heavily frosted window panes. He drew on his shirt and trousers and glanced at his watch. It was ten o'clock. He built a roaring fire, broke the ice that had formed upon the surface of a huge pail of water, filled his coffee-pot, and set his wash pan beside it upon the stove. Then he returned to his bunk and, feeling beneath his pillow, withdrew a flat quart bottle and took a long drink. When the water had warmed in the pan, he shaved before a small mirror that hung above his rude wash stand. Twice during the process he returned to the bottle for a swallow of liquor.

"Kitty was right," he confided to his reflection in the glass, "My luck did turn—and now, I'm broke."

He finished shaving and, as he was about to turn from the wash stand paused, and thrusting his face close to the mirror, subjected it to careful scrutiny.

"Eyes *are* a little muddy," he grudgingly admitted, "And face a little pouchy and red, but, hell, it isn't the hooch!—I don't drink enough to hurt me any. It's being indoors so much, and the smoke. Two days on the trail will fix that. I've got to slip out and make another strike. And when I come back—that bunch will be in for an awful cleaning."

He threw a handful of coffee into the pot, and sliced some bacon into a frying pan, and when the grease ran, he broke a half-dozen eggs and scrambled them with the bacon.

"She said I wouldn't have the nerve nor the muscles to hit out and locate another claim," he grinned as he swallowed a draught of scalding coffee. "I'll show her!"

He finished his meal, washed the dishes, and drew on his mukluks and blanket coat. As he opened the door he was met by a blast of wind-driven snow that fairly took his breath, and drawing back into the room he shut the door.

"I thought it was pretty dark in here for this time of day—some blizzard!"

He drew down the ear-flaps of his fur cap, hunted up his heavy mittens, and once more opening the door, pushed out into the storm.

Twenty minutes later he entered Stoell's place, and as he stamped the snow from his garments, and beat it from his cap and mittens, Camillo Bill greeted him from the bar.

"Hello, Ace-In-The-Hole! I'm buyin' a drink." The room was deserted except for the bartender who promptly set out bottle and glasses. "Let's go over here," suggested Camillo Bill, when the empty glasses had been returned to the bar. He led the way to a small table.

"Bring the bottle and glasses!" called Brent over his shoulder, and Camillo Bill seconded the order with a nod.

"Now," he began, as Brent filled his glass, "Let's get this here deal straightened out. In the first place, is them two claims of yourn worth a million?"

Brent flushed, hotly, but Camillo Bill forestalled his reply. "Hold on, now. I didn't mean what you're thinkin' about—an' you ort to know me well enough to know I didn't. When you said them two claims was worth a million, not me, nor no one else questioned your word, did we? Well, what I'm gettin' at is are they worth more than a million, 'n' how much more?"

Brent laughed: "They're worth more than a million. How much more I don't know. I took out a half a million last summer, and I don't think I'm half way to bed-rock at the deepest."

Camillo Bill nodded: "All right, that's what I wanted to know. You see, there's five or six of us holds your slips an' markers that totals a million over an' above what was in Stoell's safe. I'll jest cash them slips an' markers, an' take over the claims."

Brent shrugged, "Go ahead. It don't make any difference to me how you divide them up."

Camillo Bill grinned: "It does make a hell of a lot of difference to you how we divide 'em up," he said. "It's like this: I like your style. You're a *tillicum*—a natural borned sourdough. You're white clean through. When you said there's so and so much in Stoell's safe, the dust was there. An' when you know'd yer claims was worth more than a million, you says a million instead of stretchin' it to two million, an' maybe stickin' some one. Now when I cash them markers that's out agin the claims, an' figger in the slips an' markers I hold myself, I'll have a million invested, won't I? An', that's what I won—a million—not a million an' a half, or two million—just a million. Well, when I get that million back—you get the claims back—see?"

Brent stared at the man in amazement: "What do you mean? I lost the claims—lost them fair and square——"

"No you didn't," interrupted the other, "You lose just what yer slips an' markers says you lose—an' not a damn cent more. The claims was only a sort of security for the dust. C'latteral the banks would call it. Am I right, or wrong?"

Brent drank the whiskey in his glass and refilling it, shoved the bottle toward Camillo Bill, but the man shook his head. "No more for me. Too much of that stuff ain't no good. But about them claims—am I right, or wrong?"

"You're the whitest damned white man that walks on two legs, if that's what you mean," answered Brent, in a low voice. "I'll make the claims over to you, now."

"Don't say that," replied Camillo Bill, "they was five or six of us that figgered out this play—all friends of yourn. We all of us agreed to do what I'm doin'—it was only a question of who could afford to carry the load till next fall. I kin. Right's right—an' wrong ain't deuce-high, nowheres. A million's a million—an' it ain't two million. An' you don't need to make over them claims to me, neither. Jest you sign a paper givin' me the right to go into 'em an' take out a million, an' we'll tear up them slips an' markers."

"But what if there isn't a million in them. I believe there is—much more than a million. But, what if they're 'spotted,' and I just happened to hit the spots, or what if bed-rock shows a lot shallower than I think it will——"

"What if! What if! To hell with what if! If the claims peter out I ain't no better off if I hold title to 'em, am I? If they ain't good for the million, what the hell difference does it make who owns 'em? I'd ruther someone else holds a bum claim than me, any day," he added with a grin. "An' now that's settled, what you goin' to do, while I'm gettin' out my dust?"

Brent drank his liquor, and reached for the bottle: "Why, I'm going to hit out and locate another strike," he said, a trifle thickly.

Camillo Bill regarded him thoughtfully: "Where at?"

"Why I don't know. There are plenty of creeks—Eldorado—Ophir—Doolittle——"

The other laughed: "Listen here," he said, "While you be'n here in town rollin' 'em high an' soppin' up hooch, they's be'n a hell of a change on the creeks. Ain't you stopped to notice that Dawson's more'n twict as big as she was in August, an' that the country is gittin full of tin-horns, an' *chechakos*. Well it is—an' every creek's filed that's worth a damn—an' so's every one that ain't. They ain't a claim to be took up no more on Bonanza, nor Ophir, nor Siwash, nor Eldorado, nor Alhambra, nor Sulphur, nor Excelsis, nor Christo, nor Doolittle, nor not hardly none on no pup nor dry wash that runs into 'em."

"All right, I'll go farther, then," retorted Brent, pouring more liquor into his glass. "I'll go beyond the last creek that's staked. And, by God, I'll find gold!"

Camillo Bill shook his head: "Look a here, you ain't in no shape to hit out on no long trip. You've laid up too long to tackle it, an' you've drunk too much of that damned hooch. It ain't none of my business what you do, or what you don't do—maybe you ain't drinkin' enough of it, I don't know. But that there's damn poor stuff to train on for a long trail in winter—an' I'm tellin' it to you that winter's sure hit these diggin's an' hit 'em hard. Tell you what I'll do. I've be'n nosin' 'round buyin' claims while you be'n layin' abed daytimes sleepin' off the hooch. I've got more'n what I kin 'tend to alone. I'll give you two thousand a month to help me look after 'em, an' you can sort of ease off the hooch, an' get broke in easy agin. If you sleep nights, an' keep out doors daytimes, an' lay off the cards an' the hooch, you'll be good as ever agin spring."

"Not on your life," flared Brent, "I'm as good a man right now as I ever was! And a damn sight too good a man to be anybody's pensioner. You know damned well that you don't need me at two thousand a month, or any other figure, except at an ounce a day, the same as anyone else gets. What the hell's the matter with everybody?" A querulous note crept into Brent's voice, "I tell you I'm as good a man as I ever was! Kitty told me the same thing—that I'm drinking too much! Whose business is it if I am? But, I'm not, and I'll hit the trail tomorrow and show you all!"

"So long," said Camillo Bill as he rose from his chair. "I told you it wasn't no one's business but

yourn, so they ain't no argyment there. Only, jest you remember that I'm a friend of yourn, an' so is Kitty—an' a man might have a damn sight worse friend than her, at that."

Later in the day Stoell accosted Brent as he stood drinking alone at the bar. "They romped right up your middle, didn't they, the last week or so?"

Brent nodded: "They cleaned me out. I played them too high for the cards I was holding."

"What you figuring on doing now?"

"Going to hit out and locate another claim when this storm lets up."

"You've got a long trip ahead. Everything's staked."

"So they say, but I guess I'll find something, somewhere."

"Why don't you take an inside job this winter. Hell of a lot of grief out there in the snow with only a tent and a bunch of huskies."

"What kind of a job?"

"I'm figuring on starting up a new layout—faro. How'd you like to deal? Just till spring when the weather lets up a little. You can't tell what you're staking under ten foot of snow anyhow."

"I never dealt faro."

"It won't take you long to learn. I only run one big game now because I can't trust no one to deal another—but I could get plenty of play on one if I had it goin'. I figure that the boys all like you, an' you'd be a good card. They all know you're square an' I'd get a good play on your layout. What do you say? It's a damn sight better than mushin' out there in the cold."

"What will you pay?"

"Well, how would five hundred a month, an' five percent of the winnings of the layout do? You wouldn't need to come on till around nine in the evening, and stay till the play was through. I'll throw in your supper, and dinner at midnight, and we won't keep any bar tab. You're welcome to what drinks you want—only you've got to keep sober when you're on shift."

Brent did not answer immediately. A couple of men came through the door in a whirl of flying snow, and he shivered slightly, as the blast of cold air struck him. Stoell was right, there would be a hell of a lot of grief out there on the long snow trail. "I guess I'll take you up on that," he said, "When do I start?"

"It'll take me a day or so to get rigged up. Let's make it day after tomorrow night. Meantime you can do your eating and drinking here—just make yourself at home. The boys'll be tickled when they hear the news—it'll spread around the camp pretty lively that you're dealing faro at Stoell's, and we'll get good play—see."

During the next two days Brent spent much time in Stoell's, drinking at the bar, and watching the preparation of the new layout over which he was to preside. And to him there, at different times came eight or ten of the sourdoughs of the Yukon, each with a gruff offer of assistance, but carefully couched in words that could give no offense. "You'll be on yer feet agin, 'fore long. If you need any change in the meantime, just holler," imparted one. Said another: "Here, jest slip this poke in yer jeans. I ain't needin' it. Somethin'll turn up d'rectly, an' you can slip it back then." But Brent declined all offers, with thanks. And to each he explained that he had a job, and each, when he learned the nature of the job, either answered rather evasively, or congratulated him in terms that somehow seemed lacking in enthusiasm. Old Bettles was the only man to voice open disapproval: "Hell," he blurted, "Anyone c'n deal faro. Anyone c'n gamble with another man's money, an' eat another man's grub, an' drink another man's hooch. But, it's along the cricks an' the gulches you find the reg'lar he-man sourdoughs."

At the words of this oldest settler on the Yukon, Brent strangely took no offense. Rather he sought to excuse his choice of profession: "I'm only doing it till spring, then I'm going to hit into the hills, and when I come back we'll play them higher than ever," he explained. "I'm a little soft now and don't feel quite up to tackling the winter trail."

"Humph," grunted Bettles, "You won't be comin' back—because you ain't never goin' to go. If yer soft now, you'll be a damn sight softer agin spring. Dealin' from a box an' lappin' up hooch ain't a-goin' to put you in shape for to chaw moose-meat an' wrestle a hundred pound pack. It'll sap yer guts." But Brent laughed at the old man's warning, and the next evening took his place behind the layout with the cards spread before him.

As Stoell had predicted, Brent proved to be a great drawing card for the gambling house. Play at his layout ran high, and the table was always crowded. But nearly all the players were *chechakos*—men new to the country, who had struck it lucky and were intent upon making a big splash. Among these tin-horns and four-flushers, Ace-In-The-Hole was a deity. For among petty gamblers he was a prince of gamblers. Rumors and fantastic lies were rife at all the bars concerning his deeds. "He had cleaned up ten million in a summer on a claim." "He killed three men with three blows of his fist." "The Queen of the Yukon was all caked in on him, and he wouldn't have her. He tossed her a slip for half a million that he had won on a single bet at the wheel, and because she was sore at him, she ground it into the floor with her foot." "He had bet a million on an ace in the hole—hence his name. He had gambled away twenty million in a week."

And so it went. Men fell over themselves to make his acquaintance that they might ostentatiously boast of that acquaintance at the bars. One would casually mention that "Ace-In-The-Hole says to me, the other day, he says—" Or, "I was tellin' Ace-In-The-Hole about one time I an' a couple of tarts down in 'Frisco—" Or, "Me an' Ace-In-The-Hole was eatin' supper the other night, an' he says to me—" When he was off duty, men crowded to stand next to him at the bar, they plied him with drinks, and invited him to dine. All of which meant increased business for Stoell. So that upon several occasions when Brent was too drunk to attend to business, Stoell himself dealt his game and said nothing.

It was inevitable that this sudden popularity should in a measure turn Brent's head. Personally, he detested the loud-mouthed fawning *chechakos*, but as his association with them grew, his comradery with the real sourdoughs diminished. They did not openly or purposely cut him. They still greeted him as an equal, they drank with him, and occasionally they took a fling at his game. But there was a difference that Brent was quick to notice, and quick to resent, but powerless to dispel. He was a professional gambler, now—and they were mining men—that was all.

Only once since he had taken up his new vocation had he seen Kitty. She had come into Stoell's one evening, and slipping behind the table stood at his elbow until the end of the deal. As he shuffled the cards preparatory to returning them into the box, she placed her lips close to his ear: "Who are all your friends?" she whispered indicating the tin-horns and *chechakos* that rimmed the table. Brent flushed, slightly, and answered nothing. "So this is what you meant by hitting the trail when they broke you, is it? Well, take it from me, it's a short trail, and a steep grade slanting down, and when you're on the toboggan it ain't going to take long to hit the bottom—with a bump." And before Brent could reply she had slipped away and lost herself in the crowd.

Night after night, although his eyes sought the crowd, he never saw her again, nor did he find her upon his excursions to "The Nugget," or to Cuter Malone's "Klondike Palace." If she were purposely avoiding him, she was succeeding admirably.

Along in February, Brent was surprised one day to receive, in his own cabin, a visit from Johnny Claw. "What do you want?" he asked as the man stood in the doorway.

Claw entered, closing the door behind him. He removed his cap and mittens, and fumbling beneath his parka, produced a sealed bottle of whiskey which he set upon the table: "Oh, jest dropped in fer a little visit. Been 'outside.' Try a shot of this hooch—better'n anything Stoell's got."

Brent sat down upon the edge of his bunk and motioned the man to a chair: "Didn't know you were so damned friendly with me that you would lug me in a bottle of hooch from the outside," he said, "What's on your chest?"

Claw produced a corkscrew and opened the bottle, then he poured a half-tumbler into each of two glasses. "Le's liquor," he said, offering one to Brent. "Good stuff, ain't it?"

Brent nodded: "Damned good. But what's the idea?"

"Idee is jest this," announced Claw, eyeing him shrewdly, "You damn near busted me, but I ain't holdin' that agin' you." He paused and Brent, who knew that he was lying, waited for him to proceed. "You told me right plain out that you didn't like the business I was in! That's all right, too. I s'pose it ain't no hell of a good business, but someone's got to bring 'em in or you bucks wouldn't have nobody to dance with. But, layin' all that aside, you're dealin' the big game for Stoell."

"Yup."

"Well, listen: You're hittin' the hooch too hard fer to suit Stoell. At the end of the month you're out of a job—see? He's goin' to let you out, 'cause yer showin' up too reg'lar with a bun on. Says it's got to where yer crocked so often he might's well be dealin' the game hisself."

"Who did he tell this to—you?"

The other leered: "Naw, not to me. He don't like me no more'n what you do. But, I happened to hear him tellin' it to Old Bettles an' Camillo Bill. 'That's right,' says Bettles, 'fire him, an' maybe we kin git him into the hills.' 'I'm 'fraid not,' says Camillo Bill. 'Leastways not till spring. An' at the rate he's goin', by that time he'll be countin' bees.' 'It's a shame,' says Bettles, 'There's a damn good man gone wrong.' 'He is a damn good man,' says Stoell, 'They ain't many I'd trust to deal that big game. He's square as hell—but, the hooch has got him.'"

"The hell it has," said Brent, with a short laugh. "They're damned fools! I don't drink enough to hurt me any. I'm as good a man as I ever was!"

"Sure you be," assented Claw. "What little you drink wouldn't hurt no one. What's it any of their business? You don't need no guardeen to tell you when to take a drink," he paused and refilled Brent's glass. "'Yer square as hell,'" says Stoell—"but what's it gittin' you? He's goin' to fire you, ain't he?"

"Well?"

"Well—why not git even with him, an' at the same time clean up big fer yerself? They ain't no chanct to git caught."

"What do you mean?" Brent's voice rasped a trifle harshly, but Claw did not notice.

"I got it all doped out. Cold deck him—an' I'll play agin the fixed deck an' make a cleanin'—an' we'll split."

"You mean——"

"I mean this. Me an' you will fix up a deck, an' I'll copy off how the cards lays. Then you slip 'em into the box an' start the deal, an' I'll lay the bets. Of course, knowin' how they'll fall, I kin win whenever I want to. No one'll ever b'lieve it's a frame-up, 'cause they know you're square, an' likewise they know you hate me, an' they wouldn't figger we'd git together. I'll make the play strong by comin' in fer a night er two before we spring it an' braggin' that I've got a system. Then I'll have my slip of paper an' I'll look at it, an' make bets, an' of course I'll lose—'cause they ain't no system. An' the next night I'll do the same an' the third night we'll slip in the fixed deck—an' then my system'll win. An' all the time I'll be sneerin' at you, like I hated yer guts——"

The sentence was never finished. In a blind rage Brent hurled himself upon the man, and both crashed to the floor together. The fight was fast and furious while it lasted. But, flabby, and with his brain befuddled with liquor, Brent was no match for the other, who a year before, he could have killed with his bare hands. He got in several good blows at the start, which slowed up his antagonist, and rendered him incapable of inflicting serious damage later, when Brent winded and gasping, was completely at his mercy. A referee would unhesitatingly have declared it Claw's fight, for when he slipped from the cabin it was to leave Brent nursing two half-closed and rapidly purpling eyes, with nose and lips to match.

When, four days later he showed up at Stoell's, the latter called him aside and weighing out what was coming to him in dust, informed him that his services were no longer required.

CHAPTER VII

"WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?"

From Stoell's Brent drifted to "The Nugget," where for a month, he dealt faro on percentage in a "limit" game—for with the tin-horns and the *chechakos* had come also "limits" and "table stakes."

Here, "The Queen of the Yukon" passed and repassed his layout a dozen times in an evening on her way to and from the dance-hall in the rear, but never by even so much as a look did she admit that she recognized him.

On the afternoon of his first payday, he sat in a "table stakes" game of stud and a run of luck netted him seven hundred dollars. Whereupon he promptly went on a spree that lasted three days and when he again showed up for duty another dealer was presiding over his layout.

The next day Cuter Malone called him into a little back room and sounded him out. "Hear how yer out of a job," quoth Cuter, as he set two glasses and a bottle upon the little table between them. Brent nodded, and the other continued: "Want to keep on dealin'?"

"Why yes, I guess so. I'm going to hit the trail right after the break-up, but until that comes I might as well be doing something."

"Sure. Well I got a good percent proposition fer you. You'll draw quite a little trade—you done it at Stoell's, an' then swung the heft of it over to 'The Nugget.'"

"Is it a limit game?" asked Brent. "What percentage will you pay?"

Malone filled the glasses from the bottle, and having drank combed at his black beard with his fingers: "W-e-e-l, that's accordin'. This here game I'm figgerin' on is a sure thing—that is, o' course, lots o' turns has got to lose, but in the long run she wins big."

"What do you mean—a sure thing?"

Cuter grinned craftily: "D'ye ever hear tell of a double-slotted box? Well, I've got one, an'——"

Brent interrupted him with a short laugh: "What you mean is that because I've got the reputation for being square, you want to use me for a decoy, and when they come in, rob them on a percentage."

"Well, that's—er—talkin' it out kind of plain——"

"You can go to hell!" exclaimed Brent, "and that's talking it out kind of plain, too."

Cuter laughed: "Don't git sore about it. Business is business, an' I'm into it to git the money, one way an' another. If you don't want to deal, how about goin' behind the bar? That's a square enough game." He paused and grinned. "An' I wouldn't mind fer onct havin' someone handlin' my dust that I wouldn't feel like friskin' every time he went out the door to see how much of it had stuck to him."

And so Brent began tending bar in the notorious "Klondike Palace," and Kitty, as she faced him for the first time with her dancing partner and called for a drink, addressed him in words that to her partner meant nothing: "Your toboggan is going good, now—ain't it, Ace-In-The-Hole? You're most there, now—most to the bump that lays at the end of the trail." And Brent served the drinks, and answered nothing.

The "Klondike Palace" was the wildest and most notorious of all the dives of the big camp. Unlike Stoell's and "The Nugget," everything downstairs was in one big room. The bar occupied a whole side, the gambling tables and devices were in the rear, and the remainder of the wide floor space was given over to dancing. At the rear of the bar a flight of stairs led upward to the rooms of the painted women.

And it was concerning one of these painted women that, three weeks later, Brent had his first "run in" with Cuter Malone. It was bitter cold and snowing thickly, and Brent, with lowered head, was boring through the white smother on his way to work. He paused in the light that shone dully through the heavily frosted windows of Malone's and was about to push open the door, when from the thick darkness around the side of the building he heard a woman scream. It was a sharp, terrible scream, that ended in a half-muffled shriek. And without an instant's hesitation, Brent dashed around the corner. The "Klondike Palace" was located well upon the edge of the big camp, beyond it being only a few scattered cabins. Scarcely fifty feet from the street he came upon a man standing over a woman who was cowering in the snow. Neither saw him, and even as he looked the man struck with a coiled dog whip. Again the woman screamed, and the man jumped upon her and started to kick her first with one foot then with the other as she lay in the snow. Like an avalanche Brent hurled himself upon the man, his fist catching him squarely upon the side of the head and sending him sprawling. Without waiting for him to get up, Brent jerked the woman to her feet and pushed her toward the street. He saw then that she was one of the girls who roomed over Malone's, and that she was clad in the thinnest of silk stockings, and the flimsiest of semi-transparent gowns. One of her high-heeled slippers had been lost in the snow. Scarce able to stand, the girl staggered whimpering toward the light. Turning upon the man who had regained his feet Brent found himself looking into the muzzle of a forty-five. So close was the man that even in the darkness he could see his face. It was Johnnie Claw, and Brent saw that the recognition was mutual. Claw's thick lips writhed back in a grin of hate, and Brent could hear his breath sucking heavily between his clenched teeth. Eye to eye they stared as Brent's lips moved in a sneer: "Well—you—damned—pimp—why don't you shoot?" To his intense surprise, the gun wavered, dropped to the man's side and, jamming it into the pocket of his fur coat, Claw pushed past him toward the street, mumbling thick curses.

Later, that night, when business was a little slack during a dance Malone motioned him aside: "Say, what the hell be you buttin' in on other folks business fer?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. What did you go knockin' Johnnie Claw down fer, when he was givin' that damn Violet what was comin' to her, fer holdin' out on him?"

"Giving her what was coming! My God, man, he would have kicked her to death there in the snow—that's what he would have done!"

"Well, what if he did—she's hisn, ain't she?"

A surge of swift anger almost overcame Brent. His fists clenched, and it was with difficulty that he refrained from striking Malone down where he stood. Instead, he leaned a trifle closer to the man: "Just let this stick to you, Malone," he said, "What passes between me and Claw, or me and anyone else, when it isn't on your premises and on your time, is my business—see?"

Malone laughed, shortly, and with a shrug, turned away, while Brent served drinks to a couple who had left the dance and sauntered to the bar. The couple were Kitty, and a strapping young *chechako* called Moosehide Charlie, the name referring to an incident that had occurred early in the winter when he had skinned out a moose and, finding himself far from camp and no blankets, had wrapped himself in the green hide and gone to sleep. In the morning he awoke to find himself encased in an iron-hard coffin of frozen moosehide unable to move hand or foot. Luckily a party of hunters found him and spent half a day thawing him out over a roaring fire.

Said Kitty to Moosehide Charlie, as she sipped at the liquid that by courtesy was called port wine: "That's Johnnie Claw over there by the door. He's one-two-three with Cuter Malone—some say they're pardners."

Her companion swallowed his liquor and glanced indifferently toward the object of the girl's remarks. "It ain't worryin' me none who he's pardners with. I don't like the looks of him, nohow."

"Sh-sh-sh," warned Kitty, "What a man learns in this country don't hurt him any. I was just telling you so if you ever happened to run foul of Claw, you'd know enough to keep your eye on Malone, too."

"Guess I ain't goin' to run foul of him. Come on, let's dance."

Kitty had not even favored him by so much as a glance, but as Brent removed the glasses from the bar, he smiled.

The days were rapidly lengthening on the Yukon. At noon each day the sun was higher in the

heavens and its increased heat was heralded by little streams of snow water that trickled over the ice of the creeks.

One evening when the grip of winter had broken and the feel of spring was in the air, Moosehide Charlie stood at the bar drinking with Johnnie Claw. It was too early for the dancers and three or four of the girls sat idly along the opposite wall. As Brent served the drinks, he noticed that Claw appeared to be urging the younger man into a deal of some kind—he, caught a word now and then, of reference to dumps, slucings, and water heads. Moosehide seemed to be holding out. He was a man who drank little, and after two drinks he turned from the bar shaking his head. "Come on," urged Claw, "Have another."

"No, two or three's my limit. I don't aim to git drunk."

"Drunk, hell!" laughed Claw, "I don't nuther. You've only had two. Make it three, an' I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll throw off a leetle on that claim. I ain't got time to fool with it, noways."

Moosehide returned to the bar: "Well, one more, then, an' that's all. But you'll have to throw off more'n just a little on that property, fer me to touch it."

Claw filled his glass and pushed the bottle toward the other and as Moosehide Charlie measured his liquor, out of the tail of his eye, Brent saw Claw pour something from a small vial into his own glass and return the vial swiftly to his pocket. The next moment he was talking earnestly to Moosehide who, as he listened, toyed with his glass, rubbing into patterns the few drops of liquor he had spilled upon the bar.

Cuter Malone had himself carried a tray of drinks to be served at one of the poker tables in the rear, and just at this moment, tray and glasses struck the floor with a loud crash. Moosehide Charlie turned quickly at the sound, and as he did so Brent saw Johnnie Claw deftly switch the glasses upon the bar. Malone returned, grumbling at his clumsiness, for another tray of drinks, and Claw raised his glass. "I guess we kin deal, all right. Le's drink, an' then we'll slip into the back room there an' figger it out."

As Moosehide picked up the glass before him, Brent reached out swiftly and took it from his fingers. He looked into it for a second and tossed its contents onto the floor. "Better fill her up again," he said, "There was a fly in it." A fly on the Yukon, with the rivers still frozen, and the sodden snow three feet deep on the ground! Moosehide stared, and before Brent could move, Cuter Malone had floored him with a blow from a heavy bottle. The truth flashed upon Moosehide Charlie. One blow of his fist settled Claw, while with his other hand he reached across the bar and jerked a gun from the hand of Cuter Malone. The poker players rose from their chairs and started for the bar, but Moosehide motioned them back with the gun. "Jest go on with yer game, boys," he said meaningly. "Don't mind me." And as they settled into their places he stepped around the bar, keeping Malone covered. Kitty, who had been chatting with the girls on the opposite side of the room, darted across the floor and brushing past Moosehide, knelt beside Brent. "Jest raise up his head, girl, an' throw some water in his face," ordered Moosehide, "An' pour a little licker down his throat. If he can't swaller it, it'll make him gag an' bring him to." Then he turned to Malone: "An' you, you damn crook! You git busy an' weigh out what's comin' to him. An' weigh it damn quick—an' weigh it right. 'Cause if it ain't right, I'm a-comin' back here with about forty or ninety of my friends an' I'm tellin' it to you, we'll gut this damn joint—an' you along with it!"

Brent only partially revived under the water and choking whiskey, and between them they managed to get him out the door and onto Moosehide's sled. Then they hauled him to his cabin and put him to bed, where he lay for two weeks, delirious with fever, while Kitty stayed day and night at his side and nursed him. Another week passed, during which the girl came daily and cooked his meals, and made him get up for a little while each day while she aired and rearranged his blankets. At length came a day when he rose and dressed himself and stayed up till evening.

"You won't be needing me any more," said the girl, simply, as she stood in the doorway late in the afternoon. She pointed to two small buckskin sacks which she had laid upon the table. "There's your pay that was coming to you from Cuter Malone, and a sack that Moosehide Charlie left for you."

"Moosehide Charlie? He don't owe me anything."

"Says he owes you a whole lot, and he wanted me to give you that. He's gone off on a trip up Indian River."

Brent picked up the sack, which was a dozen times the weight of the other, and extended it toward the girl: "Give this back to him," he said shortly. "I don't need it."

Kitty did not take it: "You do too need it," she said, "How long will that pinch of dust last you? And what are you going to do when it's gone?"

"It don't make any difference what I do when it's gone. Whatever I do, I won't live on charity." And he tossed the sack past her through the doorway where it buried itself in the snow.

"You're a fool, Ace-In-The-Hole," she said, quietly, "A *damn fool*."

The man nodded, slowly: "That's right, I reckon. Anyway we won't quarrel about it. Will you do me just one more favor?"

"What is it?"

"Take this dust and get me a bottle of hooch—a quart bottle—two of them."

"No, I won't!"

Brent rose to his feet: "I'll have to go myself, then," he said, as he cast his eyes about for his hat.

"You ain't able! You're weak as a cat, and you'd fall down in the snow."

"I'll get up again, then." He found the hat and put it on.

"I'll go," the words were hurled at him, and he handed her Cuter Malone's sack. "Never mind that—"

"Take it! Or I won't touch the hooch."

Reluctantly, she took it and in half an hour she was back and without a word deposited two quart bottles upon the table.

"Will you drink with me?" Brent asked, as he drew the cork.

"No! I'm going, now."

Brent rose to his feet and held out his hand: "Good bye, Kitty," he said, gravely. "I know what you've done for me—and I won't forget it. You'll come to see me—sometimes?"

"No. I hate you! An' if you could see yourself the way I see you—knowing what you are, and what you ought to be—you'd hate yourself!"

Brent flushed under the sting of the words: "I'm as good a man as I ever was," he muttered, defiantly.

The girl sneered: "You are—like hell! Why, you ain't even got a job—now. You're a bum! You hit the bump that I told you was at the end of your trail—now, where do you go from here?" And before Brent could reply she was gone.

"Where do I go from here?" he repeated slowly, as he sank into a chair beside his table, and swallowed a stiff drink of whiskey. And, "Where do I go from here?" he babbled meaninglessly, three hours later when, very drunk, his head settled slowly forward upon his folded arms, and he slept.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PLOTTING OF CAMILLO BILL

With the rapidly lengthening days the sodden snow thawed and was carried away by the creeks which were running waist-deep on top of the ice. New snow fell, lay dazzling white for a day or two, and then under the ever increasing heat of the sun, it, too, turned sodden, and sullen, and grey, and added its water to the ever increasing torrent of the creeks. Bare patches of ground showed upon south slopes. The ice in the creeks let go, and was borne down by the torrents in grinding, jamming floes. Then, the big river broke up. Wild geese and ducks appeared heading northward. Wild flowers in a riot of blazing color followed up the mountain sides upon the heels of the retreating snow-banks. And with bewildering swiftness, the Yukon country leaped from winter into summer.

From his little cabin Carter Brent noted the kaleidoscopic change of seasons, and promised himself that as soon as the creeks receded into their normal beds he would hit the gold trail. He ate little, drank much, and spent most of his days in reading from some books left him by a wandering Englishman who had come in overland from the North-west territories, where for a year or more he had prowled aimlessly among the Hudson's Bay posts, and the outposts of the Mounted. The books were, for the most part, government reports, geological, and geodetical, upon the Canadian North.

"She said I am a bum," he muttered to himself one evening as he laid aside his book, and in the gathering darkness walked to the door and watched the last play of sunlight upon the distant glittering peaks. "But, I'll show her—I'll show her where I'll go from here. I'm as good a man as I ever was." This statement that he had at first made to others, he now found necessary to make to himself. A dozen times a day he would solemnly assure himself that he was as good a man as he ever was, and that when he got ready to hit the trail he would show them.

The sunlight faded from the peaks, and as he turned from the doorway, his eyes fell upon his pack straps that hung from their peg on the wall. Reaching for his hat, he stepped to the door and peered out to make sure that no one was watching. Then he stooped and fixed his straps to a half-sack of flour which he judged would weigh about fifty pounds. After some difficulty he got the pack onto his back and started for the bank of the river, a quarter of a mile away. A hundred

yards from the cabin he stopped for breath. His shoulders ached, and the muscles of his neck felt as though they were being torn from their moorings as he pushed his forehead against the tump-line. With the sweat starting from every pore he essayed a few more steps, stumbled, and in clumsily catching his balance, his hat fell off. As he stooped to recover it, the weight of the pack forced him down and down until he was flat on his belly with his face in the mud. For a long time he lay, panting, until the night-breeze chilled the sweat on his skin, and he shivered. Then he struggled to rise, gained his hands and knees and could get no farther. Again and again he tried to rise to his feet, but the weight of the pack held him down. He remembered that between the Chilkoot and Lake Lindermann he had risen out of the mud with a hundred pounds on his shoulders, and thought nothing of it. He wriggled from the straps and carrying, and resting, staggered back to his cabin and sank into a chair. He took a big drink and felt better. "It's the fever," he assured himself, "It left me weak. I'll be all right in a day or so. I'm as good a man as I ever was—only, a little out of practice."

After that Brent stayed closer than ever to his cabin until the day came when there was not enough dust left in his little buckskin sack to pay for a quart of hooch. He bought a pint, and as he drank it in his cabin, decided he must go to work, until he got strong enough to hit the trail. Houses were going up everywhere, houses of boards that were taking the place of the tents and the cabins of the previous year. Work there was a plenty, and the laborers were few. *Chechakos* were pouring in by the thousands and staking clear to the mountain tops. But, none of them would work. Crazed by the lure of gold they pitted the hillsides and valleys and mucked like gnomes in their wild scramble for riches. Brent worked for a week in a sawmill, and then quit, bought some hooch and some necessary food, and retired to his cabin to reread his reports and laugh at the efforts of the hillside miners.

The old timers were scattered out in the hills, and the tin-horns and *chechakos* who had worshiped at his shrine were dispersed, or had forgotten him. Life moved swiftly in the big camp. Yesterday's hero would be forgotten tomorrow. And the name of Ace-In-The-Hole meant nothing to the newcomers. Occasionally he met one of the old timers, who would buy him a drink, and hurry on about his business.

Spasmodically Brent worked at odd jobs. He fired a river steamboat on a round trip to Fort Gibbon. Always he promised himself pretty soon, now, he would be ready to hit the trail. Stampedes were of almost daily occurrence, but Brent was never in on them and so the summer wore on and still he had not hit the trail. "I'll just wait now, for snow," he decided late in August. "Then I'll get a good dog team together, and make a real rush. There's no use hitting out with a poling boat, the creeks are all staked, and back-packing is too hard work for a white man. I'm as good a man as I ever was, and when the snow comes I'll show them."

Brent's wardrobe was depleted until it consisted of a coarse blue jumper and ragged overalls drawn over underclothing, laced and tied together in a dozen places. He had not shaved for a month.

Later in October Camillo Bill came to his cabin. He stood in the doorway and stared into the dirty interior where Brent, with the unwashed dishes of his last meal shoved back, sat reading.

"Hello, Camillo," greeted the owner of the cabin as he rose to his feet and extended his hand, "Come in and sit down."

Camillo Bill settled himself into a chair: "Well I'll be damned!" he exclaimed under his breath.

Brent rinsed a couple of murky glasses in the water pail, and reached for a bottle that sat among the dirty dishes: "Have a drink," he invited, extending a glass to his visitor.

Camillo Bill poured a taste of liquor into the glass and watched Brent, with shaking hand, slop out a half a tumblerful, and drink it down as one would drink water. He swallowed the liquor and returned the glass to the table.

"Take some more," urged Brent, "I've got another quart under the bunk."

"No thanks," refused the other, curtly, "I heard you was down an' out, but—by God, I wasn't lookin' for this!"

"What's the matter?" asked Brent, flushing beneath his stubby beard, "What do you mean?"

Righteous indignation blazed from Camillo Bill's eyes. "Mean! You know damn well what I mean!" he thundered. "Look around this shack! Look in the lookin' glass up there! You're livin' here worse'n a dog lives! You're worse'n a—a squaw-man!"

Brent rose to his feet, and drew himself proudly erect. Ragged and unshaven as he was, the effect was ludicrous, but Camillo Bill saw nothing of humour as he stared at the wreck of his friend. Brent spoke slowly, measuring his words: "No man—not even you can insult me and get away with it. I'm as good a man as I ever was, and I'll prove it if you'll step outside."

"You couldn't prove nothin' to nobody, noway. Kitty told me you'd gone to hell—but, I didn't know you'd gone on plumb through."

Brent sank weakly into his chair and began to whimper: "I'm as good a man as I ever was," he sniveled.

"Shut up!" Camillo Bill's fist struck the table, "It makes me mad to look at you! You're a hell of a

lookin' object. You won't winter through. They'll find you froze some mornin' half ways between here an' some saloon."

"I won't be here when winter comes. I'm going to hit the trail when snow flies, with a dog outfit."

"Where do you aim to go?"

"Over beyond the Mackenzie. Over in the Coppermine River country. There's gold over there, and there aren't a million *chechakos* gouging for it."

Camillo Bill roared with laughter: "Over beyond the Mackenzie! Picked you out the roughest an' the furtherest place to go there is. An' nuthin' there when you get there—only you'd never get there. You ain't got the strength nor the guts to cross Indian River—let alone the Mackenzie. An' besides, where do you aim to get your outfit?"

"I'll work in the sawmill till I get enough, or anyone will grub-stake me—you will."

"I will—like hell! An' no one else won't, neither. You'd never buy nothin' but hooch if they did."

A gleam of hope flashed into Brent's eyes: "Say," he asked, "How about my claims? You must have taken out your million by this time."

Camillo Bill smiled and his eyes never wavered as they met Brent's gaze: "Petered plumb out," he said, "That's what I come to tell you about. They ain't an ounce left in 'em."

"Did you get yours?" asked Brent dully. "If you didn't, just let me know how much you are shy, and I'll make it good—when I make my strike, over beyond the Mackenzie."

This time the other did not laugh. His fists clenched, and he muttered under his breath: "All gone to hell—puffed an' bloated, an' rotten with hooch—an' still square as a brick school house!" For a long time he sat silent, staring at the floor.

Brent poured himself another drink: "How much are you shy?" he repeated.

The words roused Camillo Bill from a brown study: "Huh?" he asked.

"I said, how much are you shy of that million?"

"Oh, I don't know yet. I ain't cleaned up the tailin' of the dump. It ain't goin' to be so far off, though. I'll let you know later." He got up and crossed to the door. "So long," he said, and without waiting for Brent's adieu, struck out at a fast walk for Stoell's where he found old Bettles and Swiftwater Bill drinking at the bar with Moosehide Charlie, who was telling of a fresh strike on a nameless creek to the westward.

Camillo Bill motioned the three to a small table, and when they were seated he ordered the drinks: "We got a job to do," he announced, plunging straight into his subject, "An' we got to do it thorough."

"Meanin' which?" asked Bettles.

"Meanin' to kidnap a man, an' hide him out fer a year, an' make him work like hell every minute he ain't sleepin' or eatin'."

"That sounds like a hell of a contrack," opined Swiftwater Bill. "Who's goin' to keep him workin', an' what at, an' what for?"

"For the good of his soul," grinned Camillo, "The spark of a man's there yet—an' a damn good man. But if we all don't git down an' blow like hell the spark's goin' out."

"Clear as mulligan," grinned Moosehide Charlie.

Camillo Bill looked into the faces of his companions: "Anyone saw Ace-In-The-Hole, lately?" he asked.

Bettles shook his head, and Swiftwater Bill spoke up: "I seen him about a month ago—bought him a drink. He's on the toboggan."

Moosehide Charlie broke in: "I ain't seen him since spring when he saved me from gettin' doped in Cuter Malone's. Cuter floored him with a bottle an' Kitty an' I got him home an' she looked after him till he got better. I give her a sack of dust to give him, but he wouldn't take it—throw'd it out in the snow, an' Kitty dug it out an' brung it back. If you all is figgerin' on gettin' up a stake fer him, let me in I'll go as high as the next."

Camillo Bill shook his head: "Nothin' doin' on the stake stuff. He wouldn't take it, an' if he did it would be the worst thing we could do to him. He'd blow it all in fer hooch. I went over to his cabin just now to turn back his claims. I've took out my million, an' only worked one of 'em. An' it ain't worked half out. They must be two or three million in 'em yet. Kitty told me the hooch had got him right—but she didn't tell it strong enough. He's in a hell of a shape, an' thinks he's as good a man as he ever was. He's dirty, an' ragged, an' bloated with hooch an' broke—an' yet, by God—he's a man! When I seen how things was, I decided not to say anything about the claims because if he got holt of 'em now, he'd blow 'em in as fast as he could get out the dust. But, after a while he asked me, an' I told him they'd petered out. He never batted an eye, but he says, 'Did

you get out your million? 'Cause,' he says, 'if you didn't just tell me how much you're shy, an' I'll make it good!' He thinks he's goin' somewhere over beyond the Mackenzie when the snow comes—but, hell—he ain't in no shape to go nowheres. What we got to do is jest na'chelly steal him, an' put him in a cabin somewheres way out in the hills, an' hire a couple of guards for him, an' keep him workin' for a whole damn year. It'll nearly kill him at first, but it'll put him back where he was, if it don't kill him—an' if it does, it's better to die workin' than to freeze to death drunk like McMann did."

"I got the place to put him," said Swiftwater, "The claim's no good, but it's way to hell an' gone from here, an' there's a cabin on it."

"Just the ticket," agreed Camillo.

"We better send out quite a bunch of hooch. So he can kind of taper off," suggested Moosehide Charlie.

"Taper—hell!" cried Bettles, "If you taper off, you taper on agin. I know. The way to quit is to quit."

"We'll figger that out," laughed Camillo, "The best way is to ask the doc. I'll tend to that, an' I'll get a guard hired, an' see about grub an' tools and stuff. We'll meet here a week from tonight an' pull the deal off, an' Swiftwater he can go along fer guide—only you don't want to let him see you. I'll get guards that he don't know, an' that don't know him. We'll have to pay 'em pretty good, but it's worth it."

Old Bettles nodded: "He was a damn good man, onct."

"An' he'll be agin'!" exclaimed Camillo, "If he lives through it. His heart's right."

And so they parted, little thinking that when they would gather for the carrying out of their scheme, Brent would have disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up.

CHAPTER IX

SNOWDRIFT RETURNS TO THE BAND

As Snowdrift plodded mile after mile, in her flight from the mission, her brain busied itself with her problem, and the first night beside her little campfire she laid her plans for the future. In her heart was no bitterness against old Wananebish—only compassion that resolved itself into an intense loyalty and a determination to stay with her and to lighten the burden that the years were heaping upon her. For she knew of the old woman's intense love for her, and the hardships she willingly endured to keep her in school at the mission. The blame was the white man's blame—the blame of the man who was her father.

Her face burned hot and her eyes flashed as her hatred of white men grew upon her. Gladly would she have opened her veins and let out the last drop of white blood that coursed the length of them. At least she could renounce the white man's ways—his teachings, and his very language. From now on she was Indian—and yet, again came that fleeting, elusive *memory*—always, ever since she had been a little girl there had been the *memory*, and when it came she would close her eyes, and press her hands to her head and try and try in vain to grasp it—to bring the picture clean-cut to her mind. Then the *memory* would fade away—but it would return again, in a month—a year—always it would return—a log cabin—wind-tossed waters—a beautiful white woman who held her close—a big man with a beard upon his face like McTavish, the factor. At first she had told Wananebish of the *memory*, but she had laughed and said that it was the wives of the different factors and traders at the posts who were wont to make much of the little girl when the band came to trade. The explanation never quite satisfied Snowdrift, but she accepted it for want of a better. Was it a flash of memory from another existence? There was the book she had borrowed from Father Ambrose, the peculiar book that she did not understand, and that Father Ambrose said he did not understand, and did not want to understand, for it was all about some heathenish doctrine. She wondered if it could not be possible that people lived over and over again, as the book said, and if so, why couldn't they remember? Maybe last time she had been a white girl, and this time she was a half-breed, and the next time she would be an Indian—she wouldn't wait till next time! She was an Indian now. She hated the white men.

And so it went as hour on hour she worked her plans for the future. She knew that Wananebish was getting old, that she was losing her grip on the band. Many of the older ones had died, and many of the younger ones had deserted, and those who were left were dissatisfied, and always grumbling. There were only eighteen or twenty of them all told, now, and they preferred to hang about along the rivers, trapping just enough fur to make a scanty living and pay for the hooch that the free-traders brought in. They were a degenerate lot and old Wananebish had grown weary in trying to get them back into the barrens where there was gold. They scoffed at the gold. There had been so little of it found in so many years of trying—yet she had not been able to get them to leave the vicinity of the river. But, now, to the river had come news of the great gold strike beyond the mountains to the westward. Snowdrift reasoned that if there were gold to the

westward there would be gold also to the eastward, especially as Wananebish knew that it was there—had even found some of it long years ago. Maybe they would go, now—far back into the barrens, far, far away from Henri of the White Water.

Upon the fourth day after her departure from the mission, the girl walked into the camp of the little band of non-treaty Indians. Straight to the tepee of Wananebish, she went—to the only mother she had ever known. The old squaw received her with open arms, and with much wondering, for upon her last visit to the mission the good Sister Mercedes had told her that Snowdrift would go and continue her studies at the great convent in the far away land of the white man. It was the thing she had most feared to hear, yet, by not so much as the flicker of an eyelash did she betray her soul-hurt. All the long years of deception, during which MacFarlane's note book had lain wrapped in its waterproof wrappings and jealously guarded in the bottom of the moss bag had gone for naught. For it was to guard against the girl's going to the land of the white man that the deception had been practiced. None but she knew that no drop of Indian blood coursed through the veins of the girl, and she knew that once firmly established among her own people she would never return to the North. At that time she had almost yielded to the impulse to tell the truth to them, and to spread the proofs before them—almost, but not quite, for as long as the girl believed herself to be half Indian there was a chance that she would return, and so the squaw had held her peace, and now here was the girl herself—here in the tepee, and she had brought her all her belongings. Wananebish plied her with questions, but the girl's answers were brief, and spoken in the Indian tongue, a thing that greatly surprised and troubled the old woman, for since babyhood, the girl had despised the speech of the Indians.

The two prepared supper in silence, and in silence they ate it. And for a long time they sat close together and silent beside the mosquito smudge of punk and green twigs. The eyes of the old squaw closed and she crooned softly from pure joy, for here beside her was the only being in the world that she loved. Her own baby, the tiny red mite she had deposited that day upon the blanket in the far away post at Lashing Water, had died during that first winter. The crooning ceased abruptly, and the black, beady eyes flashed open. But why was she here? And for how long? She must know. Why did not the girl speak? The silence became unbearable even to this woman who all her life had been a creature of silence. Abruptly she asked the question: "Are you not going to the land of the white men?"

And quick as a flash came the answer in the Indian tongue: "*I hate the white men!*" The suppressed passion behind the words brought a low inarticulate cry to the lips of the squaw. She reached for the sheath knife at her belt, and the sinews upon the back of the hand that grasped it stood out like whip cords. The black eyes glittered like the eyes of a snake, and the lips curled back in a snarl of hate, so that the yellow fangs gleamed in the wavering light of a tiny flame that flared from the smouldering fire.

Words came in a hoarse croak: "Who is he? I will cut his heart out!"

Then the hand of the girl was laid soothingly upon her arm, and again she spoke words in the Indian tongue: "No, no, not that."

The old squaw's muscles relaxed as she felt the arm of the girl steal about her shoulders. The knife slipped back into its sheath, as her body was drawn close against the girl's. For a long time they sat thus in silence, and then the girl rose, for she was very tired. At the door of the tepee she paused: "There are some good white men," she said, "Tell me again, was my father a good white man?"

Still seated beside the fire the old squaw nodded slowly, "A good white man—yes. He is dead."

The eyes of the girl sought with penetrating glance the face beside the fire. Was there veiled meaning in those last words? Snowdrift thought not, and entering the tepee she crept between her blankets.

When the sound of the girl's breathing told that she slept old Wananebish stole noiselessly into the tepee and, emerging a moment later with the old moss bag, she poked at the fire with a stick, and threw on some dry twigs, and seated herself in the light of the flickering flames. She thrust her hand into the bag and withdrew a packet from which she undid the wrappings. Minutes passed as she sat staring at the notebook of MacFarlane, and at the package of parchment deer-skin still secure in its original wrapping. For never had the squaw touched a dollar of the money left in her care for the maintainance and education of the girl. Poor as she was Wananebish had kept Snowdrift in school, had clothed and fed her solely by her own efforts, by the fruits of her hunting and trapping. All during the years she had starved, and saved, and driven shrewd bargains that the girl might receive education, even as she herself had received education.

And, now, tonight, she knew that the girl had been suddenly made to realize that she was one of those born out of wedlock, and the shame of it was heavy upon her. The old woman's heart beat warm as she realized that the girl held no blame for her—only an intense hatred for the white men, one of whose race had wrought the supposed wrong.

For a long time Wananebish sat beside the fire her heart torn by conflicting emotions. She knew right from wrong. She had not the excuse of ignorance of the ethics of conduct, for she, too, had been an apt pupil at the mission school. And for nearly nineteen years she had been living a lie. And during those years right had struggled against love a thousand times—and always love had won—the savage, selfish love that bade her keep the object of her affections with her in the Northland. Upon the death of her baby soon after the visit of MacFarlane, her whole life centered

upon the tiny white child. In the spring when the band moved, she had left false directions in the caribou skull beside the river, and instead of heading for Lashing Water to deliver the babe to old Molaire, she had headed northward, and upon the third day had come upon the remains of a sled, and a short distance farther on, a rifle, and a sheath knife—the same that now swung at her own belt, and which bore upon its inside surface, the legend "Murdo MacFarlane." A thousand times she had been upon the point of telling the girl of her parentage, and turning over to her the packet, but always the fear was upon her that she would forsake the North, and seek the land of her own people. Years before, when she had entered the girl at the mission, she had smothered the temptation to tell all, and to deliver the packet to the priest. But instead, she invented the story of her illegitimate birth and accepted the shame. She knew from the first that Sister Mercedes doubted the tale, that she believed the girl to be white, but she stoutly held to her story, nor deviated from it so much as a hair's breadth, during years of periodical questioning.

But now? What should she do now that the girl herself was suffering under the stigma of her birth? Should she tell her the truth and deliver to her the packet of her father? If she did would not the girl turn upon her with hatred, even as she had turned against the people of her own race? Should she remain silent, still living the lie she had lived all these years, and thus keep at her side the girl she loved with the savage mother love of a wild beast? Was it not the girl's right to know who she was, and if she so willed, to go among her own people, and to go among them with unsullied name? Clearly this was her right. Wananebish admitted the right, and the admission strengthened her purpose. Slowly she rose from the fire and with the packet and the notebook in her hand, stepped to the door of the tepee and stood listening to the breathing of the sleeping girl. She would slip the packet beneath the blankets, and then—and then—she, herself would go away—and stay until the girl had gone out of the North. Then she would come back to her people. Her eyes swept the group of tepees that showed dimly in the starlight—back to her people! A great wave of revulsion and self-pity swept over her as she saw herself, old and unheeded, working desperately for the betterment of the little band of degenerates, waging almost single handed the losing battle against the whiskey runners. Suddenly she straightened, and the hand clutched tightly the packet. If Snowdrift stayed, might not the band yet be saved? What is it the white men say when they seek excuse for their misdeeds? Ah, yes, it is that the end justifies the means. As she repeated the old sophistry a gleam of hope lighted her eyes and she returned again to the fire. At least, the girl would remain at her side, and would care for her in her old age—only a few more years, and then she would die, and after that— Carefully she rewrapped the packet and returned it to the moss bag. As always before the savage primal love triumphed over the ethics, and with a great weight lifted from her mind, the old squaw sought her blankets.

Heart and soul, during the remaining days of the summer, Snowdrift threw herself into the work of regenerating the little band of Indians. News of the great gold strike on the Yukon had reached the Mackenzie and these rumors the girl used to the utmost in her arguments in favor of a journey into the barrens. At first her efforts met with little encouragement, but her enthusiasm for the venture never lagged and gradually the opposition weakened before the persistence of her onslaughts.

When the brigade passed northward, Henri of the White Water had promised the Indians he would return with hooch, and it was in anticipation of this that the young men of the band were holding back. When, in August, word drifted up the river that a patrol of the mounted from Fort Simpson had come upon a certain *cache*, and that Henri of the White Water was even then southward bound under escort, the last of the opposition vanished. Without hooch one place was as good as another and if they should find gold—why they could return and buy much hooch, from some other whiskey runner. But, they asked, how about debt? Already they were in debt to the company, and until the debt was paid they could expect nothing, and a long trip into the barrens would call for much in the way of supplies.

McTavish, the bearded trader at Fort Good Hope, listened patiently until the girl finished her recital, and then his thick fingers toyed with the heavy inkstand upon his desk.

"I do' no' what to say, to ye, lass," he began, "The Company holds me to account for the debt I give, an' half the band is already in my debt. Ye're mither, auld Wananebish is gude for all she wants an' so are you, for ye're a gud lass. Some of the others are gud too, but theer be some amongst them that I wad na trust for the worth of a buckshot. They've laid around the river too lang. They're a worthless, hooch-guzzlin' outfit. They're na gude."

"But that's just why I want debt," cried the girl, "To get them away from the river. There's no hooch here now, and they will go. I, myself, will stand responsible for the debt."

The Scotchman regarded the eager face gravely: "Wheer wad ye tak them?" he asked.

"Way to the eastward, beyond Bear Lake, there is a river. The trapping is good there, and there is gold——"

"The Coppermine," interrupted McTavish, "Always theer has been talk of gold on the Coppermine—but na gold has been found theer. However, as ye say, the trappin' should be gude. Yer Injuns be na gude along the river. They're lazy an' no account, an' gettin' worse. Theer's a bare chance ye can save 'em yet if ye can get 'em far into the barrens. I'm goin' to give ye that chance. If ye'll guarantee the debt, I'll outfit 'em—no finery an' frippery, mind ye—just the necessities for the winter in the bush. Bring 'em along, lass, an' the sooner ye get started the better, for 'tis a lang trail ye've set yerself—an' may gude luck go with ye."

And so it was that upon the first day of September, the little band of Indians under the leadership of Snowdrift and Wananebish, loaded their goods into canoes and began the laborious ascent of Hare Indian River.

CHAPTER X

THE DINNER AT REEVES'

With the rush of the *chechakos* had come also the vanguard of big business—keen-eyed engineers and bespectacled metallurgists, accompanied by trusted agents of Wall Street, who upon advice of the engineers and the metallurgists paid out money right and left for options.

First over the pass in the spring came Reeves and Howson who struck into the hills and, passing up the rich "gold in the grass roots" claims, concentrated upon a creek of lesser promise. By the first of July, their findings upon this creek justified the report to their principals in the states that roused those officials of the newly organized Northern Dredge Company from their stupor of watchful waiting into a cauldron of volcanic activity.

Fowler, the little purchasing agent sat at his desk and for fourteen straight hours dictated telegrams, pausing only to refer to pages of neatly typed specifications, with the result that within twenty-four hours upon many railroads carloads of freight began to move toward a certain dock in Seattle at which was moored a tramp steamer waiting to receive her cargo. A sawmill from the Washington forests, steel rails and a dinky engine from Pittsburg, great dredges from Ohio, tools, iron, cement from widely separated States and the crowning item of all, a Mississippi River steamboat jerked bodily from the water and dismantled ready to be put together in a matter of hours at the mouth of the Yukon.

Late in August that same steamboat, her decks and two barges piled high with freight, nosed into the bank at Dawson and threw out her mooring lines, while down her plank swarmed the Northern Company's skilled artisans—swarmed also into the waiting arms of her husband, Reba Reeves, wife of the Northern Dredge Company's chief engineer and general manager of operation. Reeves led his wife to the little painted house that he had bought and furnished, and turned his attention to the problem of transporting his heavy outfit to the creek of his selection.

For a month thereafter he was on the works night and day, snatching his sleep where he could, now and then at home, but more often upon the pile of blankets and robes that he had thrown into a corner of the little slab office on the bank of the creek. Early in October, upon one of his flying visits, his wife reminded him that he had promised to send a man down to bank the house for the winter.

"Don't see how I can spare a man right now, little girl," he answered, "I'm hiring every man I can find that will handle a pick or a shovel, or drive a nail, or carry a board. I've still got three miles of flume to put in, and half a mile of railroad grade to finish—and the snow will hit us any time now."

"You can't work your old dredges in the winter, anyhow, why don't you wait till spring."

"When spring comes I want to be in shape to begin throwing out the gravel the minute the ground thaws, and I don't want to be bothered building flume and railroad."

"But, dearest, the floor is so cold. We can't live in this house in the winter unless it is banked. All the neighbors have their houses banked three or four feet high, and if the ground freezes we'll never get it done."

Reeves' brow puckered into a frown: "That's right," he admitted, "Tell you what I'll do, I'll come down Saturday afternoon and stay over Sunday and bank it myself. Maybe I can find someone to help me. There's an old tramp that lives in a cabin a piece back from the river. One of my foremen has hired him three or four times, but he's no good—won't work more than two or three days at a stretch—he's a drunkard, and can't stay away from booze. Maybe, though, if I stay right on the job with him till it's finished I can get a day's work out of him—anyway I'll try."

Of the books left by the Englishman, the one that interested Brent most was a volume from which the title page had long since disappeared as had the lettering upon its back, if indeed any had ever existed. It contained what appeared to be semi-official reports upon the mineral possibilities of the almost unexplored territory lying between the Mackenzie and Back's Fish River, but more particularly upon the Coppermine River and its tributaries. To these reports was added a monograph which treated exhaustively of the expeditions of Hearne into the North in search of gold, and also of the illfated expedition of old Captain Knight. This book held a peculiar fascination for Brent, and he read and reread it, poring over its contents by the hour as he dreamed his foolish dreams of some day carrying on Hearne's explorations to ultimate success.

Upon the night following the visit of Camillo Bill, Brent sat beside his dirty table, with his stinking oil lamp drawn near, and his favorite book held close to catch the sullen light that filtered through its murky, smoke blackened chimney. This night the book held a new interest for

him. All along he had cherished the hope that when Camillo Bill should turn back his claims, there would still be a goodly amount of gold left in the gravel. But Camillo Bill said that the claims had petered out—and Camillo Bill was square. All that was left for him to do then was to hit for the Coppermine, and not so much for himself, for he stood in honor bound to see that Camillo Bill lost nothing through cashing those slips and markers upon his assurance that the claims were worth a million.

The book settled slowly to Brent's lap, he poured a drink, and idly turned its pages, as his drunken imagination pictured himself mushing at the head of a dog team through those unknown wastes, and at the end of the long trail finding gold, gold, gold. He turned to the inside of the front cover and stared idly at the name penned many years ago. The ink was faded and brown and the name almost illegible so that he had to turn it aslant to follow the faint tracery. "Murdo MacFarlane, Lashing Water," he read, "I wonder where Lashing Water is? And who was this Murdo MacFarlane? And where is he now? Did he find Hearne's lost gold? Or, did he—did he—?" A loud knock upon the door roused Brent from his dreamy speculation.

"Come in!" he called, and turned to see Reeves standing in the doorway.

"Hello," greeted the intruder, plunging straight into the object of his visit, "I'm up against it, and I wonder if you won't help me out." He paused, and Brent waited for him to proceed, "I'm Reeves, of the Northern Dredge Company, and I've got every available man in Dawson out there on the works trying to finish three miles of flume and a half mile of railroad before snow flies. I can't spare a man off the works, but I've got to bank my house, so I decided to stay home myself tomorrow and tackle it. If you'll help me, and if we get a good early start, I think we can finish the job by night. I wouldn't care a rap if it were not for my wife, she's from the South, and I'm afraid of those cold floors. What do you say, will you do it? I'll pay you well."

"Yes," answered Brent, and he noticed that the other's eyes had strayed in evident surprise to the pile of books upon the table among the dirty dishes.

"All right, that's fine! What time can I expect you?"

"Daylight," answered Brent, "Will you have a drink?" he indicated the bottle that stood beside the pile of books, but Reeves shook his head:

"No, thanks, I've got to tackle some work tonight that I've been putting off for weeks. See you in the morning."

Seated once more in his chair with his book, Brent poured himself a drink, "From the South," he whispered, and raising the murky glass to his lips swallowed the liquor. His eyes closed and into his brain floated a picture, dim and indistinct, at first, but gradually taking definite form—a little town of wide, tree-shaded streets, a weather-stained brick courthouse standing in the centre of a grassed square, and facing it across the street a red brick schoolhouse. The schoolhouse doors swung open and out raced a little boy swinging his books on the end of a strap. He was a laughing, cleareyed little boy, and he wore buckled slippers and black velvet nickers, and a wide collar showed dazzling white against the black of the velvet jacket.

Other children followed, barefooted little boys whose hickory shirts, many sizes too large for the little bodies, bulged grotesquely about their "galluses," and little boys shod in stiff hot looking black shoes and stockings, and little girls with tight-braided pig-tails hanging down their backs, and short starched skirts, who watched with envious eyes as the velvet clad boy ran across to the "hitch-rail" that flanked the courthouse sidewalk, and mounted a stocky little "calico" Shetland pony, and rode down the tree-shaded street at a furious gallop. On the outskirts of the town the pony swerved of its own accord between two upstanding stone posts and into a broad avenue that swept in graceful curves between two rows of huge evergreens that led from the white turnpike to a big brick house, the roof of whose broad gallery was supported upon huge white pillars. Up the avenue raced the pony and up the dozen steps that led to the gallery, just at the moment that the huge bulk of a round-eyed colored "mammy" blocked the doorway of the hall.

"Hyah, yo' rascal, yo'!" cried the outraged negress flourishing her broom, "Git yo' circus hoss offen my clean gallery flo', fo' I bus' him wide open wif dis, broom! Lawd sakes, efen Miss Callie see yo' hyah, she gwine raise yo' ha'r fo' sho'! Yo' Ca'teh Brent, yo' *git*!" The broom swished viciously—and Brent opened his eyes with a jerk. The first fitful gusts of a norther were whipping about the eaves of his cabin, and shivering slightly, he crawled into his bunk.

All the forenoon the two men worked side by side with pick and shovel and wheelbarrow, piling the earth high above the baseboards of Reeves' white painted house. Brent spoke little and he worked as, it seemed to him, he had never worked before. The muscles of his back and arms and fingers ached, and in his vitals was the gnawing desire for drink. But he had brought no liquor with him, and he fought down the desire and worked doggedly, filling the wheelbarrows as fast as Reeves could dump them. At noon Reeves surveyed the work with satisfaction: "We've got it!" he exclaimed, "We're a little more than half through, and none too soon." The wind had blown steadily from the north, carrying with it frequent flurries of snow. "We'll knock off now. Just step into the house."

Brent shook his head, "No, I'll slip over to the cabin. I'll be back by the time you're through dinner."

Reeves, who had divined the man's need, stepped closer, "Come in, won't you. I've got a little

liquor that I brought from the outside. I think you'll like it."

Without a word Brent followed him into the kitchen where Reeves set out the bottle and a tumbler: "Just help yourself," he said, "I never use it," and passed into the next room. Eagerly Brent poured himself half a tumblerful and gulped it down, and as he returned the glass to the table, he heard the voice of Reeves: "You don't mind if he eats with us do you? He's worked mighty hard, and—" the sentence was interrupted by a woman's voice:

"Why, certainly he will eat with us. See, the table's all set. I saw you coming so I brought the soup in. Hurry before it gets cold." At the man's words Brent's eyes had flashed a swift glance over his disreputable garments. His lips had tightened at the corners, and as he had waited for the expected protest, they had twisted into a cynical smile. But at the woman's reply, the smile died from his lips, and he took a furtive step toward the door, hesitated, and unconsciously his shoulders stiffened, and a spark flickered for a moment in his muddy eyes. Why not? It had been many a long day since he had sat at a table with a woman—that kind of a woman. Like a flash came Reeves' words of the night before. "She's from the South." If the man should really ask him to sit at his table, why not accept—and carry it through in his own way? The good liquor was taking hold. Brent swiftly dashed some more into the glass and downed it at a swallow. Then Reeves stepped into the room.

"You are to dine here," he announced, "we both of us need a good hot meal, and a good smoke, and my wife has your place all laid at the table."

"I thank you," answered Brent, "May I wash?" Reeves, who had expected an awkward protest started at the words, and indicated the basin at the sink. As Brent subjected his hands and face to a thorough scrubbing, and carefully removed the earth from beneath his finger nails, Reeves eyed him quizzically. Brent preceded his host into the dining room where Mrs. Reeves waited, standing beside her chair.

Reeves stepped forward: "My wife, Mr.——," his voice trailed purposely, but instead of mumbling a name, and acknowledging the introduction with an embarrassed bob of the head, Brent smiled:

"Let us leave it that way, please. Mrs. Reeves, allow me," and stepping swiftly to her chair he seated her with a courtly bow. He looked up to see Reeves staring in open-mouthed amazement. Again, he smiled, and stepped to his own place, not unmindful of the swift glance of surprise that passed between husband and wife. After that surprises came fast. Surprise at the ease and grace of manner with which he comported himself, gave place to surprise and admiration at his deft maneuvering of the conversation to things of the "outside"—to the literary and theatrical successes of a few years back, and to the dozen and one things that make dinner small talk. The Reeves' found themselves consumed with curiosity as to this man with the drunkard's eye, the unkempt beard, and the ragged clothing of a tramp, whose jests and quips kept them in constant laughter. All through the meal Mrs. Reeves studied him. There was something fine in the shape of the brow, in the thin, well formed nose, in the occasional flash of the muddy eyes that held her.

"You are from the South, aren't you?" she asked, during a pause in the conversation.

Brent smiled. "Yes, far from the South—very far."

"I am from the South, too, and I love it," continued the woman, her eyes upon the man's face. "From Plantersville, Tennessee—I've lived there all my life." At the words Brent started perceptibly, and the hand that held his coffee cup trembled violently so that part of the contents splashed onto his napkin. When he returned the cup to its saucer it rattled noisily.

The woman half rose from her chair: "*Carter Brent*!" she cried. And Reeves, staring at his wife in astonishment, saw that tears glistened in her eyes.

The next moment Brent had pulled himself together: "You win," he smiled, regarding her curiously, "But, you will pardon me I'm sure. I've been away a long time, and I'm afraid——"

"Oh, you wouldn't recognize me. I was only sixteen or seventeen when you left Plantersville. You had been away at college, and you came home for a month. I'm Reba Moorhouse——"

"Indeed I do remember you," laughed Brent, "Why you did me the honor to dance with me at Colonel Pinkney's ball. But, tell me, how are your mother and father and Fred and Emily? I suppose Doctor Moorhouse still shoots his squirrels square in the eye, eh!"

"Mother died two years ago, and dad has almost given up his practice," she smiled, "So he'll have more time to shoot squirrels. Fred is in college, and Emily married Charlie Harrow, and they bought the old Melcher place out on the pike."

Brent hesitated a moment: "And—and—my father—have you seen him lately?"

"Yes, indeed! General Brent and Dad are still the greatest of cronies. He hasn't changed a bit since I can first remember him. Old Uncle Jake still drives him to the bank at nine o'clock each morning, he still eats his dinners at the Planter's Hotel, and then makes his rounds of the lumber yard, and the coal yard, and the tobacco warehouse, or else Uncle Jake drives him out to inspect some of his farms, and back home at four o'clock. No, to all appearances, the General hasn't changed—but, dad says there is a change in the last two or three years. He—he—would give everything he owns just to hear from—you."

Brent was silent for a moment: "But, he must not hear—yet. I'll make another strike, one of these days—and then——-"

"Did you make a strike?" asked Reeves.

Brent nodded. "Yes, I was on the very peak of the first stampede. Did you, by chance, ever hear of Ace-In-The-Hole?"

Reeves smiled: "Yes—notorious gambler, wasn't he? Were you here when he was? Made a big strike, somewhere, and then gambled away ten or twenty million, didn't he, and then—I never did hear what became of him."

Brent smiled: "Yes, he made a strike. Then, I suppose, he was just what you said—a notorious gambler—his losses were grossly exaggerated, they were not over two millions at the outside."

"A mere trifle," laughed Reeves, "What ever became of him."

"Just at this moment he is seated at a dining table, talking with a generous host, and a most charming hostess——"

"Are *you* Ace-In-The-Hole?"

"So designated upon the Yukon," smiled Brent.

Mrs. Reeves leaned suddenly forward: "Oh, why don't you—why don't you brace up? Let liquor alone, and——"

Brent interrupted her with a wave of the hand: "Theoretically a very good suggestion," he smiled, "But, practically—it won't work. Personally, I do not think I drink enough to hurt me any—but we will waive that point—if I do, it is my own fault." He was about to add that he was as good a man as he ever was, but something saved him that sophistry, and when he looked into the face of his hostess his muddy eyes twinkled humorously. "At least," he said, "I have succeeded in eliminating one fault—I have not gambled in quite some time."

"And you never will gamble again?"

Brent laughed: "I didn't say that. However I see very little chance of doing so in the immediate future."

"Promise me that you never will?" she asked, "You might, at least, promise me that, if you won't give up the other."

"What assurance would you have that I would keep my promise?" parried the man.

Quick as a flash came the reply, "The word of a Brent!"

Unconsciously the man's shoulders straightened: He hesitated a moment while he regarded the woman gravely: "Yes," he said, "I will promise you that, if it will please you, 'Upon the word of a Brent.'" He turned abruptly to Reeves, "We had better be getting at that job again, or we won't finish it before dark," he said, and with a bow to Mrs. Reeves, "You will excuse us, I know." The woman nodded and as her husband was about to follow Brent from the room she detained him.

"Who is he?" asked Reeves, as the door closed behind him.

"Who is he!" exclaimed his wife, "Why he's Carter Brent! The very last of the Brents! Anyone in the South can tell you what that means. They're the bluest of the blue bloods. His father, the old General, owns the bank, and about everything else that's worth owning in Plantersville, and half the county besides! And oh, it's a shame! A shame! We've got to do something! You've got to do something! He's a mining engineer, too. I recognized him before he told me, and when I mentioned Plantersville, did you see his hand tremble? I was sure then. Oh, can't you give him a position?"

Reeves considered: "Why, yes, I could use a good mining engineer. But—he's too far gone. He couldn't stay away from the booze. I don't think there's any use trying."

"There is, I tell you! The blood is there—and when the blood is there it is *never* too late! Didn't you notice the air with which he gave me his promise not to gamble 'Upon the word of a Brent.' He would die before he would break that promise—you see."

"But—he wouldn't promise to let liquor alone. The gambling—in his circumstances is more or less a joke."

"But, when he gets on his feet again it won't be a joke!" she insisted. "You mark my words, he is going to make good. I can *feel* it. And that is why I got him to promise not to gamble. If you can make him promise to let liquor alone you can depend on it he will let it alone. You'll try—won't you dear?"

"Yes, little girl, I'll try," smiled Reeves, kissing his young wife, "But I'll tell you beforehand, you are a good deal more sanguine of success than I am." And he passed out and joined Brent who was busily loading a wheelbarrow.

CHAPTER XI

JOE PETE

Several times during the afternoon as they worked side by side, Reeves endeavored to engage Brent in conversation, but the latter's replies were short to the verge of curtness, and Reeves gave it up and devoted his energy to the task in hand. The fitful snow flurries of the forenoon settled into a steady fall of wind-driven flakes that cut the air in long horizontal slants and lay an ever-thickening white blanket upon the frozen surface of the ground. Darkness fell early, and the job was finished by lantern light. When the last barrow of earth had been placed, the two made a tour of inspection which ended at the kitchen door.

"Snug and tight for the winter!" exclaimed Reeves, "And just in time!"

"Yes," answered Brent, "Winter is here."

The door opened and the face of Mrs. Reeves was framed for a moment in the yellow lamp light: "Supper is ready!" she called, cheerily.

"Come in," invited Reeves, heartily, "We'll put that supper where it will do the most good, and then we'll——"

Brent interrupted him: "Thank you, I'll go home."

"Oh, come, now!" insisted the other. "Mrs. Reeves is expecting you. She will be really disappointed if you run off that way."

"Disappointed—*hell*!" cried Brent, so fiercely that Reeves stared at him in surprise. "Do you think for a minute that it was easy for me to sit at a table—the table of a southern lady—in these rags? Would you care to try it—to try and play the rôle of a gentleman behind a six weeks' growth of beard, and with your hair uncut for six months? It would have been an ordeal at any table, but to find out suddenly—at a moment when you were straining every nerve in your body to carry it through, that your hostess was one you had known—in other days—and who had known you—I tell you man it was hell! What I've got to have is not food, but whiskey—enough whiskey to make me drunk—very drunk. And the hell I've gone through is not a circumstance to the hell I've got to face when that same whiskey begins to die out—lying there in the bunk staring wide-eyed into the thick dark—seeing things that aren't there—hearing voices that were, and are forever stilled, and voices that never were—the voices of the damned—taunting, reviling, mocking your very soul, asking you what you have done with your millions? And where do you go from here? And your hands shaking so that you can't draw the cork from the bottle to drown the damned voices and still them till you have to wake up again, hoping when you do it will be daylight—it's easier in daylight. I tell you man that's *hell*! It isn't the hell that comes after he dies a man fears—it's the hell that comes in the dark. A hell born of whiskey, and only whiskey will quench the fires of it—and more whiskey—and more——"

Reeves grasped his hand in a mighty grip: "I think I understand, old man—a little," he said. "I'll make excuse to Mrs. Reeves."

"Tell her the truth if you want to," growled Brent, turning away, "We'll never meet again."

"You've forgotten something," called Reeves as he extended a hand which held a crisp bill.

Brent examined it. It was a twenty. "What is this—wages or charity?" he asked.

"Wages—and you've earned every cent of it."

"Shoveling dirt, or play acting?" There was a sneer in the man's voice, which Reeves was quick to resent.

"Shoveling dirt," he replied, shortly.

"Men shovel dirt in this camp now for eight or ten."

"I think I am quite capable of judging what a man's services are worth to me," answered Reeves, "Good bye." He turned to the door, and Brent crumpled the bill into his pocket and disappeared in the whirling snow.

Arriving at his cabin he carefully deposited two quarts of liquor upon the table, lighted his smoky lamp, and built a roaring fire in the stove. Seating himself in a chair, he carefully removed the cork from the bottle and took a long, long drink. He realized suddenly that the unwonted physical exercise had made him very tired and hungry. The greater part of a link of bologna sausage lay upon the table, a remnant of a previous meal. He took the sausage in his hand and devoured it, pausing now and then to drink from the bottle. When the last fragment had been consumed he settled himself in his chair and, with the bottle at his elbow, stared for a long time at the log wall. "Winter is here," he muttered, at length, "And I've got to hit the trail." He took a drink, and carefully replaced the bottle upon the table, and again for a long time he stared at the logs. A knock on the door startled him.

"Come in," he called. He felt better now. The liquor was taking hold.

Reeves stamped the snow noisily from his feet and closed the door behind him. Brent rose and

motioned for the man to draw the other chair closer to the stove. He turned up the murky lamp a trifle, then turned it down again because it smoked.

Reeves seated himself, and fumbling in his pocket, produced two cigars, one of which he tendered to Brent. "I came, partly on my own account, and partly at the earnest solicitation of my wife." He smiled, "I hardly know how to begin."

"If it's a sermon, begin about three words from the end; but if it is a drinking bout, begin at the beginning, but you will have to pardon me for beginning in the middle, for I have already consumed half a quart." He indicated the bottle and Reeves noted that his lips were smiling, and that there was a sparkle in the muddy eyes.

"Not guilty on either count," he laughed, "I neither preach nor drink. What brings me here is a mere matter of business."

"Business? Sure you haven't got your dates mixed. I have temporarily withdrawn from the business world."

Reeves was relieved to see that the fierce mood of a few hours before had given place to good humour. "No, it is regarding the termination of this temporary withdrawal that I want to see you. I understand you're a mining engineer."

"Colorado School of Mines—five good jobs within two years in Montana—later, placer miner, 'notorious gambler,' and—" he included himself and the interior of the cabin in an expressive gesture.

"Do you want another good job?"

"What kind of a job?"

"An engineering job. How would you like to be my assistant in the operation of this dredging proposition?"

Brent shook his head: "It wouldn't work."

"Why not?"

Brent smiled: "Too close to Dawson. I like the hooch too well. And, aside from that, you don't need me. You will be laying off men now. Not hiring them."

"Laying off laborers, yes. But there is plenty of work along that creek this winter for the right man—for me, and for you, if you will assume it."

Again Brent shook his head: "There is another reason," he objected, "I have got to make another strike—and a good one. I have an obligation to meet—an obligation that in all probability will involve more money than any salary I could earn."

"Small chance of a rich strike, now. The whole country is staked."

"Around here, yes. But not where I'm going."

"Where is that?"

"Over beyond the Mackenzie. In the Coppermine River country."

"Beyond the Mackenzie!" cried Reeves, "Man are you crazy!"

"No, not crazy, only, at the moment, comfortably drunk. But that has nothing whatever to do with my journey to the Coppermine. I will be cold sober when I hit the trail."

"And when will that be? How do you expect to finance the trip?"

"Ah, there's the rub," grinned Brent, "I have not the least idea in the world of how I am going to finance it. When that detail is arranged, I shall hit the trail within twenty-four hours."

Reeves was thinking rapidly. He did not believe that there was any gold beyond the Mackenzie. To the best of his knowledge there was nothing beyond the Mackenzie. Nothing—no towns—no booze! If Brent would be willing to go into a country for six months or a year in which booze was not obtainable—"There's no booze over there," he said aloud, "How much would you have to take with you?"

"Not a damned drop!"

"What!"

Brent rose suddenly to his feet and stood before Reeves. "I have been fooling myself," he said, in a low tense voice, "Do you know what my shibboleth has been? What I have been telling myself and telling others—and expecting them to believe? I began to say it, and honestly enough, when I first started to get soft, and I kept it up stubbornly when the softness turned to flabbiness, and I maintained it doggedly when the flabbiness gave way to pouchiness: 'I am as good a man as I ever was!' That's the damned lie I've been telling myself! I nearly told it at your table, and before your wife, but thank God I was spared that humiliation. Just between friends, I'll tell the truth—I'm a damned worthless, hooch-guzzling good-for-naught! And the hell of it is, I haven't got the guts to quit!" He seized the bottle from the table and drank three or four swallows in rapid

succession, "See that—what did I tell you?" He glared at Reeves as if challenging a denial. "But, I've got one chance."

He straightened up and pointed toward the eastward. "Over beyond the Mackenzie there is no hooch. If I can get away from it for six months I can beat it. If I can get my nerve back—get my *health* back, By God, I *will* beat it! If there's enough of a Brent left in me, for that girl, your wife, to recognize through this disguise of rags and hair and dirt, there's enough of a Brent, sir, to put up one hell of a fight against booze!"

Reeves found himself upon his feet slapping the other on the back. "You've said it man! You've said it! I will arrange for the financing."

"You! How?"

"On your own terms."

Brent was silent for a moment: "Take your pick," he said, "Grub-stake me, or loan me two thousand dollars. If I live I'll pay you back—with interest. If I don't—you lose."

Reeves regarded him steadily: "I lose, only in case you die—you promise me that—on the word of a Brent? And I don't mean the two thousand—you understand what I mean, I think."

Brent nodded, slowly: "I understand. And I promise—on the word of a Brent. But," he hastened to add, "I am not promising that I will not drink any more hooch—now or any other time—I have here a quart and a half of liquor. In all probability between now and tomorrow morning I shall get very drunk."

"You said you would leave within twenty-four hours," reminded Reeves.

"And so I will."

"How do you want the money?"

"How do I want it? I'll tell you. I want it in dust, and I want it inside of an hour. Can you get it?"

"Yes," answered Reeves, and drawing on cap and mittens, pushed out into the storm.

Hardly had the door closed behind him, than it opened again and Brent also disappeared in the storm.

In a little shack upon the river bank, an Indian grunted sleepily in answer to an insistent banging upon his door: "Hey, Joe Pete, come out here! I want you!"

A candle flared dully, and presently the door opened, and a huge Indian stood in the doorway rubbing his eyes with his fist.

"Come with me," ordered Brent, "To the cabin."

Silently the Indian slipped into his outer clothing and followed, and without a word of explanation, Brent led the way to his cabin. For a half hour they sat in silence, during which Brent several times drank from his bottle. Presently Reeves entered and laid a pouch upon the table. He looked questioningly at the Indian who returned the scrutiny with a look of stolid indifference.

"Joe Pete, this is Mr. Reeves. Reeves, that Injun is Joe Pete, the best damned Injun in Alaska, or anywhere else. Used to pack over the Chilkoot, until he made so much money he thought he'd try his hand at the gold—now he's broke. Joe Pete is going with me. He and I understand each other perfectly." He picked up the sack and handed it to the Indian: "Two thousand dolla—*pil chikimin*. Go to police, find out trail to Mackenzie—Fort Norman. How many miles? How many days? Buy grub for two. Buy good dogs and sled. Buy two outfits clothes—plenty tabac. Keep rest of *pil chikimin* safe until two days on trail, then give it to me. We hit the trail at eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

Without a word the Indian took the sack and slipped silently out the door, while Reeves stared in astonishment:

"You've got a lot of confidence in that Indian!" he exclaimed. "I wouldn't trust one of them out of my sight with a dollar bill!"

"You don't know Joe Pete," grinned Brent. "I've got more confidence in him than I have in myself. The hooch joints will be two days behind me before I get my hands on that dust."

"And now, what?" asked Reeves.

"Be here at eight o'clock tomorrow morning and witness the start," grinned Brent, "In the meantime, I am going to make the most of the fleeting hours." He reached for the bottle, and Reeves held up a warning hand:

"You won't be in any shape to hit the trail in the morning, if you go too heavy on that."

Brent laughed: "Again, I may say, you don't know Joe Pete."

At seven o'clock in the morning Reeves hurried to Brent's cabin. The snow about the door lay a foot deep, trackless and unbroken. Reeves' heart gave a bound of apprehension. There was no

dog team nor sled in evidence, nor was there any sign that the Indian had returned. A dull light glowed through the heavily frosted pane and without waiting to knock Reeves pushed open the door and entered.

Brent greeted him with drunken enthusiasm: "H'l'o, Reeves, ol' top! Glad to she you. S'down an' have a good ol' drink! Wait'll I shave. Hell of a job to shave." He stood before the mirror weaving back and forth, with a razor in one hand and a shaving brush in the other, and a glass half full of whiskey upon the washstand before him, into which he gravely from time to time dipped the shaving brush, and rubbing it vigorously upon the soap, endeavored to lather the inch-long growth of beard that covered his face. Despite his apprehension as to what had become of the paragon, Joe Pete, Reeves was forced to laugh. He laughed and laughed, until Brent turned around and regarded him gravely: "Wash matter? Wash joke? Wait a minuit lesh have a li'l drink." He reached for the bottle, that sat nearly empty upon the table, and guzzled a swallow of the liquor. "Damn near all gone. Have to get nosher one when Joe Pete comes."

"When Joe Pete comes!" cried Reeves, "You'll never see Joe Pete again! He's skipped out!"

"Skipped out? Washa mean skipped out?"

"I mean that it's a quarter past seven and he hasn't showed up and you told him you would start at eight."

Brent laid his razor upon the table: "Quar' pasht seven? Quar pasht seven isn't eight 'clock. You don' know Joe Pete."

"But, man, you're not ready. There's nothing packed. And you're as drunk as a lord!"

"Sure, I'm drunk's a lord—drunker'n two lords—lords ain't so damn' drunk. If I don't get packed by eight 'clock I'll have to go wishout packin'. You don' know Joe Pete."

At a quarter of eight there was a commotion before the door, and the huge Indian entered the room, dressed for the trail. He stood still, gave one comprehensive look around the room, and silently fell to work. He examined rapidly everything in the cabin, throwing several articles into a pile. Brent's tooth brush, comb, shaving outfit, and mirror he made into a pack which he carried to the sled, returning a moment later with a brand new outfit of clothing. He placed it upon the chair and motioned Brent to get into it. But Brent stood and stared at it owlishly. Whereupon, without a word, the Indian seized him and with one or two jerks stripped him to the skin and proceeded to dress him as one would dress a baby. Brent protested weakly, but all to no purpose. Reeves helped and soon Brent was clothed for the winter trail even to moose hide parka. He grinned foolishly, and drank the remaining liquor from the bottle. "Whad' I tell you?" he asked solemnly of Reeves. "You don't know Joe Pete."

The Indian consulted a huge silver watch, and returning it to his pocket, sat upon the edge of the bunk, and stared at the wall. Brent puttered futilely about the room, and addressed the Indian. "We got to get a bottle of hooch. I got to have jus' one more drink. Jus' one more drink, an' then to hell wish it."

The Indian paid not the slightest heed, but continued to stare at the wall. A few minutes later he again consulted his watch, and rising, grasped Brent about the middle and carried him, struggling and protesting out the door and lashed him securely to the sled.

Reeves watched the proceeding in amazement, and almost before he realized what was happening, the Indian had taken his place beside the dogs. He cracked his whip, shouted an unintelligible command, and the team started. Upon the top of the load, Brent wagged a feeble farewell to Reeves: "Sho long, ol' man—she you later—I got to go now. You don' know Joe Pete."

The outfit headed down the trail to the river. Reeves, standing beside the door of the deserted cabin, glanced at his watch. It was eight o'clock. He turned, closed the door and started for home chuckling. The chuckle became a laugh, and he smote his thigh and roared, until some laborers going to work stopped to look at him. Then he composed himself and went home to tell his wife.

CHAPTER XII

ON THE TRAIL

At noon Joe Pete swung the outfit into the lee of a thicket, built a fire, and brewed tea. Brent woke up and the Indian loosened the *babiche* line that had secured him, coiled the rope carefully, and without a word, went on with his preparation of the meal. Brent staggered and stumbled about in the snow in an effort to restore circulation to his numbed arms and legs. His head ached fiercely, and when he could in a measure control his movements, he staggered to the fire. Joe Pete tendered him a cup of steaming tea. Brent smelled of the liquid with disgust: "To hell with tea!" he growled thickly, "I want hooch. I've got to have it—just one drink."

Joe Pete drank a swallow of tea, and munched unconcernedly at a piece of pilot bread.

"Give me a drink of hooch! Didn't you hear me? I need it," demanded Brent.

"Hooch no good. Tea good. Ain' got no hooch—not wan drink."

"No hooch!" cried Brent, "I tell you I've got to have it! I thought I could get away with it, this trailing without hooch—but, I can't. How far have we come?"

"Bout 'leven mile."

"Well, just as soon as you finish eating you turn that dog team around. We're going back." Brent was consumed by a torturing thirst. He drank the tea in great gulps and extended his cup for more. He drank a second and a third cup, and the Indian offered him some bread. Brent shook his head:

"I can't eat. I'm sick. Hurry up and finish, and hit the back-trail as fast as those dogs can travel."

Joe Pete finished his meal, washed the cups, and returned the cooking outfit to its appointed place on the load.

"You goin' ride?" he asked.

"No, I'll walk. Got to walk a while or I'll freeze."

The Indian produced from the pack a pair of snowshoes and helped Brent to fasten them on. Then he swung the dogs onto the trail and continued on his course.

"Here you!" cried Brent, "Pull those dogs around! We're going back to Dawson."

Joe Pete halted the dogs and walked back to where Brent stood beside the doused fire: "Mebbe-so we goin' back Dawson," he said, "But, firs' we goin' Fo't Norman. You tak hol' tail-rope, an' mush."

A great surge of anger swept Brent. His eyes, red-rimmed and swollen from liquor, and watery from the glare of the new fallen snow, fairly blazed. He took a step forward and raised his arm as though to strike the Indian: "What do you mean? Damn you! Who is running this outfit? I've changed my mind. I'm not going to Fort Norman."

Joe Pete did not even step back from the up-lifted arm. "You ain' change *my* min' none. You droonk. I ain' hear you talk. Bye-m-bye, you git sober, Joe Pete hear you talk. You grab tail-rope now or I tie you oop agin."

Suddenly Brent realized that he was absolutely in this man's power. For the first time in his life he felt utterly helpless. The rage gave place to a nameless fear: "How far is it to Fort Norman?" he asked, in an unsteady voice.

"'Bout fi' hondre mile."

"Five hundred miles! I can't stand the trip, I tell you. I'm in no condition to stand it. I'll die!"

The Indian shrugged—a shrug that conveyed to Brent more plainly than words that Joe Pete conceded the point, and that if it so happened, his demise would be merely an incident upon the trail to Fort Norman. Brent realized the futility of argument. As well argue with one of the eternal peaks that flung skyward in the distance. For he, at least, knew Joe Pete. In the enthusiasm of his great plan for self redemption he had provided against this very contingency. He had deliberately chosen as his companion and guide the one man in all the North who, come what may, would deviate no hair's breadth from his first instructions. And now, he stood there in the snow and cursed himself for a fool. The Indian pointed to the tail-rope, and muttering curses, Brent reached down and picked it up, and the outfit started.

So far they had fairly good going. The course lay up Indian River, beyond the head reaches of which they would cross the Bonnet Plume pass, and upon the east slope of the divide, pick up one of the branches of the Gravel and follow that river to the Mackenzie. Joe Pete traveled ahead, breaking trail for the dogs, and before they had gone a mile Brent was puffing and blowing in his effort to keep up. His grip tightened on the tail-rope. The dogs were fairly pulling him along. At each step it was becoming more and more difficult to lift his feet. He stumbled and fell, dragged for a moment, and let go. He lay with his face in the snow. He did not try to rise. The snow felt good to his throbbing temples. He hoped the Indian would not miss him for a long, long time. Better lie here and freeze than endure the hell of that long snow trail. Then Joe Pete was lifting him from the snow and carrying him to the sled. He struggled feebly, and futilely he cursed, but the effort redoubled the ache in his head, and a terrible nausea seized him, from which he emerged weak and unprotesting while the Indian bound him upon the load.

At dark they camped. Brent sitting humped up beside the fire while Joe Pete set up the little tent and cooked supper. Brent drank scalding tea in gulps. Again he begged in vain for hooch—and was offered pilot bread and moose meat. He tried a piece of meat but his tortured stomach rejected it, whereupon Joe Pete brewed stronger tea, black, and bitter as gall, and with that Brent drenched his stomach and assuaged after a fashion his gnawing thirst. Wrapped in blankets he crept beneath his rabbit robe—but not to sleep. The Indian had built up the fire and thrown the tent open to its heat. For an hour Brent tossed about, bathed in cold sweat. Things crawled upon the walls of the tent, mingling with the shadows of the dancing firelight. He closed his eyes, and buried his head in his blankets, but the things were there too—twisting, writhing

things, fantastic and horrible in color, and form, and unutterably loathsome in substance. And beyond the walls of the tent—out in the night—were the voices—the voices that taunted and tormented. He threw back his robe, and crawled to the fireside, where he sat wrapped in blankets. He threw on more wood from the pile the Indian had placed ready to hand, so that the circle of the firelight broadened, and showers of red sparks shot upward to mingle with the yellow stars.

But, it was of no use. The crawling, loathsome shapes writhed and twisted from the very flames—laughed and danced in the lap and the lick of the red flames of fire. Brent cowered against his treetrunk and stared, his red-rimmed eyes stretched wide with horror, while his blood seemed to freeze, and his heart turned to water within him. From the fire, from beyond the fire, and from the blackness of the forest behind him crept a *thing*—shapeless, and formless, it was, of a substance vicious and slimy. It was of no color, but an unwholesome luminosity radiated from its changing outlines—an all encompassing ever approaching thing of horror, it drew gradually nearer and nearer, engulfing him—smothering him. He could reach out now and touch it with his hands. His fingers sank deep in its slime and—with a wild shriek, Brent leaped from his blankets, and ran barefooted into the forest. Joe Pete found him a few minutes later, lying in the snow with a rapidly swelling blue lump on his forehead where he had crashed against a tree in his headlong flight. He picked him up and carried him to the tent where he wrapped him in his blankets and thrust him under the robe with a compress of snow on his head.

In the morning, Brent, babbling for whiskey, drank tea. And at the noon camp he drank much strong tea and ate a little pilot bread and a small piece of moose meat. He walked about five miles in the afternoon before he was again tied on the sled, and that night he helped Joe Pete set up the tent. For supper he drank a quart of strong bitter tea, and ate more bread and meat, and that night, after tossing restlessly till midnight, he fell asleep. The shapes came, and the voices, but they seemed less loathsome than the night before. They took definite concrete shapes, shapes of things Brent knew, but of impossible color. Cerese lizards and little pink snakes skipped lightly across the walls of the tent, and bunches of luminous angleworms writhed harmlessly in the dark corners. The skipping and writhing annoyed, disgusted, but inspired no terror, so Brent slept.

The third day he ate some breakfast, and did two stretches on snowshoes during the day that totaled sixteen or eighteen miles, and that night he devoured a hearty meal and slept the sleep of the weary.

The fourth day he did not resort to the sled at all. Nor all during the day did he once ask for a drink of hooch. Day after day they mushed eastward, and higher and higher they climbed toward the main divide of the mountains. As they progressed the way became rougher and steeper, the two alternated between breaking trail and work at the gee-pole. With the passing of the days the craving for liquor grew less and less insistent. Only in the early morning was the gnawing desire strong upon him, and to assuage this desire he drank great quantities of strong tea. The outward manifestation of this desire was an intense irritability, that caused him to burst into unreasoning rage at a frozen guy rope or a misplaced mitten, and noting this, Joe Pete was careful to see that breakfast was ready before he awakened Brent.

On the tenth day they topped the Bonnet Plume pass and began the long descent of the eastern slope. That night a furious blizzard roared down upon them from out of the North, and for two days they lay snowbound, venturing from the tent only upon short excursions for firewood. Upon the first of these days Brent shaved, a process that, by reason of a heavy beard of two months' growth, and a none too sharp razor, consumed nearly two hours. When the ordeal was over he regarded himself for a long time in the little mirror, scowling at the red, beefy cheeks, and at the little broken veins that showed blue-red at the end of his nose. He noted with approval that his eyes had cleared of the bilious yellow look, and that the network of tiny red veins were no longer visible upon the eyeballs. With approval, too, he prodded and pinched the hardening muscles in his legs and arms.

When the storm passed they pushed on, making heavy going in the loose snow. The rejuvenation of Brent was rapid now. Each evening found him less tired and in better heart, and each morning found him ready and eager for the trail.

"To hell with the hooch," he said, one evening, as he and the Indian sat upon their robes in the door of the tent and watched the red flames lick at the firewood, "I wouldn't take a drink now if I had a barrel of it!"

"Mebbe-so not now, but in de morning you tak' de beeg drink—you bet," opined the Indian solemnly.

"The hell I would!" flared Brent, and then he laughed. "There is no way of proving it, but if there were, I'd like to bet you this sack of dust against your other shirt that I wouldn't." He waited for a reply, but Joe Pete merely shrugged, and smoked on in silence.

Down on the Gravel River, with the Mackenzie only three or four days away, the outfit rounded a bend one evening and came suddenly upon a camp. Brent, who was in the lead, paused abruptly and stared at the fire that flickered cheerfully among the tree trunks a short distance back from the river. "We'll swing in just below them," he called back to Joe Pete, "It's time to camp anyway."

As they headed in toward the bank they were greeted by a rabble of barking, snarling dogs, which dispersed howling and yelping as a man stepped into their midst laying right and left about him with a long-lashed whip. The man was Johnnie Claw, and Brent noted that in the gathering

darkness he had not recognized him.

"Goin' to camp?" asked Claw.

Brent answered in the affirmative, and headed his dogs up the bank toward a level spot some twenty or thirty yards below the fire.

Claw followed and stood beside the sled as they unharnessed the dogs: "Where you headin'?" he asked.

"Mackenzie River."

"Well, you ain't got fer to go. Trappin'?"

Brent shook his head: "No. Prospecting."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Dawson."

"Dawson!" exclaimed Claw, and Brent, who had purposely kept his face turned away, was conscious that the man was regarding him closely. Claw began to speak rapidly, "This Dawson, it's way over t'other side the mountains, ain't it? I heard how they'd made a strike over there—a big strike."

Brent nodded: "Yes," he answered. "Ever been there?"

"Me? No. Me an' the woman lives over on the Nahanni. I trap."

Brent laughed: "What's the matter, Claw? I'm not connected with the police. You don't need to lie to me. What have you got, a load of hooch for the Injuns?"

The man stepped close and stared for a moment into Brent's face. Then, suddenly, he stepped back: "Well, damn my soul, if it ain't you!"

He was staring at Brent in undisguised astonishment: "But, what in hell's happened to you? A month ago you was——"

"A bum," interrupted Brent, "Going to hell by the hooch route—and not much farther to go. But I'm not now, and inside of six months I will be as good a man as I ever was."

"You used to claim you always was as good a man as you ever was," grinned Claw. "Well, you was hittin' it a little too hard. I'm glad you quit. You an' me never hit it off like, what you might say, brothers. You was always handin' me a jolt, one way an' another. But, I never laid it up agin you. I allus said you played yer cards on top of the table—an' if you ever done anything to a man you done it to his face—an' that's more'n a hell of a lot of 'em does. There's the old woman hollerin' fer supper. I'll come over after you've et, an' we'll smoke a pipe 'er two." Claw disappeared and Brent and Joe Pete ate their supper in silence. Now and again during the meal Brent smiled to himself as he caught the eyes of the Indian regarding him sombrely.

After supper Claw returned and seated himself by the fire: "What you doin' over on this side," he asked, "You hain't honest to God prospectin' be you?"

"Sure I am. Everything is staked over there, and I've got to make another strike."

"They ain't no gold on this side," opined Claw.

"Who says so?"

"Me. An' I'd ort to know if anyone does. I've be'n around here goin' on twenty year, an' I spend as much time on this side as I do on t'other." Brent remembered he had heard of Claw's long journeys to the eastward—men said he went clear to the coast of the Arctic where he carried on nefarious barter with the whalers, trading Indian and Eskimo women for hooch, which he in turn traded to the Indians.

"Maybe you haven't spent much time hunting for gold," hazarded Brent.

"I'd tell a party I hain't! What's the use of huntin' fer gold where they hain't none? Over on this side a man c'n do better at somethin' else." He paused and leered knowingly at Brent.

"For instance?"

Claw laughed: "I hain't afraid to tell you what I do over here. They hain't but damn few I would tell, but I know you won't squeal. You hain't a-goin' to run to the Mounted an' spill all you know—some would—but not you. I'm peddling hooch—that's what I'm doin'. Got two sled-loads along that I brung through from Dawson. I thin it out with water an' it'll last till I git to the coast—clean over on Coronation Gulf, an' then I lay in a fresh batch from the whalers an' hit back fer Dawson. It used to be I could hit straight north from here an' connect up with the whalers near the mouth of the Mackenzie—but the Mounted got onto me, an' I had to quit. Well, it's about time to roll in." The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a bottle of liquor, "Glad you quit hooch," he grinned, "But, I don't s'pose you'd mind takin' a little drink with a friend—way out here it can't hurt you none, where you can't git no more." He removed the cork and tendered the bottle. But Brent shook his head: "No thanks, Claw," he said, "I'm off of it. And besides, I haven't got but a few real friends—and you are not one of them."

"Oh, all right, all right," laughed Claw as he tilted the bottle and allowed part of the contents to gurgle audibly down his throat, "Of course I know you don't like me none whatever, but I like you all right. No harm in offerin' a man a drink, is they?"

"None whatever," answered Brent, "And no harm in refusing one when you don't want it."

Claw laughed again: "Not none whatever—when you don't want it." And turning on his heel, he returned to his own tent, chuckling, for he had noted the flash that momentarily lighted Brent's eyes at the sight of the liquor and the sound of it gurgling down his throat.

Early in the morning Brent awoke to see Claw standing beside his fire while Joe Pete prepared breakfast. He joined the two and Claw thrust out his hand: "Well, yer breakfast's ready an' you'll be pullin' out soon. We've pulled a'ready—the old woman's mushin' ahead. So long—shake, to show they's no hard feelin's—or, better yet, have a drink." He drew the bottle from his pocket and thrust it toward Brent so abruptly that some of the liquor spilled upon Brent's bare hand. The odor of it reached his nostrils, and for a second Brent closed his eyes.

"Tea ready," said Joe Pete, gruffly.

"Damn it! Don't I know it?" snapped Brent, then his hand reached out for the bottle. "Guess one won't hurt any," he said, and raising the bottle to his lips, drank deeply.

"Sure it won't," agreed Claw, "I know'd you wasn't afraid of it. Take it, or let it alone, whichever you want to—show'd that las' night."

Instantly the liquor enveloped Brent in its warm glow. The grip of it felt good in his belly, and a feeling of vast well-being pervaded his brain. Claw turned to go.

"What do you get for a quart of that liquor over here," asked Brent.

"Two ounces," answered Claw, "An' they ain't nothin' in it at that, after packin' it over them mountains. I git two ounces fer it after it's be'n weakened—but I'll let you have it, fer two the way it is."

"I'll take a quart," said Brent, and a moment later he paid Claw two ounces "guess weight" out of the buckskin pouch, in return for a bottle that Claw produced from another pocket. And as Brent turned into the tent, Claw slipped back into the timber and joined his squaw who was breaking trail at a right angle to the river over a low divide. And as he mushed on in the trail of his sleds, Claw turned and leered evilly upon the little camp beside the frozen river.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CAMP ON THE COPPERMINE

It was mid-afternoon when Brent drank the last of the liquor and threw the bottle into the snow. He was very drunk, and with the utmost gravity, halted the outfit and commanded the Indian to turn the dogs and strike out on the trail of Claw. But Joe Pete merely shrugged, and started the dogs, whereupon Brent faced about and started over the back-trail. When he had proceeded a hundred yards the Indian halted the dogs, and strode swiftly after Brent, who was making poor going of it on his snowshoes. As Joe Pete understood his orders, the journey to the Mackenzie called for no side trips after hooch, and he made this fact known to Brent in no uncertain terms. Whereupon Brent cursed him roundly, and showed fight. It was but the work of a few moments for the big Indian to throw him down, tie him hand and foot and carry him, struggling and cursing, back to the sled, where he rode for the remainder of the day in a most uncomfortable position from which he hurled threats and malediction upon the broad back of the Indian.

The following morning Brent awoke long before daylight. His head ached fiercely and in his mouth was the bitter aftermath of dead liquor. In vain he sought sleep, but sleep would not come. Remorse and shame gripped him as it had never gripped him before. He writhed at the thought that only a day or two ago he had laughed at hooch, and had openly boasted that he was through with it and that he would not take a drink if he possessed a barrel of it. And, at the very first opportunity, he had taken a drink, and after that first drink, he had paid gold that was not his to use for such purpose for more hooch, and had deliberately drank himself drunk. The reviling and malediction which he had hurled at Joe Pete from the sled were words of gentle endearment in comparison with the terrible self-castigation that he indulged in as he tossed restlessly between his blankets and longed for the light of day. To be rid of the torture he finally arose, replenished the fire, and brewed many cups of strong tea. And when Joe Pete stepped from the tent in the grey of the morning it was to find breakfast ready, and Brent busy harnessing the dogs. In silence the meal was eaten, and in silence the two hit the trail. That day was a hard one owing to rough ice encountered upon the lower Gravel River, and the two alternated frequently between breaking trail and working at the gee-pole. The long snow trail had worked wonders for Brent physically, and by evening he had entirely thrown off the effects of the liquor. He ate a hearty supper, and over the pipes beside the fire the two men talked of gold. As they turned in, Brent

slapped Joe Pete on the back: "Just forget what I said yesterday—I was a damned fool."

The Indian shrugged: "The hooch, she all tam' mak' de damn fool. She no good. I ain' care w'at de hooch talk 'bout. Som' tam' you queet de hooch. Dat good t'ing. W'en you sober, you good man. You say, Joe Pete, you do lak dis. I do it. W'en de hooch say, Joe Pete you do lak som' nodder way. I say go to hell."

At Fort Norman, Brent bought an additional dog team and outfitted for the trip to the Coppermine. Upon learning from Murchison, the factor, that the lower Coppermine, from Kendall River northward to the coast, had been thoroughly explored and prospected without finding gold, he decided to abandon the usual route by way of Dease Bay, Dease River, the Dismal Lakes, and the Kendall River, and swing southward to the eastern extremity of Conjuror Bay of Great Bear Lake, and then head straight across the barrens, to strike the upper reaches of the Coppermine in the region of Point Lake.

Murchison expressed doubt that there was gold upon any part of the Coppermine, "If there is," he added, "No one's ever got any of it. An' I'm doubtin' if there's any gold east of the Mackenzie. I've been on the river a good many years, an' I never saw any, except a few nuggets that an old squaw named Wananebish found years ago."

"On the Coppermine?" asked Brent.

Murchison laughed: "I don't know—an' she don't either. She found 'em, an' then her husband was drowned in a rapids and she pulled out of there and she claims she ain't never be'n able to locate the place since, an' she's spent years huntin' for it an' draggin' a little band of worthless Injuns after her. They're over there now, somewhere. I heard they hit up Hare Indian River, along about the first of September. McTavish at Good Hope, give 'em debt to be rid of 'em. But I don't think they'll find any gold. The formation don't seem to be right on this side of the river."

"Gold has been taken from the bottom of the sea, and from the tops of mountains," reminded Brent, "You know the old saying, 'Gold is where you find it.'"

"Aye," answered Murchison, with a smile, "But, east of the Mackenzie, gold is where you don't find it."

The four hundred mile journey from Fort Norman to the Coppermine was accomplished in sixteen days. A permanent camp-site was selected upon the west bank of the river, and the two worked with a will in constructing a tiny log cabin, well within the shelter of a thick clump of spruce. Brent's eyes had lost the last trace of muddiness, the bloated unhealthy skin had cleared, and his flabby muscles had grown iron-hard so that he plunged into the work of felling and trimming trees, and heaving at logs with a zest and enthusiasm that had not been his for many a long day. He had not even thought of a drink in a week. When the cabin was finished and the last of the chinking rammed into place, he laughingly faced Joe Pete upon the trampled snow of the dooryard. "Come on now, you old leather image!" he cried, "Come and take your medicine! I owe you a good fall or two for the way you used me on the trail. You're heap *skookum*, all right, but I can put you on your back! Remember you didn't handle the butt ends of *all* those logs!"

And thus challenged the big Indian, who was good for his two hundred pound pack on a portage, sailed in with a grin, and for ten minutes the only sounds in the spruce thicket were the sounds of scrapping *mukluks* on the hard-trampled snow, and the labored breathing of the straining men. Laughter rang loud as Brent twice threw the Indian, rolled him onto his back, and rubbed snow into his face, and then, still laughing, the two entered their cabin and devoured a huge meal of broiled caribou steaks, and pilot bread.

Supper over, Joe Pete lighted his pipe and regarded Brent gravely: "On de trail," he said, "I handle you lak wan leetle baby. Now, you *skookum tillicum*. You de firs mans kin put Joe Pete on de back. De hooch, she no good for hell!"

"You bet, she's no good!" agreed Brent, "Believe me, I'm through with it. It's been a good while since I've even thought of a drink."

Joe Pete seemed unimpressed: "You ain't t'ink 'bout a drink cos you ain't got non. Dat better you keep 'way from it, or you t'ink 'bout it dam' queek." And Brent, remembering that morning on the trail when he had said good bye to Claw, answered nothing.

For the next few days, while Joe Pete worked at the building of a cache, Brent hunted caribou. Upon one of these excursions, while following up the river, some three of four miles south of the cabin, he came suddenly upon a snowshoe trail. It was a fresh trail, and he had followed it scarcely a mile when he found other trails that crossed and recrossed the river, and upon rounding a sharp bend, he came abruptly upon an encampment. Three tiny log cabins, and a half-dozen tepees were visible in a grove of scraggling spruce that gave some shelter from the sweep of the wind. Beyond the encampment, the river widened abruptly into a lake. An Indian paused in the act of hacking firewood from a dead spruce, and regarded him stolidly. Brent ascended the bank and greeted him in English. Receiving no response, he tried the jargon:

"*Klahowya, six?*"

The Indian glanced sidewise, toward one of the cabins, and muttered something in guttural. Then, the door of the cabin opened and a girl stepped out onto the snow and closed the door behind her. Brent stared, speechless, as his swift glance took in the details of her moccasins,

deer-skin leggings, short skirt, white *capote* and stocking cap. She held a high-power rifle in her mittened hand. Then their eyes met, and the man felt his heart give a bound beneath his tight-buttoned mackinaw. Instantly, he realized that he was staring rudely, and as the blood mounted to his cheeks, he snatched the cap from his head and stepped forward with hasty apology: "I beg your pardon," he stammered, "You see, I had no idea you were here—I mean, I had not expected to meet a lady in the middle of this God-forsaken wilderness. And especially as I only expected to find Indians—and I hadn't even expected them, until I struck the trail on the river." The man paused, and for the first time noted the angry flash of the dark eyes—noted, too, that the red lips curled scornfully.

"*I* am an Indian," announced the girl, haughtily, "And, now you have found us—go!"

"An Indian!" cried Brent, "Surely, you are——"

"Go!" Repeated the girl, "Before I kill you!"

"Oh, come, now," smiled Brent, "You wouldn't do that. We are neighbors, why not be friends?"

"Go!" repeated the girl, "and don't come back! The next time I shall not warn you." The command was accompanied by a sharp click, as she threw a cartridge into the chamber of her rifle, and another swift glance into her eyes showed Brent that she was in deadly earnest. He returned the cap to his head and bowed:

"Very well," he said gravely. "I don't know who you think I am, or why you should want to kill me, but I do know that some day we shall become better acquainted. Good bye—till we meet again."

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE BARRENS

Late that evening Brent and Joe Pete were surprised by a knock upon the door of their cabin. Brent answered the summons and three Indians filed solemnly into the room. Two of them stood blinking foolishly while the third drew from a light pack a fox skin which he extended for Brent's inspection. Brent handed the skin to Joe Pete: "What's all this?" he asked, "What do they want?"

"Hooch," answered the Indian who had handed over the skin.

Brent shook his head: "No hooch here," he answered, "You've come to the wrong place. You are the fellow I saw today in the camp up the river. Tell me, who is the young lady that claims she's an Injun? And why is she on the war-path?" The three stared stolidly at each other and at Brent, but gave no hint of understanding a word he had uttered. He turned to Joe Pete. "You try it," he said, "See if you can make 'em talk." The Indian tried them in two or three coast dialects, but to no purpose, and at the end of his attempt, the visitors produced two more fox skins and added them to the first.

"They think we're holding out for a higher price," laughed Brent.

"No wonder these damned hooch-peddlers can afford to take a chance. What are those skins worth?"

Joe Pete examined the pelts critically: "Dis wan she dark cross fox, wort' mebbe-so, t'irty dolla. Dis wan, an' dis wan, cross fox, wort' 'bout twenty dolla."

"Seventy dollars for a bottle of hooch!" cried Brent, "It's robbery!"

He handed back the skins, and at the end of five minutes, during which time he indicated as plainly as possible by means of signs, that there was no hooch forthcoming, the Indians took their departure. The next evening they were back again, and this time they offered six skins, one of them a silver fox that Joe Pete said would bring eighty dollars at any trading post. After much patient pantomime Brent finally succeeded in convincing them that there was really no hooch to be had, and with openly expressed disgust, the three finally took their departure.

Shortly after noon a week later, Brent drew the last bucket of gravel from the shallow shaft, threw it onto the dump, and leaving Joe Pete to look after the fire, took his rifle and struck off up the river in search of caribou. "Go down the river," whispered the still small voice of Common Sense, "There are no hunters there." But Brent only smiled, and held his course. And as he swung over the snow trail his thoughts were of the girl who had stepped from the cabin and angrily ordered him from the village at the point of her rifle. Each day during the intervening week he had thought of her, and he had lain awake at night and tried in vain to conjure a reason for her strange behaviour. Alone on the trail he voiced his thoughts: "Why should she threaten to shoot me? Who does she think I am? Why should she declare she is an Injun? I don't believe she's any more Injun than I am. Who ever heard of an Injun with eyes like hers, and lips, yes, and a tip-tilted nose? Possibly, a breed—but, never an Injun. And, I wonder if her warlike attitude includes the whole white race, or a limited part of it, or only me? I'll find out before this winter is over—

but, I'll bet she can shoot! She threw that shell into her rifle in a sort of off-hand *practiced* way, like most girls would powder their nose."

His speculation was cut short by a trail that crossed the river at a right angle and headed into the scrub in a south-easterly direction. The trail was only a few hours old and had been made by a small band of caribou traveling at a leisurely pace. Abruptly, Brent left the River and struck into the trail. For an hour he followed it through the scraggly timber and across patches of open tundra and narrow beaver meadows. The animals had been feeding as they traveled and it was evident that they could not be far ahead. Cautiously topping a low ridge, he sighted them upon a small open tundra, about two hundred yards away. There were seven all told, two bulls, three cows, and two yearlings. One of the bulls and two cows were pawing the snow from the moss, and the others were lying down. Taking careful aim, Brent shot the standing bull. The animals that had been lying down scrambled to their feet, and three more shots in rapid succession accounted for a cow and one of the yearlings, and Brent watched the remaining four plunge off through the snow in the direction of the opposite side of the tundra which was a mile or more in width. When they had almost reached the scrub he was startled to see the flying bull suddenly rear high and topple into the snow, the next instant one of the others dropped, and a moment later a third. Then to his ears came the sound of four shots fired in rapid succession. As Brent stepped out onto the tundra and, sheath knife in hand, walked to his fallen caribou, he saw a figure from the opposite scrub. An exclamation of surprise escaped him. It was the girl of the Indian Village.

"Wonder if she needs any help?" he muttered as he slit the throat of his third caribou. He glanced across the short open space to see the girl bending over the carcass of the other bull. "Guess I'll take a chance," he grinned, "And go and see. I knew she could shoot—three out of four, running shots—that's going some!" When he was half way across the open he saw the girl rise and wipe the blade of her knife upon the hair of the dead bull's neck. She turned and knife in hand, waited for him to approach. Brent noted that her rifle lay within easy reach of her hand, propped against the dead animal's belly. He noted also, that as he drew near, she made no move to recover it.

Jerking at the strings of his cap, he removed it from his head: "That was mighty good shooting," he smiled, "Those brutes were sure traveling!"

"But, they were very close. I couldn't have missed. It took two shots for the last one, but both bullets counted. You did good shooting, too. Your shots were harder—they were farther away. Did all your bullets count?"

Brent laughed aloud from pure joy. He hardly heard her words. The only thing he could clearly comprehend was the fact that there was no hint of anger in the dark eyes, and that the red lips were smiling. "I'm sure I don't know," he managed to reply, "I didn't stop to look. I think very likely I missed one shot."

"Why do you take your cap off?" she asked, and almost instantly she smiled again: "Oh, yes, I know—I have read of it—but, they don't do it here. Put it on please. It is cold."

Brent returned the cap to his head. "I'm glad I didn't know the other day, how expert you are with your rifle," he laughed, "Or I wouldn't have stayed as long as I did."

The girl regarded him gravely: "You are not angry with me?" she asked.

"Why, no, of course not! Why should I be angry with you? I knew that there was no reason why you should shoot me. And I knew that things would straighten out, somehow. I thought you had mistaken me for someone else, and——"

"I thought you were a hooch-runner," interrupted the girl. "I did not think any white man who is not a hooch-runner, or a policeman, would be way over here, and I could see that you were not in the Mounted."

"No," answered Brent, "I am not in the Mounted, but, how do you know that I am not a hooch-runner?"

"Because, three of our band went to your cabin that very night to buy hooch, and they did not get it. And the next night they went again and took more fox skins, and again they came away empty handed."

"You sent them then?"

"No, no! But, I knew that they would think the same as I did, that you wanted to trade them hooch, so I followed them when they slipped out of the village. Both nights I followed, and I pressed my ear close to the door, so that I heard all you said."

Brent smiled: "I have some recollection of asking one of those wooden images something about a certain warlike young lady——"

The girl interrupted him with a laugh: "Yes, I heard that, and I heard you swear at the hooch traders, and tell the Indians there was no hooch in the cabin, and I was glad."

The man's eyes sought hers in a swift glance: "Why—why were you glad?" he asked.

"Because I—because you—because I didn't want to kill you. And I would have killed you if you

had sold them hooch."

"You wouldn't—really——"

"Yes, I would!" cried the girl, and Brent saw that the dark eyes flashed, "I would kill a hooch-runner as I would a wolf. They are wolves. They're worse than wolves! Wolves kill for meat, but they kill for money. They take the fur that would put bread in the mouths of the women and the little babies, and they make the men drunken and no good. There used to be thirty of us in the band, and now there are only sixteen. Two of the men deserted their families since we came here, because they would not stay where there was no hooch." The girl ceased speaking and glanced quickly upward: "Snow!" she cried, "It is starting to snow, and darkness will soon be here. I must draw these caribou, before they freeze." She drew the knife from her belt and stepped to the carcass of the bull. But Brent took it from her hand.

"Let me do it," he said, eagerly, "You stand there and tell me how, and we'll have it done in no time."

"Tell you how!" exclaimed the girl, "What do you mean?" Brent laughed: "I'm afraid I'm still an awful *chechako* about some things. I can shoot them, all right, but there has always been someone to do the drawing, and skinning, and cutting up. But, I'll learn quickly. Where do I begin?"

Under the minute directions of the girl Brent soon had the big bull drawn. The two smaller animals were easier and when the job was finished he glanced apprehensively at the thickening storm. "We had better go now," he said. "Do you know how far it is to your camp?"

"Nine or ten miles, I think," answered the girl, "We have only been here since fall and this is the first time I have hunted in this direction. But, first we must draw your caribou. If they freeze they cannot be drawn and then they will not be fit for food."

"But, the snow," objected Brent. "It is coming down faster all the time."

"The snow won't bother us. There is no wind. Hurry, we must finish the others before dark."

"But, the wind might spring up at any moment, and if it does we will have a regular blizzard."

"Then we can camp," answered the girl, and before the astounded man could reply, she had led off at a brisk pace in the direction of the other caribou.

The early darkness was already beginning to make itself felt and Brent drove to his task with a will, and to such good purpose that the girl nodded hearty approval. "You did learn quickly," she smiled, "I could not have done it any better nor quicker, myself."

"Thank you," he laughed, "And that is a real compliment, for by the way you can handle a rifle, and cover ground on snowshoes, I know you are *skookum tillicum*."

"Yes," admitted the girl, "I'm *skookum tillicum*. But, I ought to be. I was born in the North and I have lived in the woods and in the barrens, and upon rivers, all my life."

Brent was about to reply when each glanced for a moment into the other's face, and then both stared into the North. From out of the darkness came a sullen roar, low, and muffled, and mighty, like the roar of surf on the shore of a distant sea.

"It is the wind!" cried the girl, "Quick, take a shoulder of meat! We must find shelter and camp."

"I can't cut a leg bone with this knife!"

"There are no bones! It is like this." She snatched the knife from Brent's hand and with a few deft slashes severed a shoulder from the yearling caribou. "Come, quick," she urged, and led the way toward a dark blotch that showed in the scraggling timber a few hundred yards away: "When the storm strikes, we shall not be able to see," she flung over her shoulder, "We must make that thicket of spruce—or we're bushed."

Louder and louder sounded the roar of the approaching wind. Brent encumbered with his rifle and the shoulder of meat, found it hard to keep up with the girl whose snowshoes fairly flew over the snow. They gained the thicket a few moments before the storm struck. The girl paused before a thick spruce, that had been broken off and lay with its trunk caught across the upstanding butt, some four feet from the ground. Jerking the ax from its sheath she set to work lopping branches from the dead tree.

"Break some live branches for the roof of our shelter!" she commanded. "This stuff will do for firewood, and in a minute you can take the ax and I will build the wikiup." The words were snatched from her lips by the roar of the storm. Full upon them, now, it bent and swayed the thick spruces as if to snap them at the roots. Brent gasped for breath in the first rush of it and the next moment was coughing the flinty dry snow-powder from his lungs. No longer were there snow-flakes in the air—the air itself was snow—snow that seared and stung as it bit into lips and nostrils, that sifted into the collars of *capote* and mackinaw, and seized neck and throat in a deadly chill. Back and forth Brent stumbled bearing limbs which he tore from the trunks of trees, and as he laid them at her feet the girl deftly arranged them. The ax made the work easier, and at the end of a half-hour the girl shouted in his ear that there were enough branches. Removing their rackets, they stood them upright in the snow, and stooping, the girl motioned him to follow

as she crawled through a low opening in what appeared to be a mountain of spruce boughs. To his surprise, Brent found that inside the wikiup he could breathe freely. The fine powdered snow, collecting upon the close-lying needles had effectively sealed the roof and walls.

For another half hour, the two worked in the intense blackness of the interior with hands and feet pushing the snow out through the opening, and when the task was finished they spread a thick floor of the small branches that the girl had piled along one side. Only at the opening there were no branches, and there upon the ground the girl proceeded to build a tiny fire. "We must be careful," she cautioned, "and only build a small fire, or our house will burn down." As she talked she opened a light packsack that Brent had noticed upon her shoulders, and drew from its interior a rabbit robe which she spread upon the boughs. Then from the pack she produced a small stew pan and a little package of tea. She filled the pan with snow, and smiled up into Brent's face: "And, now, at last, we are snug and comfortable for the night. We can live here for days if necessary. The caribou are not far away, and we have plenty of tea."

"You are a wonder," breathed Brent, meeting squarely the laughing gaze of the dark eyes, "Do you know that if it had not been for you, I would have been—would never have weathered this storm?"

"You were not born in the bush," she reminded, as she added more snow to the pan. "I do not even know your name," she said, gravely, "And yet I feel—" she paused, and Brent, his voice raised hardly above a whisper, asked eagerly:

"Yes, you feel—how do you feel?"

"I feel as though—as though I had known you always—as though you were my friend."

"Yes," he answered, and it was with an effort he kept the emotion from his voice, "We have known each other always, and I am your friend. My name is Carter Brent. And now, tell me something about yourself. Who are you? And why did you tell me you were an Indian?"

"I am an Indian," she replied, quickly, "That is, I am a half-breed. My father was a white man."

"And what is your name?"

"Snowdrift."

"Snowdrift!" he cried, "what an odd name! Is it your last name or your first?"

"Why, it is the only name I have, and I never had any other."

"But your father—what was your father's name?"

There was a long moment of silence while the girl threw more snow into the pan, and added wood to the fire. Then her words came slowly, and Brent detected a peculiar note in her voice. He wondered whether it was bitterness, or pain: "My father is dead," she answered, "I do not know his name. Why is Snowdrift an odd name?"

"I think it a beautiful name!" cried Brent.

"Do you—really?" The dark eyes were regarding him with a look in which happiness seemed to be blended with fear lest he were mocking her.

"Indeed I do! I love it. And now tell me more—of your life—of your education."

"I went to school at the mission on the Mackenzie. I went there for a good many years, and I worked hard, for I like to study. And books! I love to read books. I read all they had, and some of them many times. Do you love books?"

"Why yes," answered Brent, "I used to. I haven't read many since I came North."

"Why did you come North?"

"I came for gold."

"For gold!" cried the girl, her eyes shining, "That is why we are here! Wananebish says there is gold here in the barrens. Once many years ago she found it—but we have tried to find the place again, and we cannot."

"Who is Wananebish?"

"Wananebish is my mother. She is an Indian, and she has tried to keep the band together through many years, and to keep them away from the hooch, but, they will not listen to her. It was hard work to persuade them to come away from the river. And, have you found gold?"

"Yes," answered Brent, "Way over beyond the mountains that lie to the westward of the Mackenzie, I found much gold. But I lost it."

"Lost it! Oh, that was too bad. Did it fall off your sled?"

"Well, not exactly," answered the man dryly. "In my case, it was more of a toboggan."

"Couldn't you find it again?"

"No. Other men have it, now."

"And they won't give it back!"

"No, it is theirs. That part of it is all right—only I would give anything in the world to have it—now."

"Why do you want it now? Can you not find more gold? I guess I do not understand."

Brent shook his head: "No, you do not understand. But, sometime you will understand. Sometime I think I shall have many things to tell you—and then I want you to understand."

The girl glanced at him wonderingly, as she threw a handful of tea into the pan. "You must sharpen some green sticks and cut pieces of meat," she said, "And we will eat our supper."

A silence fell upon them during the meal, a silence broken only by the roar of the wind that came to them as from afar, muffled as it was by its own freighting of snow. Hardly for a moment did Brent take his eyes from the girl. There was a great unwonted throbbing in his breast, that seemed to cry out to him to take the girl in his arms and hold her tight against his pounding heart, and the next moment the joy of her was gone, and in its place was a dull heavy pain.

"Now, I know why I like you," said the girl, abruptly, as she finished her piece of venison.

"Yes?" smiled Brent, "And are you going to tell me?"

"It is because you are good." She continued, without noting the quick catch in the man's breath. "Men who hunt for gold are good. My father was good, and he died hunting for gold. Wananebish told me. It was years and years ago when I was a very little baby. I know from reading in books that many white men are good. But in the North they are bad. Unless they are of the police, or are priests, or factors. I had sworn to hate all white men who came into the North—but I forgot the men who hunt gold."

"I am glad you remembered them," answered Brent gravely. "I hope you are right."

"I am sleepy," announced the girl. "We cannot both sleep in this robe, for we have only one, and to keep warm it is necessary to roll up in it. One of us can sleep half the night while the other tends the fire, and then the other will sleep."

"You go to sleep," said Brent. "I will keep the fire going. I am not a bit sleepy. And besides, I have a whole world of thinking to do."

"I will wake up at midnight, and then you can sleep," she said, and, taking off her moccasins, and leggings, and long woolen stockings she arranged them upon sticks to dry and rolled up in the thick robe.

"Good night," called Brent, as she settled down.

"Good night, and may God keep you. You forgot that part," she corrected, gravely, "We used to say that at the Mission."

"Yes," answered Brent, "May God keep you. I did forget that part."

Suddenly the girl raised her head: "Do you believe we have known each other always?" she asked.

"Yes, girl," he answered, "I believe we have known each other since the beginning of time itself."

"Why did you come way over here to find gold? I have heard that there is much gold beyond the mountains to the westward."

It was upon Brent's tongue to say: "I came to find you," but, he restrained the impulse. "All the gold claims that are any good are taken up over there," he explained, "And I read in a book that a man gave me that there was gold here."

"What kind of a book was that? I never read a book about gold."

"It was an old book. One that the man had picked up over in the Hudson Bay country. Its title was torn off, but upon one of its pages was written a man's name, probably the name of the former owner of the book. I have often wondered who he was. The name was Murdo MacFarlane."

"Murdo MacFarlane!" cried the girl, sitting bolt upright, and staring at Brent.

"Yes," answered the man, "Do you know him?"

The girl reached out and tossed her belt to Brent. "It is the name upon the sheath of the knife," she answered, "It is Wananebish's knife. I broke the point of mine."

Brent took the sheath and held it close to the light of the little fire. "Murdo MacFarlane," he deciphered, "Yes, the name is the same." And long after the girl's regular breathing told him she was sleeping, he repeated the name again: "Murdo MacFarlane. I don't know who you were or who you are, if you still live, but whoever you were, or whoever you are—here's good luck to you—Murdo MacFarlane!"

CHAPTER XV

MOONLIGHT

The wind had died down, although the snow continued to fall thickly the following morning, as Brent and Snowdrift crept from the wikiup and struck out for the river. It was heavy going, even the broad webbed snowshoes sinking deeply into the fluffy white smother that covered the wind-packed fall of the night. Brent offered to break trail, but Snowdrift insisted upon taking her turn, and as he labored in her wake, the man marveled at the strength and the untiring endurance of the slender, lithe-bodied girl. He marveled also at the unfailing sureness of her sense of direction. Twice, when he was leading she corrected him and when after nearly four hours of continuous plodding, they stood upon the bank of the river, he realized that without her correction, his course would have carried him miles to the southward.

"Good bye," he smiled, extending his bared hand, when at length they came to the parting of the ways, "I don't want but one of the caribou I shot. Divide the other two between the families of the Indians that skipped out."

Slipping off her mitten, the girl took the proffered hand unhesitatingly and an ecstatic thrill shot through Brent's heart at the touch of the firm slender fingers that closed about his own—a thrill that half-consciously, half-unconsciously, caused him to press the hand that lay warm within his clasp.

"Yes," she answered, making no effort to release the hand, "They need the meat. With the rabbits they can snare, it will keep them all winter. I have not much fur yet—a few fox skins, and some *loup cervier*. I will bring them to you tomorrow."

"Bring them to me!" cried Brent, "What do you mean? Why should you bring them to me?"

"Why!" she exclaimed, regarding him curiously, "To pay for the meat, of course. A caribou is worth a cross fox, and——"

Brent felt the blood mounting to his face. Abruptly, almost roughly he released the girl's hand. "I did not offer to sell you the meat," he answered, a trifle stiffly. "They need it, and they're welcome to it."

Snowdrift, too, had been thrilled by that handclasp, and the thrill had repeated itself at the gentle pressure of the strong fingers, and she was quick to note the change in the man's manner, and stood uncertainly regarding her bared hand until a big snowflake settled upon it and melted into a drop of water. Then she thrust the hand into her big fur mitten, and as her glance met his, Brent saw that the dark eyes were deep with concern: "I—I do not understand," she said, softly. "I have made you angry. I do not want you to be angry with me. Do you mean that you want to give them the meat? People do not give meat, excepting to members of their own tribe when they are very poor. But you are not of the tribe. You are not even an Indian. White men do not give Indians meat, ever."

Already Brent was cursing himself for his foolish flare of pride. Again his heart thrilled at the wonder of the girl's absolute unsophistication. Swiftly his hand sought hers, but this time she did not remove it from the mitten. "I am not angry with you, Snowdrift!" he exclaimed, quickly, "I was a fool! It was I who did not understand. But, I want you to understand that here is one white man who does give meat to Indians. And I wish I were a member of your tribe. Sometime, maybe——"

"Oh, no, no! You would not want to be one of us. We are very poor, and we are Indians. You are a white man. Why should you want to live with us?"

"Some day I will tell you why," answered the man, in a voice so low that the dark eyes searched his face wonderingly. "And, now, won't you give me your hand again? To show me that you are not angry with me."

The girl laughed happily: "Angry with you! Oh, I would never be angry with you! You are good. You are the only good white man I have known who was not a priest, or a factor, or a policeman—and even they do not give the Indians meat." With a swift movement she slipped her hand from the mitten and once more placed it within his, and this time there was nothing unconscious in the pressure of Brent's clasp. He fancied that he felt the slender hand tremble ever so lightly within his own, and glanced swiftly into the girl's face. For an instant their eyes met, and then the dark eyes dropped slowly before his gaze, and very gently he released her hand.

"May I come and see you, soon?" he asked.

"Why, yes, of course! Why did you ask me that?" she inquired, wonderingly, "You know the way to our camp, and you know that now I know you are not a hooch trader."

"Why," smiled Brent, "I asked because—why, just because it seemed the thing to do—a sort of formality, I reckon."

The girl's smile met his own: "I do not understand, I guess. Formality—what is that? A custom of the land of the white man? But I have not read of that in books. Here in the North if anybody wants to go a place, he goes, unless he has been warned to stay away for some reason, and then if he goes he will get shot. I will shoot the hooch traders if they come to the camp. The first time I will tell them to go—and if they come back I will kill them."

"You wouldn't kill them—really?" smiled Brent, amazed at the matter of fact statement coming from this slip of a girl, whose face rimmed in its snow-covered parka hood was, he told himself, the most beautiful face he had ever looked upon. "Didn't they teach you in the mission that it is wrong to kill?"

"It is wrong to kill in anger, or for revenge for a wrong, or so that you may steal a man's goods. But it is not wrong to kill one who is working harm in the world. You, too, know that this is true, because in the books I have read of many such killings, and in some books it was openly approved, and other books were so written that the approval was made plain."

"But, there is the law," ventured Brent.

"Yes, there is the law. But the law is no good up here. By the time the policemen would get here the hooch trader would be many miles away. And even if they should catch him, the Indians would not say that he traded them hooch. They would be afraid. No, it is much better to kill them. They take all the fur in trade for hooch, and then the women have nothing to eat, and the little babies die."

Brent nodded, thoughtfully; "I reckon you're right," he agreed, "But, I wish you would promise me that if any hooch runners show up, you will let me deal with them."

"Oh, will you?" cried the girl, her eyes shining, "Will you help me? Oh, with a white man to help me! With *you*—" she paused, and as Brent's glance met hers, the dark eyes drooped once more, and the man saw that the cheeks were flushed through their tan.

"Of course I'll help you!" he smiled reassuringly, "I would love to, and between us we'll make the Coppermine country a mighty unhealthy place for the hooch runners."

"You will come to see me," reminded the girl, "And I will come to see you, and we will hunt together, and you will show me how to find gold."

"Yes," promised Brent, "We will see each other often—very often. And we will hunt together, and I will show you all I know about finding gold. Good bye, and if you need any help getting the meat into camp, let me know and Joe Pete and I will come down with the dogs."

"We won't need any help with the meat. There are plenty of us to haul it in. That is squaw's work, Good bye."

The girl stood motionless and watched Brent until his form was hidden by a bend of the river. Then, slowly, she turned and struck off up stream. And as she plodded through the ever deepening snow her thoughts were all of the man who had come so abruptly—so vitally into her life, and as she pondered she was conscious of a strange unrest within her, an awakening longing that she did not understand. Subconsciously she drew off her heavy mitten and looked at the hand that had lain in his. And then, she raised it to her face, and drew it slowly across her cheek.

In the cabin, she answered the questions of old Wananebish in monosyllables, and after a hearty meal, she left the cabin abruptly and entered another, where she lifted a very tiny red baby from its bed of blankets and skins, and to the astonishment of the mite's mother, seated herself beside the little stove, and crooned to it, and cuddled it, until the short winter day came to a close.

Early the following day Snowdrift piloted a dozen squaws with their sleds and dog teams to the place of the kill. One of Brent's three caribou was gone, and the girl's eyes lighted with approval as she saw that his trail was partially covered with new-fallen snow. "He came back yesterday—he and his Indian, and they got the meat. He is strong," she breathed to herself, "Stronger than I, for I was tired from walking in the loose snow, and I did not come back."

Leaving the squaws to bring in the meat, the girl shouldered her rifle and struck into the timber, her footsteps carrying her unerringly toward the patch of scrub in which she and Brent had sought shelter from the storm. She halted beside the little wikiup, snow-buried, now—even the hole through which they had crawled was sealed with the new-fallen snow. For a long time she stood looking down at the little white mound. As she turned to go, her glance fell upon a trough-like depression, only half filled with snow. The depression was a snowshoe trail, and it ended just beyond the little mound.

"It is *his* trail," she whispered, to a Canada jay that chattered and jabbered at her from the limb of a dead spruce. "He came here, as I came, to look at our little wikiup. And he went away and left it just as it was." Above her head the jay flitted nervously from limb to limb with his incessant scolding. "Why did he come?" she breathed, "And why did I come?" And, as she had done upon the river, she drew her hand from her mitten and passed it slowly across her cheek. Then she turned, and striking into the half-buried trail, followed it till it merged into another trail, the trail of a man with a dog-sled, and then she followed the broader trail to the northwestward.

At nine o'clock that same morning Brent threw the last shovelful of the eight-inch thawing of gravel from the shallow shaft, and leaving Joe Pete to build and tend the new fire, he picked up his rifle, and under pretense of another hunt, struck off up the river in the direction of the Indian camp.

Joe Pete watched with a puzzled frown until he had disappeared. Then he carried his wood and lighted the fire in the bottom of the shaft.

An hour and a half later Brent knocked at the door of the cabin from which Snowdrift had stepped, rifle in hand, upon the occasion of their first meeting. The door was opened by a wrinkled squaw, who looked straight into his eyes as she waited for him to speak. There was unveiled hostility in the stare of those beady black eyes, and it was with a conscious effort that Brent smiled: "Is Snowdrift in?" he inquired.

"No," the squaw answered, and as an after-thought, "She has gone with the women to bring in the meat."

The man was surprised that the woman spoke perfect English. The Indians who had come to trade, had known only the word "hooch." His smile broadened, though he noticed that the glare of hostility had not faded from the eyes: "She told you about our hunt, then? It was great sport. She is a wonder with a rifle."

"No, she did not tell me." The words came in a cold, impersonal monotone.

"Can't I come in?" Brent asked the question suddenly. "I must get back to camp soon. I just came down to see—to see if I could be of any help in bringing in the meat."

"The women bring in the meat," answered the woman, and Brent felt as though he had been caught lying. But, she stepped aside and motioned him to a rude bench beside the stove. Brent removed his cap and glanced about him, surprised at the extreme cleanliness of the interior, until he suddenly remembered that this was the home of the girl with the wondrous dark eyes. Covertly he searched the face of the old squaw, trying to discover one single feature that would proclaim her to be the mother of the girl, but try as he would, no slightest resemblance could he find in any line or lineament of the wrinkled visage.

She had seated herself upon the edge of the bunk beyond the little stove.

"Can't we be friends?" he asked abruptly.

The laugh that greeted his question sounded in his ears like the snarl of a wolf: "Yes, if you will let me kill you now—we can be friends."

"Oh, come," laughed Brent, "That's carrying friendship a bit too far, don't you think?"

"I had rather you had traded hooch to the men," answered the woman, sullenly, "For then she would even now hate you—as someday she will learn to hate you!"

"Learn to hate me! What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean!" cried the squaw, her voice quivering with anger, "You white men are devils! You come, and you stay a while, and then you go your way, and you stop again, and your trail is a trail of misery—of misery, and of father-less half-breed babies! I wish she had killed you that day you stood out there in the snow! Maybe the harm has been already done——"

"What do you mean?" roared Brent, overturning the bench and towering above the little stove in his rage. "You can't talk to me like that! Out with it! What do you mean?"

The squaw, also, was upon her feet, cowering at the side of the bunk, as she hurled her words into Brent's face. "Where were you last night? And, where was she?"

Two steps and Brent was before her, his face thrust to within a foot of her own: "We were together," he answered in a voice that cut cold as steel, "In a wikiup that we built in the blinding snow and the darkness to protect us from the storm. Half of the night, while she slept upon her robe, I sat and tended the fire, and then, because she insisted upon it, she tended the fire while I slept." As the man spoke never for a moment did the glittering eyes of the squaw leave his close-thrust, blazing eyes, and when he finished, she sank to the bunk with an inarticulate cry. For in the righteous wrath of the blazing eyes she had read the truth—and in his words was the ring of truth.

"Can it be?" she faltered, "Can it be that there is such a white man?"

The anger melted from Brent's heart as quickly as it had come. He saw huddled upon the bunk not a poison-tongued, snake-eyed virago, but a woman whose heart was torn with solicitude for the welfare of her child. But, was Snowdrift her child? Swiftly the thought flitted into Brent's brain, and as swiftly flashed another. Her child, or another's—what matter? One might well question her parentage—but never her love.

Gently his hand went out and came to rest upon the angular shoulder. And when he spoke the tone of his voice, even more than his words, reassured the woman. "There are many such white men," he said, soothingly. "You need not fear. I am your friend, and the friend of Snowdrift. I, like yourself, am here to find gold, and like yourself, I too, hate the traders of hooch—and with reason." He stepped to the stove, upturned the bench and recovered his cap. And as the old woman rose to her feet, Brent saw that the look of intense hatred had been supplanted by a look, which if not exactly of friendliness, was at least one of passive tolerance. At the doorway he paused, hesitated for a moment, and then, point blank, flashed the question that for days had been uppermost in his mind: "Who is Snowdrift?"

Wananebish leaned against a stanchion of the bunk. Instinctively, her savage heart knew that the white man standing before had spoken the truth. Her eyes closed, and for a moment, in the withered breast raged a conflict. Then her eyes opened, her lips moved, and she saw that the

man was straining eagerly toward her to catch the words: "Snowdrift is my daughter," she said.

Brent hesitated. He had been quick to catch the flash of the eye that had accompanied the words, a flash more of defiance than of anger. It was upon his tongue to ask who was Murdo MacFarlane, but instead he bowed: "I must go now. I shall be coming here often. I hope I shall not be unwelcome."

The look of passive tolerance was once more in her eyes, and she shrugged so noncommittally that Brent knew that for the present, if he had not gained an ally, he had at least, eliminated an enemy.

As the man plodded down the river, his thoughts were all of the girl. The stern implacability of her as she stood in the doorway of the cabin and ordered him from the encampment. The swift assurance with which she assumed leadership as the storm roared down upon them. The ingenuous announcement that they must spend the night—possibly several nights in the barrens. And the childlike naïvete of the words that unveiled her innermost thoughts. The compelling charm of her, her beauty of face and form, and the lithe, untiring play of her muscles as she tramped through the new-fallen snow. Her unerring sense of direction. Her simple code of morals regarding the killing of men. Her every look, and word and movement was projected with vivid distinctness upon his brain. And then his thoughts turned to the little cabin that was her home, and to the leathern skinned old woman who told him she was the girl's mother.

"The squaw lied!" he uttered fiercely. "Never in God's world is Snowdrift her daughter! But—who is she?"

He rounded the last bend of the river and brought up shortly. Joe Pete was stoking the fire with wood, and upon the gravel dump, sat the girl apparently very much interested in the operation.

Almost at the same instant she saw him, and Brent's heart leaped within him at the glad little cry that came to him over the snow, as the girl scrambled to her feet and hurried toward him. "Where have you been?" she asked. "I came to hunt—and you were gone. So I waited for you to come, and I watched Joe Pete feed the fire in the hole."

Brent's fingers closed almost caressingly over the slender brown hand that was thrust into his and he smiled into the upraised eyes: "I, too, went to hunt. I went to your cabin, and your—mother," despite himself, the man's tongue hesitated upon the word, "told me that you had gone with the women to bring in the meat."

"Oh, you have seen Wananebish!" cried the girl, "And she was glad to see you?"

"Well," smiled Brent, "Perhaps not so awfully glad—right at first. But Wananebish and I are good friends, now."

"I am glad. I love Wananebish. She is good to me. She has deprived herself of many things—sometimes I think, even of food, that I might stay in school at the mission. And now it is too late to hunt today, and I am hungry. Let us go in the cabin and eat."

"Fine!" cried Brent, "Hey, Joe Pete, cut some caribou steaks, and I'll build up the fire!" He turned again to the girl, "Come on," he laughed, "I could eat a raw dog!"

"But, there is plenty of meat!" cried the girl, "And you'll need the dogs! Only when men are starving will they eat their dogs—and not *raw*!"

Brent laughed heartily into the dismayed face: "You need not be afraid, we will save the dogs till we need them. That was only a figure of speech. I meant that I am very hungry, and that, if I could find nothing else to eat I should relish even raw dog meat."

Snowdrift was laughing, now: "I see!" she cried, "In books are many such sayings. It is a metaphor—no, not a metaphor—a—oh, I don't remember, but anyway I am glad you said that because I thought such things were used only in the language of books—and maybe I can say one like that myself, someday."

At the door of the cabin they removed their snowshoes, and a few moments later a wood fire was roaring in the little stove. Joe Pete came in with the frozen steaks, set them down upon the table, and moved toward the door, but Brent called him back. "You're in on this feed! Get busy and fry up those steaks while I set the table."

The Indian hesitated, glanced shrewdly at Brent as if to ascertain the sincerity of the invitation, and throwing off his parka, busied himself at the stove, while Brent and Snowdrift, laughing and chattering like children, placed the porcelain lined plates and cups and the steel knives and forks upon the uneven pole table.

The early darkness was gathering when they again left the cabin. Snowdrift paused to watch Joe Pete throw wood into the flames that leaped from the mouth of the shallow shaft: "Why do you have the fire in the hole?" she asked of Brent, who stood at her side.

"Why, to thaw the gravel so we can throw it out onto the dump. Then in the spring, we'll sluice out the dump and see what we've got."

"Do you mean for gold?" asked the girl in surprise, "We only hunt for gold in the summer in the sand of the creeks and the rivers."

"This way is better," explained Brent. "In the summer you can only muck around in the surface stuff. You can't sink a shaft because the water would run in and fill it up. In most places the deeper you go the richer the gravel. The very best of it is right down against bed-rock. In the winter we keep a fire going until the gravel is thawed for six or eight inches down, then we rake out the ashes and wait for the hole to cool down so there will be air instead of gas in it, and then we throw out the loose stuff and build up the fire again."

"And you won't know till spring whether you have any gold or not? Why, maybe you would put in a whole winter's work and get nothing!"

"Oh, we kind of keep cases on it with the pan. Every day or so I scoop up a panful and carry it into the cabin and melt some ice and pan it out."

"And is there gold here? Have you found it?"

"Not yet. That is, not in paying quantities. The gravel shows just enough color to keep us at it. I don't think it is going to amount to much. So far we're making fair wages—and that's about all."

"What do you mean by fair wages?" smiled the girl. "You see, I am learning all I can about finding gold."

"I expect we're throwing out maybe a couple of ounces a day—an ounce apiece. If it don't show something pretty quick I'm going to try some other place. There's a likely looking creek runs in above here."

"But an ounce of gold is worth sixteen dollars!" exclaimed the girl, "And sixteen dollars every day for each of you is lots of money."

Brent laughed: "It's good wages, and that's about all. But I'm not here just to make wages. I've got to make a strike."

"How much is a strike?"

"Oh, anywhere from a half a million up."

"A half a million dollars!" cried the girl, "Why, what could you do with it all?"

Brent laughed: "Oh I could manage to find use for it, I reckon. In the first place I owe a man some money over on the Yukon—two men. They've got to be paid. And after that—" His voice trailed off into silence.

"And what would you do after that?" persisted the girl.

"Well," answered the man, as he watched the shower of sparks fly upward, "That depends—But, come, it's getting dark. I'll walk home with you."

"Are you going because you think I am afraid?" she laughed.

"I am going because I want to go," he answered, and led off up the river.

As the darkness settled the snow-covered surface of the river showed as a narrow white lane that terminated abruptly at each bend in a wall of intense blackness. Overhead a million stars glittered so brightly in the keen air that they seemed suspended just above the serried skyline of the bordering spruces. At the end of an hour it grew lighter. Through the openings between the flanking spruce thickets long naked ridges with their overhanging wind-carved snow-cornices were visible far back from the river. As they came in sight of the encampment the girl, who was traveling ahead, paused abruptly and with an exclamation of delight, pointed toward a distant ridge upon the clean-cut skyline of which the rim of the full moon showed in an ever widening segment of red. Brent stood close by her side, and together, in wrapt silence they watched the glowing orb rise clear of the ridge, watched its color pale until it hung cold and clean-cut in the night sky like a disk of burnished brass.

"Isn't it beautiful?" she breathed, and by the gentle pressure that accompanied the words, Brent suddenly knew that her bared hand was in his own, and that two mittens lay upon the snow at their feet.

"Wonderful," he whispered, as his eyes swept the unending panorama of lifeless barrens. "It is as if we two were the only living beings in the whole dead world."

"Oh, I wish—I wish we were!" cried the girl, impulsively. And then: "No that is wrong! Other people—thousands and thousands of them—men, and women, and little babies—they all love to live."

"It is wonderful to live," breathed the man, "And to be standing here—with you—in the moonlight."

"Ah, the moonlight—is it the moonlight that makes me feel so strange—in here?" she raised her mittened hand and pressed it against her breast, "So strange and restless. I want to go—I do not know where—but, I want to do something big—to go some place—any place, but to go, and go, and go!" Her voice dropped suddenly, and Brent saw that her eyes were resting broodingly upon the straggling group of tepees and cabins. A dull square of light glowed sullenly from her own cabin window, and her voice sounded heavy and dull: "But, there is no place to go, and nothing to do, but hunt, and trap, and look for gold. Sometimes I wish I were dead. No I do not mean that—

but, I wish I had never lived."

"Nonsense, girl! You love to live! Beautiful, strong, young—why, life is only just starting for—you." Brent had almost said "us."

"But, of what use is it all? Why should one love to live? I am an Indian—yet I hate the Indians—except Wananebish. We fight the hooch traders, yet the men get the hooch. It is no use. I learned to love books at the mission—and there are no books. You are here—with you I am happy. But, if you do not find a strike, you will go away. Or, if we do not find gold, we will go. The Indians will return to the river and become hangers-on at the posts. It is all—no use!"

Brent's arms were about her, her yielding body close against his, and she was sobbing against the breast of his parka. The man's brain was a chaos. In vain he strove to control the trembling of his muscles as he crushed her to him. In an unsteady voice he was murmuring words: "There, there, dear. I am never going away from you—never." Two arms stole about his neck, and Brent's heart pounded wildly as he felt them tighten in a convulsive embrace. He bent down and their lips met in a long, lingering kiss, "Darling," he whispered, with his lips close to her ear, "You are mine—mine! And I am yours. And we will live—live! Tell me Snowdrift—sweetheart—do you love me?"

"I love you!" her lips faltered the simple words, and Brent saw that the dark eyes that looked up into his own glowed in the moonlight like black pools. "Now—I know—it was—not the moonlight—in here—it was love!"

"Yes, darling, it was love. I have loved you since the first moment I saw you."

"And I have loved you—always!"

CHAPTER XVI

CONFESSIONS

Brent returned to the cabin with his brain in a whirl. "I'll make a strike before spring! I've got to! Then we'll hit for Dawson, and we'll stop at Fort Norman and be married. No—we'll go on through and be married at the Reeves'! Married! A Brent married to an Indian!" He halted in the trail and cursed himself for the thought.

"She's a damn sight too good for you! You're a hell of a Brent—nothing left but the name! Gambler—notorious gambler, Reeves said—and a barkeep in Malone's dive. You're a hooch hound, and you've got to keep away from hooch to stay sober! You don't dare go back to Dawson—nor anywhere else where there's a saloon! You're broke, and worse than broke. You're right now living on Reeves' money—and you think of marrying *her*!"

Furiously, next morning, he attacked the gravel at the bottom of the shaft. When the loose muck was thrown out he swore at the slow progress, and futilely attacked the floor of the shaft with his pick as though to win down to bed-rock through the iron-hard frost. Then he climbed out and, scooping up a pan from the dump, retired to the cabin, and washed it out.

"Same thing," he muttered disgustedly, as he stared at the yellow grains, "Just wages. I've got to make a strike! There's Reeves to pay—and Camillo Bill—and I've got to have dust—and plenty of it—for *her*. Damn this hole! I'm going to hit for the lower river. We'll cover this shaft to keep the snow out and hit north. Hearne, and Franklin, and Richardson all report native copper on the lower river—amygdaloid beds that crop out in sheer cliffs. Gold isn't the only metal—there's millions in copper! And, the river winding in and out among the trap and basalt dykes, there's bound to be gold, too." He collected the few grains of gold, threw out the gravel and water, and picking up his rifle, stepped out the door. At the shaft he paused and called to Joe Pete that he was going hunting and as the big Indian watched him disappear up the river, his lips stretched in a slow grin, and he tossed wood into the shaft.

A mile from the cabin Brent rounded a sharp bend and came face to face with Snowdrift. There was an awkward silence during which both strove to appear unconcerned. The girl was the first to speak, and Brent noticed that she was blushing furiously: "I—I am hunting," she announced, swinging her rifle prominently into view.

Brent laughed: "So am I hunting—for you."

"But really, I am hunting caribou. There are lots of mouths to feed, and the men are not much good. They will spend hours slipping up onto a caribou and then miss him."

"Come on, then, let's go," answered the man gaily. "Which way shall it be?"

"I saw lots of tracks the other day on a lake to the eastward. It is six or seven miles. I think we will find caribou there." Brent tried to take her hand, but she eluded him with a laugh, and struck out through the scraggling timber at a pace that he soon found hard to follow.

"Slow down! I'll be good!" he called, when they had covered a quarter of a mile, and Snowdrift

laughingly slackened her pace.

"You're a wonder!" he panted, as he closed up the distance that separated them, "Don't you ever get tired?"

"Oh, yes, very often. But, not so early in the day. See, three caribou passed this way only a few hours ago—a bull and two cows." They struck into the trail, and two hours later Snowdrift succeeded in bring down one of the cows with a long shot as the three animals trotted across a frozen muskeg.

"And now we must kill one for you," announced the girl as Brent finished drawing the animal.

"We needn't be in any hurry about it," he grinned. "We still have most of the one we got the other day."

"Then, why are you hunting?"

"I told you. I found what I was hunting—back there on the river. How about lunch? I'm hungry as a wolf."

The girl pointed to a sheltered spot in the lee of a spruce thicket, and while Brent scraped back the snow, she produced food from her pack.

"You must have figured on getting pretty hungry," teased Brent, eying the generous luncheon to which he had added his own.

Snowdrift blushed: "You brought more than I did!" she smiled, "See—there is much more."

"Oh, I'll come right out with it—I put that up for two!"

"And mine is for two," she admitted, "But you are mean for making me say it."

During the meal the girl was unusually silent and several times Brent surprised a look of pain in the dark eyes, and then the look would fade and the eyes would gaze pensively into the distance. Once he was sure that her lip quivered.

"What's the matter, Snowdrift," he asked abruptly, "What is troubling you? Tell me all about it. You might as well begin now, you know—because——"

She hastened to interrupt him: "Nothing is the matter!" she cried, with an obviously forced gaiety. "But, tell me, where did you come from—before you came to the Yukon? All my life I have wanted to know more of the land that lies to the southward—the land of the white man. Father Ambrose and Sister Mercedes told me much—but it was mostly of the church. And Henri of the White Water told me of the great stores in Edmonton where one may buy fine clothes, of other stores where one may sell hooch without fear of the police, and also where one may win money with cards. But, surely, there are other things. The white men, and the women, they do not always go to church and buy clothes, and drink hooch, and gamble with cards. And are all the women beautiful like the pictures in the books, and in the magazines?"

Brent laughed: "No, all the women are not beautiful. It is only once in a great while that one sees a really beautiful woman, and you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen——"

"But I am not beautiful!" cried the girl, "Not like the pictures."

"The pictures are not pictures of real women, they are creations of an artist's brain. The pictures are the artist's conception of what the real women should be."

Snowdrift regarded him with a puzzled frown: "Is it all make-believe, in the land of the white man? The books—the novels that tell of knights in armor, and of the beautiful ladies with their clothes, and their rings of the diamonds that sparkle like ice—and other novels that tell of suffering, and of the plotting of men and women who are very bad—and of the doings of men and women who are good—Sister Mercedes said they are all lies—that they are the work of the brain of the man who wrote it down. Is it all lies and make-believe? Do the white men use their brains only to tell of the doings of people who have never lived, and to make pictures of people and things that never were? Do you, too, live in the make-believe? You have told me you love me. And just now you told me that I was the most beautiful woman you have seen. Those are the words of the books—of the novels. Always the man must tell the woman she is the most beautiful woman in the world. And it is all make-believe, and in the words is no truth!"

"No, no, dear! You do not understand. I don't know whether I can explain it, but it is not all make-believe—by a long shot! Life down there is as real as it is here. There are millions of people there and for them all life is a struggle. Millions live in great cities, and other millions live in the country and raise grain with which to feed themselves, and the millions who live in the cities. And the people in the cities work in great factories, and make the clothing, and the tools, and guns, and everything that is used by themselves and by the people who live outside the cities, and they build the ships and the railroads which carry these goods to all parts of the world. But you have read of all that in the books—and the books are not all lies and make-believe, for they tell of life as it is—not as any one or a dozen characters live it—but as thousands and millions live it. The comings and goings of the characters are the composite comings and goings of a thousand or a million living breathing people. And because each person is too busy—too much occupied with his own particular life, he does not know of the lives of the other millions. But he wants to know—so he reads the books and the magazines, and the newspapers." The girl hung absorbed upon his

words, and for an hour Brent talked, describing, explaining, detailing the little things and the great things, the common-places, and the wonders of the far-off land to the southward. But of all the things he described, the girl was most interested in the libraries with their thousands and thousands of books that one might read for the asking—the libraries, and the clothing of the women.

"All my life," she concluded, "I have wanted to go to the land of the white man, and see these things myself. But, I never shall see them, and I am glad you have told me more."

Brent laughed, happily, and before she could elude him his arms were about her and he had drawn her close. "Indeed you shall see them!" he cried. "You and I shall see them together. We'll be married at Dawson, and we'll make a strike——"

With a low cry the girl freed herself from his arms, and drew away to the other side of the fire: "No, no, no!" she cried, with a catch in her voice, "I can never marry you! Oh, why must we love! Why must we suffer, when the fault is not ours? They would hate me, and despise me, and point at me with the finger of scorn!"

Brent laughed: "Hold on girl!" he cried, "Some of the best families in the world have Indian blood in their veins—and they're proud of it! I know 'em! They'll come a long way from hating you. Why, they'll pile all over themselves to meet you—and a hundred years from now our great-grand-children will be bragging about you!" Suddenly, he grew serious, "But maybe you won't marry me, after all—when you've heard what I've got to say. Maybe you'll despise me—and it'll be all right if you do. It will be what I have earned. It isn't a pretty story, and it's going to hurt to tell it—to you. But, you've got to know—so here goes.

"In the first place, you think I'm good. But, I'm not good—by most of the ten commandments, and a lot of by-laws. I'm not going to do any white-washing—I'm going to begin at the beginning and tell you the truth, so you can see how far I've dropped. In the first place my family tree is decorated with presidents, and senators, and congress-men, and generals, and diplomats, and its branches are so crowded with colonels, and majors and captains and judges, and doctors, that they have to prop them up to keep them from breaking. Some were rich, but honest; and some were poor, but not so honest, and a lot of them were half way between in both wealth and honesty. But, anyway, you can't turn twenty pages of United States history without running onto the trail of at least one man that I can claim kin to. As for myself, I'm a college man, and a mining engineer—that means I was fitted by family and education to be a big man, and maybe get a chance to slip into history myself—I've made some, over on the Yukon, but—it ain't fit to print.

"Hooch was at the bottom of the whole business. I couldn't handle hooch like some men can. One drink always called for another, and two drinks called for a dozen. I liked to get drunk, and I did get drunk, every chance I got—and that was right often. I lost job after job because I wouldn't stay sober—and later some others because I couldn't stay sober. I heard of the gold on the Yukon and I went there, and I found gold—lots of it. I was counted one of the richest men in the country. Then I started out to get rid of the gold. I couldn't spend it all so I gambled it away. Almost from the time I made my strike I never drew a sober breath, until I'd shoved my last marker across the table. Then I dealt faro—turned professional gambler for wages in the best place in Dawson, but the hooch had got me and I lost out. I got another job in a saloon that wasn't so good, but it was the same story, and in a little while I was tending bar—selling hooch—in the lowest dive in town—and that means the lowest one in the world, I reckon. That last place, The Klondike Palace; with its painted women, who sell themselves nightly to men, with the scum of the earth carousing in its dance-hall, and playing at its tables, was the hell-hole of the Yukon. And I was part of it. I stood behind its bar and sold hooch—I was the devil that kept the hell-fires stoked and roaring. And I kept full of hooch myself, or I couldn't have stood it. Then I lost out even there, on—what you might call a technicality—and after that I was just a plain bum. Everybody despised me—worst of all, I despised myself. I did odd jobs to get money to buy hooch, and when I had bought it I crawled into my shack and stayed there till it was gone. I was weak and flabby, and dirty. My hands shook so I couldn't raise a glass of hooch to my lips, until I'd had a stiff shot. I used to lap the first drink out of a saucer like a dog. I dodged the men who had once been my friends. Only Joe Pete, who had helped me over the Chilkoot, and who remembered that I was a good man on the trail, and a girl named Kitty, would even turn their heads to glance at the miserable drunkard that slunk along the street with his bottle concealed in his ragged pocket.

"There is one more I thought was my friend. His name is Camillo Bill, and he is square as a die, and he did me a good turn when he cleaned me out, by holding my claims for only what he had coming when he could have taken them all. But he came to see me one day toward the last. He came to tell me that the claims had petered out. I wanted him to grub-stake me, for a prospecting trip and he refused. That hurt me worse than all the rest—for I thought he was my friend. He cursed me, and refused to grub-stake me. Then I met a real friend—one I had never seen before, and he furnished the gold for my trip to the Coppermine, and—here I am."

Snowdrift had listened with breathless attention and when Brent concluded she was silent for a long time. "This girl named Kitty?" she asked at length, "Who is she, and why was she your friend? Did you love this woman? Is she beautiful?"

"No," answered Brent, gravely, "I did not love her. She was not the kind of a woman a man would love. She was beautiful after a fashion. She might have been very beautiful had her life fallen in a different groove. She was an adventuress, big hearted, keen of brain—but an adventuress. Hers was a life distorted and twisted far from its original intent. For it was plain to

all that she had been cast in a finer mould, and even the roughest and most brutal of the men treated her with a certain respect that was not accorded to the others. She never spoke of her past. She accepted the present philosophically, never by word or look admitting that she had chosen the wrong road. Her ethics were the ethics of the muck and ruck of the women of the dance halls. She differed only in that she had imagination—and a certain pride that prevented her from holding herself cheaply. Where others were careless and slovenly, she was well groomed. And while they caroused and shamelessly debauched themselves, she held aloof from the rabble.

"You asked why she was my friend. I suppose it was because she was quick to see that I too, was different from the riff-raff of the dives. Not that I was one whit better than they—for I was not. It was no credit to me that I was inherently different. It was, I reckon, a certain innate pride that kept me out of the filth of the mire, as it kept her out. To me the painted slovens were physically loathsome, so I shunned them. She was keener of brain than I—or maybe it was because she had a perspective. But while I was still at the height of my success with the claims and with the cards, she foresaw the end, and she warned me. But, I disregarded the warning, and later, when I was rushing straight to the final crash, she warned me again and again, and she despised me for the fool I was.

"When, at the very bottom, I was taken suddenly sick, it was Kitty who nursed me through. And then, when I was on my feet again she left me to myself. I have not seen her since."

"And, if you make a strike again," asked the girl in a low voice, "Will you go back to Dawson—to the cards and the hooch?"

"I will go back to Dawson," he answered, "And pay my debts. I will not go back to the cards. I am through with gambling for good and all, for I have promised. And when a Brent gives his word, he would die rather than break it."

"But the hooch?" persisted Snowdrift. "Are you done with the hooch too?"

Brent was conscious that the eyes of the girl were fixed upon his in a gaze of curious intentness, as though their deliberate calm suppressed some mighty emotion. He groped for words: "I don't—that is, how can I tell? I drink no hooch now—but there is none to drink. I hate it for I know that what it did to me once it will do to me again. I hate it—and I love it!" exclaimed the man. "Tell me, is hate stronger than love?"

The girl was silent for a moment, and by the clenching of her fists, Brent knew that a struggle was raging within her. She ignored his question, and when she spoke her voice was low, and the words fell with a peculiar dullness of tone: "I, too, have a thing to tell. It is a horrible thing. And when you have heard you will not want to marry me." The girl paused, and Brent felt suddenly sick and weak. There was a dull ache in his breast that was an actual physical pain, and when the cold breeze fanned his forehead, it struck with a deadly chill. With a mighty effort he recovered, leaned swiftly toward her and was vaguely conscious that she winced at the grip of his fingers upon her arm.

"Tell me!" he cried hoarsely. For a single instant his eyes blazed into hers, and then, as though anticipating her words, his fingers relaxed their hold and he settled back with a half-articulate moan—"*Oh, God!*"

"What you have told me," she continued, in the same dull tone, "Is nothing. It is past and gone. It is dead, and its evil died with it. You are a white man. The white man's thoughts are your thoughts, and his standards are your standards. You work the harm, then unjustly you sit in judgment. And the harm does not die with the deed. The shame of it is a thing of the present, and of the future, and it is borne always by the innocent.

"The thing I must tell you is this. I am a half-breed. But my father was not the husband of Wananebish, who is my mother——"

Brent interrupted her with quick, glad cry: "Is that all?" The blood surged hot through his veins. The ache in his breast became a wild singing. And suddenly he realized the grip and the depth of the thing that is called love, with its power to tear and to rend the very foundations of his being. He felt an insane desire to leap and to shout—and the next instant the girl was in his arms and he was crushing her against his breast as he covered her face with hot kisses. And when a few moments later, he released her, he laughed aloud—a laugh that was clear and boyish, and altogether good to hear, while the girl gazed half-fearfully—half-wonderingly into his eyes:

"I—I do not understand," she faltered, "I have known this only for a short time. Henri of the White Water told me of it, and of the shame of it—and then Sister Mercedes—and it is true, because years ago when I was very small, Wananebish told it to Father Ambrose——"

"Damn Henri of the White Water! And damn Sister Mercedes and Father Ambrose!" cried Brent, his eyes narrowing, "What did they tell you for? What difference does it make?"

"Henri of the White Water told me because he was angry. I would not marry him. I was going to a great convent school, and he said that in the land of the white man I would be an object of scorn—that people would shun me, and point me out with the finger of shame. I did not believe him, so I went to Sister Mercedes, and she told me, also. And so I would not go to the school, and that night I came away from the mission—came back to the Indians." She paused, and as she raised her eyes to his, Brent saw that in their depths a wondrous newborn hope struggled against fear. Her lips moved: "You do not scorn me? You love me—knowing that?"

Again she was in his arms, and his lips were upon hers: "Yes, I love you—love you—love you! You are mine, darling—mine for all time!" She did not resist his arms, and he felt her yielding body press close against his own, as her shoulders heaved in short, quick sobs.

Softly, almost timidly, her arms stole about his neck, and her tear-jeweled eyes raised to his: "And you would marry me, not knowing who I am?"

"Yes, darling," reassured Brent, "Neither knowing nor caring who you are. It is enough that you are the dearest, and most beautiful, and the most lovable woman in the whole world of women. Why, girl, the wonder is not that I love you—but that you could love me, after what I told you."

"It is the answer to your question," she smiled, "It means that love is the strongest thing in all the world—stronger than hate, stronger than race, or laws, or codes of ethics. Love is supreme!"

"And that means, then, that my love for hooch will conquer my hate for it?"

"No!" breathed the girl, and Brent could feel her arms tighten about his neck. "For your love for hooch has not only to overcome your hate for it, but it must also overcome your love for me, and my love for you. I am not afraid to fight it out with hooch for your love! If I cannot make myself more to you than hooch ever can, I would not be worthy of your love!"

"My darling," whispered Brent, his lips close to her ear, "You have won already. I will promise ——"

He was interrupted by her fingers upon his lips, shutting off the words.

"No—dear," she hesitated a second at the unfamiliar word, "You must not promise—yet. It is easy to promise, out here in the barrens, where you have me in your arms, and the hooch is far away. I ask no odds of hooch. Wait till you have stood the test. I am not afraid. I have not much learning, but some things I know. I know that, holding a promise in as high regard as you hold one, if anything should happen—if you should drink hooch just once, the promise would be broken—and never again would a promise be just the same. We have a war with hooch—you and I. And we are going to win. But, in the histories I have read of few wars where every battle was won by the same army. Some of the battles we must expect to lose—but the *war* we will win."

"Not much learning," smiled Brent, looking into the depths of the dark eyes, "But the concentrated wisdom of the ages—the wisdom that is the heritage of woman, and which not one woman in a thousand learns to apply."

For a long time the two sat beside their little fire, add in the gloom of the early darkness, they made their way toward the river.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE CABIN OF THE *BELVA LOU*

For two weeks Brent and Snowdrift were together each day from dawn until dark. Leaving Joe Pete to work the claim on the Coppermine, they burned into the gravel on a creek that gave promise, and while their fire slowly thawed out the muck, they hunted. When at a depth of four feet they had not struck a color, Brent gave it up.

"No use," he said, one day as he tossed the worthless pebbles from his pan. "If there was anything here, we'd have found at least a trace. I'm going to hit down the river and have a look at the Copper Mountains."

"Take me with you!" cried the girl, eagerly, "How long will you be gone?"

"I wish I could," smiled Brent, "But Joe Pete and I will be gone two weeks—a month—maybe longer. It depends on what we find. If we were only married, what a great trip it would be! But, never mind, sweetheart, we've got a good many trips coming—years and years of them."

"But that isn't now," objected the girl, "What will I do all the while you are gone? Each morning I hurry here as fast as I can, and each evening I am sorry when the darkness comes and I must leave you."

The man drew her close, "Yes, darling," he whispered, "I understand. The hours I spend away from you are long hours, and I count them one by one. I do not want to go away from you, but it is for you that I must make a strike."

"I would rather have you with me than have all the strikes in the world!"

"I know—but we don't want to spend all our days in this God-forgotten wilderness, fighting famine, and the strong cold. We want to go far away from all this, where there is music, and books, and life! You've got it coming, little girl—but first we must make a strike."

"And, we will not be married until you make your strike?" The dark eyes looked wistfully into his, and Brent smiled:

"Strike or no strike, we will be married in the spring!" he cried, "and if the strike has not been made, we'll make it together."

"Will we be married at the mission?"

"No—at Dawson."

"Dawson!" cried the girl, "And I shall really see Dawson? But, isn't it very far?"

Brent laughed: "Yes, you will really see Dawson—and you won't see much when you see it, in comparison with what you will see when we quit the North and go back to the States. In the spring you and Wananebish, and Joe Pete and I will take a month's vacation—and when we come back, darling, we will have each other always."

"But, if you do not make a strike?" questioned the girl, "What then? Would you be happy here in the North—with me?"

"Sweetheart," answered Brent, "If I knew to a certainty that I should never make a strike—that I should always live in these barrens, I would marry you anyway—and call the barrens blessed. But, I will make a strike! It is for you—and I cannot fail! Oh, if I hadn't been such a fool!"

The girl smiled into his eyes: "If you hadn't been such a—a fool, you would never have come to the barrens. And I—I would always have been just an Indian—hating the white man, hating the world, living my life here and there, upon the lakes and the rivers, in cabins and tepees, with just enough education to long for the better things, and with my heart bursting with pain and bitterness in the realization that those things were not for me."

"It is strange how everything works out for the best," mused Brent, "The whys and the wherefores of life are beyond my philosophy. Sordid, and twisted, and wrong as they were, my Dawson days, and the days of the years that preceded them were all but the workings of destiny —to bring you and me together up here on the rim of the Arctic.

"It was a great scheme, little girl," he smiled, suddenly breaking into a lighter mood, "And the beauty of it is—it worked. But what I was getting at is this: it don't seem reasonable that after going to all that trouble to bring us together, and taking such liberties with my reputation, Old Man Destiny is going to make us fill out the rest of the time punching holes in gravel, and snaring rabbits, and hunting caribou."

That evening they said good bye upon the edge of the clearing that surrounded the Indian encampment, and as Brent turned to go he drew a heavy bag from his pocket and handed it to the girl, "Keep this till I come back," he said, "It's gold."

"Oh, it is heavy!" cried the girl in surprise.

Brent smiled, "Weighs up pretty big now. But when we make our strike it won't be a shoestring. But come—one more good bye and I must be going. I've got to pack my outfit for an early start."

One day a week later Brent stood with Joe Pete on the northernmost ridge of the Copper Mountains and gazed toward the coast of the Arctic Ocean. Almost at their feet, buried beneath snow and ice were the Bloody Falls of the Coppermine and to the northward, only snow. Brent was surprised, for he knew that the ridge upon which he was standing could not be more than ten or twelve miles from the coast, but he also knew that he could see for twenty miles or more, and that the only thing that met the eye was a gently undulating plain of snow, unbroken by even so much as a twig or a bush, or a hillock worthy the name. Never, he thought, as his glance swept the barren, treeless waste, had eyes of mortal man beheld its equal for absolute bleak desolation.

A cry from Joe Pete cause him to concentrate his gaze upon a spot toward which the Indian pointed, where, dimly discernible, a dark object appeared against the unbroken surface of the snow. The steel blue haze—the "cold fog" of the North, obfuscated its outlines, as it destroyed perspective so that the object may have been five miles away, or twenty. It may have been the size of a dog, or the size of a skyscraper. In vain the two strained their eyes in an endeavor to make it out. In the first gloom of the early darkness it disappeared altogether, and the two made their way to the frozen surface of the river where, in the shelter of a perpendicular wall of rock, they made their camp and kindled a tiny fire of twigs they had collected the day before from the last timber on the Coppermine, at a creek that runs in from the eastward.

For two days, holding to the surface of the river, the two had threaded the transverse ridges that form the Copper Mountains. It was Brent's idea to mush straight to the northernmost ridge and work back slowly, stopping wherever practicable to prospect among the outcropping ledges. He had planned, also, to burn into the gravel at intervals, but he had not foreseen the fact that the mountains lay north of the timber line, so the burning had to be abandoned.

At daylight they again climbed the ridge. The cold fog had disappeared and as Joe Pete, who was in the lead, reached the summit, he gave voice to a loud cry of surprise. For in place of the indiscernible object of the day before, apparently only ten or twelve miles distant, and right in the centre of the vast plain of snow was a ship—each mast and spar standing out clean-cut as a cameo against its dazzling background. Brent even fancied he could see men walking about her deck, and other men walking to and fro among a group of snow mounds that clustered close about the hulk.

"A whaler!" he exclaimed, "One of those that Johnnie Claw said wintered up here."

For a long time Brent watched the ship, and covertly Joe Pete watched Brent. At length the white man spoke. "Reckon we'll just mush over there and call on 'em. Neighbors aren't so damned common up here that we can afford to pass them by when we're in sight of 'em."

"Dat better, mebbe-so, we don' go w'ere we ain' got no business. Mebbe-so dat Godam Johnnie Claw, she giv' you som' mor' hooch, eh? Dat breed gal she dam' fine 'oman—she ain' lak dat."

Brent laughed, a trifle nervously: "I don't reckon there's any danger of that," he answered, shortly. "Come on, we'll harness the dogs and pull out there. I'd like to see what kind of an outfit they've got, and as long as we're this near it would be too bad not to go to the very top of the continent."

Joe Pete shrugged and followed Brent down to the river where they broke camp, harnessed the dogs, and struck out over the plain. The wind-packed snow afforded good footing and the outfit pushed rapidly northward.

Brent was surprised at the absence of a pressure ridge at the shore line, but so flat was the snow-buried beach that it was with difficulty that he determined where the land left off and the sea-ice began. The whaler he judged to be frozen in at a distance of three or four miles from shore.

The figures of men could be plainly seen, now, and soon it became evident that their own presence had been noted, for three or four figures were seen to range themselves along the rail, evidently studying them through a glass.

While still a mile or two distant, the figures at the rail disappeared below deck, but others moved about among the snow mounds in the shelter of the vessel's hull.

Upon arriving at the mounds, which proved to be snow igloos such as are used by the Eskimos, Brent halted the dogs, and advanced to where two men, apparently oblivious to his presence, were cutting up blubber.

"Hello," he greeted, "Where's the captain?"

One of the men did not even look up. The other, presenting a villainous hairy face, nodded surlily toward an ice-coated ladder.

"Wait here," said Brent, turning to Joe Pete, "Till I find out whether this whole crew is as cordial to strangers as these two specimens."

At the words, the man who had directed Brent to the ladder, raised his head and opened his lips as if to speak, but evidently thinking better of it, he uttered a sneering laugh, and went on with his cutting of blubber.

Brent climbed the ladder, and made his way across the snow-buried deck, guided by a well packed path that led to a door upon which he knocked loudly. While waiting for a response he noticed the name *Belva Lou* painted upon the stern of a small boat that lay bottomside up upon the deck. Knocking again, he called loudly, and receiving no reply, opened the door and found himself upon a steep flight of stairs. Stepping from the dazzling whiteness of the outside, the interior of the whaler was black as a pocket, and he paused upon the stairs to accustom his eyes to the change. As the foul air from below filled his lungs it seemed to Brent that he could not go on. The stench nauseated him—the vile atmosphere reeked of rancid blubber, drying furs, and the fumes of dead cookery. A tiny lamp that flared in a wall pocket at the foot of the stairs gave forth a stink of its own. Gradually, as his eyes accorded to the gloom, Brent took cognizance of the dim interior. The steep short flight of steps terminated in a narrow passage that led toward the stern whence came the muffled sound of voices. Descending, he glanced along the passage toward a point where, a few feet distant, another lamp flared dimly. Just beyond this lamp was a door, and from beyond the door came the sound of voices.

He groped his way to the door and knocked. There was a sudden hush, a few gruffly mumbled words, and then a deep voice snarled: "Who's there?"

"Just a visitor," announced Brent, stifling a desire to turn and rush from that fetid hole out into the clean air—but it was too late.

The voice beyond the door commanded thickly: "Come in, an' we'll look ye over!"

For just an instant Brent hesitated, then his hand fumbled for the knob, turned it, and the narrow door swung inward. He stepped into the box-like apartment, and for a moment stood speechless as his eyes strove to take in the details of the horrid scene.

The stinking air of the dank passage was purest ozone in comparison with the poisonous fog of the overheated, unventilated room. He felt suddenly sick and dizzy as he sucked the evil effluvia into his lungs—the thick, heavy smoke of cheap tobacco, the stench of unbathed humans, the overpowering reek of spilled liquor, the spent breath from rum-soaked bodies, the gaseous fumes of a soft coal stove, and the odor from an oil lamp that had smoked one side of its chimney black.

"Shut the door! Coal costs money. What the hell ye tryin' to do, heat the hull Ar'tic? Who be ye, anyhow? An' wot d'ye want?"

Mechanically Brent closed the door behind him, as he glanced into the leering eyes of the speaker, who sat, with two other men, and a partially clad Eskimo woman, at a table upon which

were set out a bottle and several glasses.

Before Brent could reply, the man across the table from the speaker leaped to his feet and thrust out his hand. Through the grey haze of smoke, Brent recognized Johnnie Claw.

"Well, if it ain't my ol' friend Ace-In-The-Hole!" cried the hooch runner. "'S all right Cap! Best sport on the Yukon!" Ignoring the fact that Brent had refused the proffered hand, Claw leered into his face: "Ace-In-The-Hole let me make you 'quainted with Cap Jinkins, Cap'n of the *Belva Lou*—damn good sport, too—an' Asa Scroggs, mate. Both damn good sports, *Belva Lou* fetches out more oil an' bone 'n any of 'em—an' Cap ain't 'fraid to spend his money. Glad you come long. Welcome to stay long as you like—ain't he Cap?"

The Captain lowered a glass from his lips, and cleansed his overhanging mustache upon the back of a hairy hand: "Sure," he growled, surlily, "Didn't know he was friend o' yourn. S'down." The room contained only four chairs, and as he spoke, the man, with a sweep of his hand, struck the klooch from her chair, and kicked it toward Brent, who sank into it heavily, and stared dully at the klooch who crawled to a corner and returned the stare with a drunken, loose-lipped grin upon her fat face. Brent shifted his glance, and upon a bunk beyond the table he saw another klooch, lying in a drunken stupor, her only garment, a grimy wrapper of faded calico, was crumpled about her, exposing one brown leg to the hip.

Schooled as he had been to sights of debauchery by his service with Cuter Malone, Brent was appalled—sickened by the sottish degeneracy of his surroundings.

With unsteady hand the mate slopped some liquor into a glass and shoved it toward him: "Swaller that," he advised, with a grin, "Yer gittin' white 'round the gills. Comin' right in out of the air, it might seem a leetle close in here, at first."

The fumes arising from the freshly spilled liquor smelled *clean*—the only hint of cleanliness in the whole poisoned atmosphere of the cabin. He breathed them deeply into his lungs, and for an instant the dizziness and sickness at his stomach seemed less acute. Maybe one drink—one little sip would revive him—counteract the poison of the noisome air, and stimulate him against the dull apathy that was creeping upon him. Slowly, his hand stole toward the glass, his fingers closed about it, and he raised it to his lips. Another deep inhalation of its fragrance and he drained it at a gulp.

"Didn't know we had no neighbors," ventured the Captain, filling his own glass. "What ye doin' up here?"

"Prospecting," answered Brent, "The Copper Mountains. I saw your vessel from the ridge, and thought I would come over and see what a whaler looks like." The strong liquor was taking hold. A warm glow gripped his belly and diffused itself slowly through his veins. The nausea left him, and the olid atmosphere seemed suddenly purged of its reek.

"Well," grinned the captain, "The *Belva Lou* hain't what ye'd call no floatin' palace, but she's ahead o' most whalers. An' after Johnnie gits through hornin' round 'mongst the Husky villages an' fixes us up with a wife apiece, we manage to winter through right comfortable. Me an' Asa stays on board, an' the rest of the crew, builds 'em igloos. But, here's me runnin' off at the head—an' you might spill it all to the Mounted."

"Not him," laughed Claw. "Him an' I ain't always pulled, what you might say, together—but he's square—kill you in a minute, if he took a notion—but he'd go to hell before he'd snitch. Have another drink, Ace-In-The-Hole, 'twon't hurt you none—only rum—an' water-weak."

Before he knew it the glass was in his hand, and again Brent drank.

After that he took them as they came. The bottle was emptied and tossed into the corner where the drunken klooch recovered it and holding it to her lips, greedily sucked the few drops that remained in the bottom. Another bottle was produced, and Brent, his brain fired by the raw liquor, measured glasses, drink for drink, never noticing that the same liquor served, in the glasses of the other three, for round after round of libations.

"Wher's yer camp?" asked Claw, as he refilled the glasses.

"Bloody Falls," answered Brent, waxing loquacious. "Bloody Falls of the Coppermine, where old Samuel Hearne's Indians butchered the Eskimos."

"Butchered the Eskimos!" exclaimed Claw, "What d'you mean—butchered? I ain't heard 'bout no Huskies bein' killed, an' who in hell's Sam Hearne? I be'n round here, off an' on, fer long while, an' I ain't never run acrost no Sam Hearne. What be you handin' us? You ort to start a noospaper."

Brent laughed uproariously: "No, Claw, I reckon you never ran across him. This happened over a hundred years ago—1771—July 13th, to be exact."

Asa Scroggs grinned knowingly: "Man kin lap up a hell of a lot of idees out of a bottle of hooch," he opined, "Mostly it runs to ph'los'fy, er fightin', er po'try, er singin', er religion, er women, er sad mem'ries—but this here stale news idee is a new one. But, g'wan, Ace-In-The-Hole, did the Mounted git Sam fer his murdersome massacres?"

"That was a hundred years before the Mounted was thought of," answered Brent, eying

Scroggs truculently, as his inflamed brain sought hidden insult in the words.

"I always know'd I was born too late," laughed Claw, who, noting the signs of approaching trouble, sought peace. "This here'd be a hell of a fine country, if it wasn't fer the Mounted. But, say, Ace-In-The-Hole, you doin' any good? Struck any color?"

Brent forgot Scroggs and turned to Claw: "No, not to speak of. Just about made wages."

"Well," continued the hooch runner, "You had a pretty fair sack of dust when you come in. What d'you say we start a little game of stud—jest the four of us?"

"Nothing doing," answered Brent, shortly. "I'm off of stud."

"Off of stud!" exclaimed the other, "How in hell d'you ever expect to git even? Stud owes you more dust than you kin pile on a sled!"

Brent drank a glass of rum: "The game can keep what it owes me. And besides I left my dust in camp—except a couple of ounces, or so."

"Yer finger bet goes with me," assured Claw, "Everybody's wouldn't, by a damn sight—but yourn does. What d'you say?"

"My word is good in a game, is it?" asked Brent.

"Good as the dust—in one, or out of one," promptly assured Claw.

"Well, then listen to this: I gave my word in the presence of the man who staked me for this trip, that I would never gamble again. So I reckon you know how much stud I'll play from now on."

"Gawd A'mighty!" breathed Claw, incredulously, "An' the game owin' you millions. Well, have a drink on it, anyway."

Claw refilled Brent's glass, and thrust it into his hand, with a wink at the captain, for he had been quick to note that the liquor and the hot fetid air of the room was making Brent drowsy. His eyes had become dull and heavy lidded, and his chin rested heavily upon the throat of his parka. "Ain't happened to run onto a little bunch of Injuns, up the river, have you?" asked the man, as Brent gagged at the liquor.

"No," answered Brent, drowsily, "No Injuns in Copper Mountains—nothing in the mountains—nothing but snow." Gradually his eyes closed, and his head rolled heavily to one side. The drunken klooch rose to her knees, and with a maudlin giggle, seized Brent's half empty glass and drained it.

With a curse, the captain kicked her into her corner, and turned to Claw with a suggestive motion: "Slit his gullet, an' we'll slip him down a seal hole with some scrap iron on his legs. He's prob'bly lyin' 'bout leavin' the dust in camp."

Claw shook his head: "Not him," he opined, "Search him first."

The Captain and the mate subjected the unconscious man to a thorough search, at the conclusion of which Scroggs tossed a small lean gold sack upon the table. "Prob'ly all he's got left, anyhow," he growled in disgust. "Le's jest weight him an' slip him through the ice the way he is. 'Tain't so messy."

"Not by a damn sight!" objected Claw. "It's jest like I told you, when we was watchin' him through the glass. He's got anyways clost to a hundred ounces. I seen it, when he paid me fer the hooch, like I was tellin' you."

"Well, we kin back-track him to his camp, an' if we can't find it we kin put the hot irons to the Injun's feet till he squeals."

"The Injun don't know where it's at," argued Claw contemptuously, "He's too damn smart to trust a Siwash. An' you bet he's got it *cached* where we couldn't find it. He wouldn't leave it round where the first bunch of Huskies that come along could lift it, would he?"

"Well," growled the Captain, "Yer so damn smart, what's yer big idee?"

"We got to let him go. Put back his little two ounces, so he won't suspicion nothin'. Then, when he wakes up, I'll slip him a bottle of hooch fer a present, an' he'll hit fer camp and start in on it. It won't last long, an' then you an' me an' Scroggs will happen along with more hooch to sell him. When he digs up the dust to pay fer it, I'll tend to him. You two git the Injun—but *he's* mine. I've got a long score to settle with him—an' I know'd if I waited long enough, my time would come."

CHAPTER XVIII

LOST

Brent was conscious of a drone of voices. They came from a great distance—from so great a distance that he could not distinguish the words. He half-realized that somewhere, men were talking.

Befuddled, groping, his brain was struggling against the stupor that had held him unconscious for an hour. Two months before, half the amount of liquor he had taken into his system would have drugged him into a whole night's unconsciousness, but the life in the open, and the hard work in the gravel and on the trail, had so strengthened him physically that the rum, even in the poisonous air of the cabin could not deaden him for long. Gradually, out of the drone of voices a word was sensed by his groping brain. Then a group of words. Where was he? Who were these men? And why did they persist in talking when he wanted to sleep? His head ached, and he was conscious of a dull pain in his cramped neck. He was about to shift into an easier position, when suddenly he realized where he was. He was drunk—in the filthy cabin of the *Belva Lou*—and the voices were the voices of Claw, and the mate, and the Captain, who were still at their liquor. A wave of sickening remorse swept him. He, Carter Brent, couldn't keep away from the hooch. Even in the vile cabin of the *Belva Lou*, he had fallen for it. It was no use. He would kill himself—would blow his worthless brains out and be done with it, rather than face—A sudden savage rage obsessed him. Kill himself, he would, but first—he would rid the North of these vultures.

He was upon the point of leaping to his feet, and with his fists, his chair—anything that came to hand, annihilating the brutish occupants of the cabin, when the gruff voice of the Captain cut in upon Claw's droning monotone.

"An' when we git him an' his Injun planted, me an' Asa'll take his dogs an' hit back here, an' you kin strike east along the coast till you pick up another woman. It's a damn outrage—that's what it is! Chargin' me fifty dollars apiece fer greasy old pelters like them, that ain't worth the grub they eat! What I want is a young one—good lookin' an' young."

"You had yer pick out of the eight," growled Claw.

"An' a hell of a pick it was! Why, I've went out an' rustled 'em myself, an' fer a sack of flour, an' a half a dozen fish-hooks, an' mebbe a file er two, I've got the pick of a hull village."

Brent's brain cleared gradually as he listened to the villainous dialogue. Vaguely he sensed that it was himself and Joe Pete that the Captain spoke of "planting." So they intended to murder him, did they? And, when that detail had been attended to, they would go on with their traffic in "winter wives." But, they did not intend to kill him here on board the vessel. The Captain had spoken of coming back, after the deed was done. Where would they take him? Brent suddenly found himself possessed by curiosity. He decided to wait and see. And, when the time came, he would give as good an account of himself as he could—and then—what difference did it make? They were not fit to live. He would kill them if he could—or maybe they would kill him. But he was not fit to live either. He had sat at table with them—had fraternized with them—drank liquor in the stinking cabin with the scum of the earth. He was no better than they—he was one of them. The bottle scraped along the table, and he could hear the audible gulping of liquor, the tap of the returned glasses, and the harsh rasping of throats as they were cleared of the fiery bite.

Then the voice of Claw: "You ain't had no pick of a village since the Mounted begun patrolin' the coast."

"Damn the Mounted!"

"Yeh, that's what I say. But damnin' 'em don't git red of 'em. Facts is, they're here, an' every year it's harder an' harder fer a man to make a livin'. But listen, Cap, I've got one bet up my sleeve. But it'll cost you more'n any fifty dollars—er a hundred, either. She ain't no Husky—she's an Injun breed—an' damn near white. Her name's Snowdrift—an' she's the purtiest thing in the North. I've had my eyes on her fer a couple of years. She was in the mission over on the Mackenzie. But she ain't there no more. She's way up the Coppermine, with a band of about twenty Dog Ribs." Claw paused to pour a glass of liquor, and Brent felt the blood pounding his eardrums in great surging throbs. He felt the sweat break out on his forehead and the palms of his hands, and it was only by a superhuman effort that he continued to feign sleep. Surely, they would notice the flush on his face, the sweat glistening on his forehead and the dryness of his lips—but, no—Claw was speaking again:

"I tried to buy her once—last year it was, offen her mother—offered her a thousan' dollars, cash money—an' 'fore I know'd what happened, the damned old squaw had me about half killed. She's a hell cat. She done it barehanded—clawed my eyes, an' clawed out a hull handful of whiskers—you kin see that patch on my throat where they never grow'd back. It was over near Good Hope, an' I didn't dast to make no holler, nor kill her neither, on account of the Mounted—but I'll get her yet. An' when I do, I'll learn her to pull folks whiskers out by the ruts when they're tryin' to do the right thing by her!"

"You won't git no thousan' dollars from me!" exploded the Captain, "They ain't no woman, white, red, brown, yaller, or black that's worth no thousan' dollars o' my money!"

"Oh, ain't they?" sneered Claw, "Well you don't git her then. Fact is I never figgered on sellin' her to you, nohow. I kin take her over to Dawson an' make ten thousan' offen her in six months' time. They got the dust over there, an' they ain't afraid to spend it—an' they know a good lookin' woman when they see one. I'm a tellin' you they ain't no woman ever hit the Yukon that kin anyways touch her fer looks—an' I've saw 'em all. The only reason I'm offerin' her to you is

because I kin run her up here a damn sight easier than I kin take her clean over to Dawson—an' with a damn sight less risk, too."

"How old is she?" growled the Captain.

"Ain't a day over twenty. She's dirt cheap at a thousan'. You could have her all winter, an' next summer you could slip into one of them coast towns, Juneau, or Skagway, or even the ones farther north, an' make five or ten times what you paid fer her."

"But s'pose she got spunky, an' I'd kill her, or knock out her teeth, er an eye—then where'd my profits be? Women's hell to handle if they take a notion."

"That's your lookout. It's your money that's invested, an' if you ain't got sense enough to look after it, it's your funeral—not mine."

"How you goin' to git her here? How you goin' to git her away from the Injuns? An' how do you know where she's at?"

"It's like this. Last summer she leaves the mission an' her an' the old squaw talks the Dog Ribs into hittin' over onto the Coppermine to prospect. They gits over there an' builds 'em a camp, an' starts in trappin' an' prospectin'. But a couple of the bucks has got a thirst fer hooch, an' they can't git none so they pulls out an' hits back fer the Mackenzie. I run onto one of 'em an' he give me the dope—he's the one that's here with me, an' he's goin' to guide me down to the village when I git ready to go. That's why I asked Ace-In-The-Hole if he'd saw 'em. I didn't want him buttin' in on the deal—the old squaw's bad enough, but Gawd! I seen him kill three men in about a second in a saloon in Dawson over a stud game—bare handed. They ain't no woman ever got her hooks into him—not even The Queen of the Yukon—an' she done her damndest—really loved him, an' all that sort of bunk. I know all about women, an' she'd of run straight as hell if he'd of married her—some says she's run straight ever sense she got caked in on him—even after she seen it wasn't no use. He kind of sticks up fer 'em all. Anyways, he knocked hell out of me one night when I was lacin' it to a gal I'd brung into the country with a dog whip. He won't stand fer no rough stuff when they's women mixed up in it, an' I'd ruther be in hell with my legs cut off than have him find out what we was up to. I don't want none of his meat—me!"

"Better go easy with yer jaw then," advised the Captain, "Mebbe he ain't so damn dead to the world as he's lettin' on."

Claw laughed: "I've got him gauged. I've studied him 'cause I aimed to git him sometime. He's a hooch-hound right. Half what he's drunk today will put him dead fer hours. You could pull all his teeth an' he'd never feel it. No, we ain't got to bother about him. He'll be out of the way before I hit fer the Injun camp, anyhow. We'll wake him up after while, an' I'll give him the bottle of hooch, like I said, so he'll stay soused an' not move his camp, then we'll hit over there with more hooch, an' when he uncovers his dust we'll git him an' the Injun both. Your share of his dust will be half enough to pay fer the breed. But, before we start out you fork over half the price—balance payable on delivery, an' me an' the Injun'll hit on up the river an' fetch back the girl. It'll cost you a keg of rum besides the thousan', 'cause the only way to git her away from them Siwashes'll be to git 'em all tanked up. They'll be right fer it, bein' off the hooch as long as they have. But, at that, I better take along a man or two of the crew, to help me handle 'em."

"We won't bother none of the crew," rasped the Captain, harshly. "I'll jest go 'long myself. With five hundred dollars of my dust in yer jeans fer a starter after ye'd got her, ye might git to thinkin' o' them ten thousan' you could make off her in Dawson—not that I wouldn't trust you, you understand, but jest to save myself some worry while you was gone, then, if she's as good lookin' as you say, I'd ruther be along myself than let you an' some of the crew have her till you get here."

Brent's first sensation when he heard the name of Snowdrift upon Claw's lips had been one of blind, unreasoning fury, but his brain cleared rapidly as the man proceeded, and as he listened to the unspeakable horror of the conversation, the blind fury gave place to a cold, deadly rage. He realized that if he were to save the woman he loved from a fate more horrible than he had ever conceived of, he must exert the utmost care to make no false move. His heart chilled at the thought of what would have happened to her had he yielded to the first blind impulse to launch himself at the throats of the men there in the little cabin where all the odds were against him. A pistol shot, a blow from behind, and Snowdrift would have been left absolutely in the power of these fiends.

Cold sober, now, his one thought was to get out of the cabin, yet he dared not move. Should he show signs of returning consciousness he knew that suspicion would immediately fasten upon him, and that his life would not be worth a penny. He must wait until they roused him, and even then, he must not be easily roused. Claw had assured the Captain that half the amount of liquor would deaden him for hours, therefore he must play his part. But could he? Was it humanly possible to endure the physical torture of his cramped position. Every muscle of his body ached horribly. His head ached, he was consumed with torturing thirst, and his mouth was coated with a bitter slime. Added to this was the brain torture of suspense when his every instinct called for action. Suppose they should change their minds. He dared not risk opening his eyes to the merest slit, because he knew that Claw or the Captain might be holding a knife to his ribs, or a pistol at his head. Any moment might be his last—and then—Snowdrift—he dared not even shudder at the thought. There was another danger, suppose he should over-play his part, when they undertook to awaken him, or should under-play it? He knew to a certainty that one false move would mean

death without a chance to defend himself, unarmed as he was and with the odds of three to one against him.

An interminable period, during which the men talked and wrangled among themselves, was interrupted by a loud knock upon the door.

"Who's there?" roared the Captain, "An' what d'ye want?"

"Dat me—Joe Pete," came a familiar voice from beyond the door. "An' I'm t'ink dat tam we goin' back. She start to snow, an' I ain' lak we git los'. Too mooch no trail."

"Might's well git 'em started now as anytime," whispered Claw. "*We* don't want 'em to git lost, neither. What we want is fer 'em to git to their camp an' then the snow an' the hooch'll hold 'em till we git there."

"Next thing is to git him woke up," answered the Captain. Aloud, he called to Joe Pete: "All right, come on in an' give us a hand, yer pardner's stewed to the guards, an' it ain't goin' to be no cinch to wake him up."

The door opened, and Brent's heart gave a leap as he felt the hand of the big Indian upon his shoulder. If anything should go wrong now, at least the odds against him were greatly reduced insofar as the occupants of the cabin were concerned. But, there would still be the crew—they could shoot from the cover of the igloos— The hand was shaking him roughly, and it was with a feeling of vast relief that Brent allowed his head to roll about upon the stiffened muscles of his neck. A glass was pressed to his lips, and there was nothing feigned in the coughing with which he sought to remove the strangling liquor from his throat. His eyes opened, and the next instant a dipper of cold water was dashed into his face. The shaking continued, and he babbled feeble protest: "Lemme 'lone. G'way—le'me sleep!" The shaking was redoubled, and Brent blinked stupidly, and feigned maudlin anger as the Indian slapped him with the flat of his hand, first on one cheek and then on the other. "Who you slappin'," he muttered, thickly, as he staggered to his feet and stood swaying and holding to the table for support, "C'm on an' fight!" he challenged, acting his part to a nicety, glaring owlishly about, "I c'n lick y'all. Gi'me some water, I'm burnin' up." A dipper of water was thrust into his hands and he drained it in huge gulps, "What's goin' on here?" he asked, apparently revived a little by the water, "Gi'me some hooch!"

Claw laid a conciliating hand upon his arm: "Listen, Ace-In-The-Hole," he purred, "Not no more hooch right now. It's startin' to snow, an' you got to be hittin' fer camp. Look a here," he picked up a corked bottle and extended it to Brent, "Here's a bottle fer you. Wait till you git to camp, and then go to it. 'Twon't take you only a little while—but you got to git goin'. If she thicks up on you before you git to the mountains you'll be in a hell of a fix—but you got time to make it if the Siwash will shove the dogs along. Better let him ride the sled," he said, turning to Joe Pete, "You'll make better time."

Brent took the bottle and slipped it beneath his parka: "How much?" he asked, fumbling clumsily for his sack.

"That's all right," assured Claw, "Tain't nothin' 't all. It's a present from me an' Cap. Shows we know how to treat a friend. Come over an' see us agin, when the storm lets up. Yer welcome to anything we got."

"Much 'blige, Claw," mumbled Brent, blinking with solemn gravity, as he smothered an impulse to reach out and crush the man's wind-pipe in the grip of his hand, "Didn't know you was good fren' of mine. Know it—now—an' you, too, Cap—an' you, too, Snaggs."

"Scroggs," corrected the mate, "Asa Scroggs."

"Sure—Scroggs—'scuse me—mus' be little full. My name's Ace, too—Ace-In-The-Hole—pair of aces, haw, haw, haw! Pair to draw to, I'll say. Well, s'long. Tell you what," he said, as he turned to the door, leaning heavily upon Joe Pete, "You come on over to my camp, when the storm lets up. Right on the river—can't miss it—Bloody Falls—where Old Hearne's Injuns butchered the poor Eskimos—damn shame! Bring over plenty of hooch—I've got the dust to pay for it—bring dozen bottles—plenty dust back there in camp—an' it'll be my treat."

"We'll come," the Captain hastened to accept, "Might's well be good friends. Neighbors hain't none too thick in these parts. We'll come, won't we Claw—an' we'll bring the hooch."

Stumbling and mumbling, Brent negotiated the narrow ally and the steep flight of stairs in the wake of Joe Pete. At the head of the ladder that led down the ship's side, he managed to stumble and land harmlessly in a huge pile of snow that had been shoveled aside to make a path to the igloos, and amid the jibes of the two sailors who were cutting blubber, allowed Joe Pete to help him onto the sled.

The wind had risen to half a gale. Out of the northeast it roared, straight across the frozen gulf from the treeless, snow-buried wastes of Wollaston Land, driving before it flinty particles of snow that hissed earthward in long cutting slants.

Heading the dogs southward, Joe Pete struck into the back-trail and, running behind, with a firm grip on the tail-rope, urged them into a pace that carried the outfit swiftly over the level snow-covered ice.

Upon the sled Brent lay thinking. Now that the necessity for absolute muscle control no longer

existed, the condition of cold hate into which he had forced himself gave place to a surge of rage that drove his nails into his palms, and curses from his lips, as he tried in his unreasoning fury to plan extermination of the two fiends who had plotted the soul-murder of his wonder woman. He would tear them to shreds with his two hands. He would shoot them down from ambush without a chance to protect themselves, as they searched for his camp among the rock-ridges of Bloody Falls.

Gradually the fume of fury cooled and he planned more sanely. He was conscious of a torturing thirst. The bottle of hooch pressed against his side, and carefully so as not to disturb the covering robe, he drew it from beneath his parka. He was cold sober, now. The shock of what he had heard in the cabin of the *Belva Lou* had completely purged his brain of the effect of the strong liquor. But not so his body. Every nerve and fibre of him called for more liquor. There was a nauseating sickness in his stomach, a gnawing dryness in his throat, and a creeping coldness in his veins that called for the feel of the warm glow of liquor. Never in his life had the physical desire for drink been more acute—but his brain was cold sober.

Nothing of the heart-sickening remorse of his first moments of consciousness assailed him now. What was done was done. He knew that he had yielded to his desire for drink, had weakly succumbed to the first temptation, as he had always weakly succumbed—an act, in itself contemptible. But with an ironical smile he realized that his very weakness had placed him in a position to save from a fate a thousand times more horrible than death, the girl who had become dearer to him than life itself. But, with that realization, came also the realization that only by the merest accident, had the good been born of evil, that the natural and logical result of his act would have had its culmination at Bloody Falls when he and Joe Pete would have sunk down dead upon the snow at the moment he produced the gold to pay for more hooch. Claw had laid his plans along the logical sequence of events. "He played me for a drunkard, as he had a right to," muttered Brent. "And his scheme would have worked except for one little mistake. He forgot to figure that physically I'm a better man than I was back at Dawson. He thought he had me gauged right, and so he talked. But—he over-played his hand. An hour ago, I was a drunkard. Am I a drunkard now? It is the test," he muttered, "The war is on," and with a grim tightening of the lips, he thrust the bottle back under his parka.

Three times within the next two hours he withdrew the bottle. And three times he returned it to its place. He thought of tossing it into the snow—and a moment later, angrily dismissed the thought. "*She* wouldn't ask odds of the hooch and I won't either! I'll keep this bottle right with me. I'll fight this fight like a man—like a Brent! And, by God, when I win, it won't be because I couldn't get the hooch! It will be because I wouldn't drink it when I had it!"

And, the next moment, to the utter astonishment of Joe Pete, he leaped perfectly sober from the sled, and took his place at the tail-rope with a laughing command to the Indian to take a rest on the robes.

An hour later, Brent halted the dogs and aroused Joe Pete. "We ought to have hit shore by this time," he said, "I'm afraid something's wrong."

The snow had thickened, entirely obliterating the trail, and forming an opaque wall through which the eye could penetrate but a short distance beyond the lead dog.

The Indian noted the course, and the direction of the wind. "Mebbe-so win' change," he opined, and even as he spoke the long sweeping lines of snow were broken into bewildering zig-zags. A puff of wind coming at a right angle from the direction of the driving gale was followed by another blustering puff from the opposite direction, and they came thick and fast from every direction, and seemingly from all directions at once. The snow became powder-fine and, in a confusion of battering blasts, the two men pushed uncertainly on.

CHAPTER XIX

TRAPPED

For three days the Arctic blizzard raged and howled, and drifted the snow deep over the igloos that were grouped about the hulk of the *Belva Lou*. On the morning of the fourth day Claw and the Captain made their way across the snow-buried deck and gazed out toward the distant ridges of the Copper Mountains.

"Might's well git started," opined Claw, "Have 'em load a week's grub onto my sled, an' you an' me, an' the Dog Rib'll hit out."

"Will a week's grub be enough?" growled the Captain, "It's goin' to be a hell of a trip. Mebbe we'd ort to wait a couple o' days an' see what the weather'll do."

"Wait—hell!" cried Claw, "What's the use waitin'? The b'rom'ter's up, an' you know damn well we ain't in fer no more storm fer a week er two. What we want to do is to git over to Bloody Falls before Ace-In-The-Hole takes a notion to break camp. An' what's the use of packin' more grub? We'll have his won't we?"

"He ain't goin' to break camp till we come along with the hooch," argued the other, "Couple days more an' this snow will be settled an' the goin'll be easier."

"If you don't want to go, you kin stay here," retorted Claw, "Me—I ain't goin' to take no chances. I an' the Dog Rib kin handle them two, if you don't want none of it. An' then we'll shove on to the Injun camp an' git the girl, an' I'll jest slip on over to Dawson with her—a thousan' dollars is too cheap, anyhow. If I hadn't of b'n lit up I'd never offered her to you fer no such figger."

"A trade's a trade," interrupted the Captain. "If yer so hell-bent on goin', I'll go along." He shouted the necessary orders to the sailors who were clearing the snow from the doorways of the igloos, and the two turned to the cabin.

"I'll take that five hundred now, before we start, an' you kin give me the balance when we git back with the girl," suggested Claw.

"Ye said there'd be five hundred apiece in Ace-In-The-Hole's sack," reminded the Captain, "I'll pay the first installment with that."

"You will, like hell! You'll pay me now. We ain't got that sack yet. Come acrost."

"I'll give ye an order on——"

"You'll give me an order on no one! You'll count out five hundred, cash money—dust, er bills, right here in this cabin, 'fore we budge an inch. You've got it—come acrost!"

After much grumbling the Captain produced a roll of bills and counting off five hundred dollars, passed the money reluctantly across the table to Claw, who immediately stowed it away. "Don't forget to have 'em put a keg of rum on the sled," he reminded, "We'll need it when we get to the Injuns. Not half water, neither. What we want this trip is the strong stuff that'll set 'em afire."

"You got to stand your half o' the rum. We're pardners on this."

"I stand nothin'. You put up the rum, an' the grub, an' a thousan' dollars fer the girl. My contract is to git her, an' deliver her on board the *Belva Lou*. The only thing we're pardners on is Ace-In-The-Hole's dust. A trade's a trade—an' you got all the best of it, at that."

Late that afternoon Claw and the Captain, and the renegade Dog Rib reached the Bloody Falls of the Coppermine, and searched vainly for Brent's camp.

"Pulled out!" cried the Captain, after an hour's search along the base of the upstanding rock ledges.

Claw shook his head: "They never got here," he amended, "The storm got bad before they hit the ridges, an' they're lost."

"Where's the camp, then?"

Claw indicated the high piled snow: "Tent was only pegged to the snow. Wind blew it down, and the fresh snow buried it. We'll camp an' hang around a couple of days. If they weathered the storm, they'll be along by that time. If they didn't—well, they won't bother us none with the girl."

"But, how about the dust?" asked the Captain, "If they don't come, we've got to find the camp."

Claw laughed: "You'll have a hell of a time doin' it! With the snow piled twenty foot deep along them ledges. If they don't show up, we'll shove on to the Injuns. It's clost to a hundred an' fifty mile to the camp, accordin' to the Dog Rib, an' it'll take us anyways a week to make it, with the goin' as bad as it is."

"An' if we hang around here fer a couple o' days, that'll make nine days, with a week's grub. What ye goin' to do 'bout that? I told ye we'd ort to take more."

"Yer head don't hurt you none—the way you work it, does it?" sneered Claw, "I s'pose we couldn't send the Dog Rib back fer some more grub while we was awaitin'? An' while he's gone you kin git a belly full of rootin' up the snow to find the camp."

For two days Claw laid in the tent and laughed at the Captain's sporadic efforts to uncover Brent's camp. "If you'd help, 'stead of layin' around laughin', we might find it!" flared the Captain.

"I don't want to find it," jeered Claw, "I'm usin' my head—me. The main reason I come here was to kill Ace-In-The-Hole, so he couldn't butt in on the other business. If the storm saved me the trouble, all right."

"But, the dust!"

"Sure—the dust," mocked Claw. "If we find the camp, an' locate the dust, I divide it up with you. If we don't—I slip up here in the spring, when you're chasin' whales, an' with the snow melted off all I got to do is reach down an' pick it up—an' they won't be no dividin', neither."

"What's to hinder me from slippin' in here long about that time? Two kin play that game."

"Help yerself," grinned Claw, "Only, the Mounted patrol will be along in the spring, an' they'll give you a chanct to explain about winterin' them klooches on the *Belva Lou*. You've forgot, mebbe, that such customs is frowned on."

"Ye damn double dealin' houn'!" cried the Captain, angrily.

"Double dealin', eh? I s'pose I'd ort to be out there breakin' my back diggin' in the snow, so I could divvy up with you dust that I could have all to myself, by takin' it easy. I offered to share the dust with you, cause I figgered I needed yer help in bumpin' off them two. If you don't help, you don't git paid, an' that's all there is to it."

The Indian returned with the provisions, and in the morning of the third day they struck out up the Coppermine, with the Indian breaking trail ahead of the dogs.

"I didn't expect 'em to show up," grinned Claw, as he trudged along behind the Captain. "I figgered if they didn't make camp that first stretch, they never would make it. Full of hooch, a man ain't fit to hit the trail even in good weather. He thinks he kin stand anything—an' he can't stand nothin'. The cold gits him. Here's what happened. The storm gits thick, an' they git off the course. The Siwash is lost an' he tries to wake up Ace-In-The-Hole. He finds the bottle of hooch—and that's the end of the Siwash. Somewheres out on the sea-ice, or in under the snow on the flats they's two frozen corpses—an' damn good reddence, I says."

Shortly after noon of the sixth day on the trail, the Dog Rib halted abruptly and stood staring in bewilderment at a little log cabin, half buried in the snow, that showed between the spruce trunks upon the right bank of the stream. Claw hastened forward, and spoke to him in jargon. The Indian shook his head, and by means of signs and bits of jargon, conveyed the information that the cabin did not belong to the Indian camp, and that it had not been there at the time he fled from the camp. He further elucidated that the camp was several miles along.

"Must be some of 'em got sore at the rest, an' moved up here an' built the shack," opined Claw, "Anyways, we got to find out—but we better be heeled when we do it." He looked to his revolver, and stooping, picked up a rifle from the sled. The Captain followed his example, and Claw ordered the Indian to proceed. No one had appeared, and at the foot of the ascent to the cabin, Claw paused to examine a snow-covered mound. The Captain was about to join him when, with a loud yell of terror, he suddenly disappeared from sight, and the next moment the welkin rang with his curses, while Claw laughing immoderately at the mishap, stood peering into Brent's brush-covered shaft. It was but the work of a few moments to haul the discomfited Captain from the hole. "Shaft, an' an ore dump," explained Claw. "This here's a white man's layout, an' he's up to date, too. They ain't be'n burnin' in, even on the Yukon, only a year or so. Wonder who he is?"

The two followed the Indian who had halted before the cabin, and stood looking down at the snowshoe trail that led from the door.

"Off huntin', I guess. Er over to the Injun camp. Looks like them tracks was made yesterday. He ain't done no work in the shaft though sence the storm. We'll go in an' make ourself to home till he gits back, anyhow. I don't like the idee of no white man in here. 'Cordin' to who it is—but——"

"Mebbe it ain't a white man," ventured the Captain.

"Sure it's a white man. Didn't I jest tell you that burnin' in ain't no Injun trick?"

"Dog Rib snowshoes," suggested the Indian in jargon, pointing to the tracks.

"That don't prove nothin'," retorted Claw, "He could of got 'em from the Injuns, couldn't he? They's two of 'em lives here," he added, from the interior. "Unharness the dogs, while I build up a fire."

From the moment of Brent's departure, Snowdrift bent all her energies persuading the Indians to burn into the gravel for gold. At first her efforts were unavailing. Even Wananebish refused to take any interest in the proceeding, so the girl was forced to cut her own wood, tend her own fire, and throw out her own gravel. When, however, at the end of a week she panned out some yellow gold in the little cabin, as she had seen Brent do, the old squaw was won completely over, and thereafter the two women worked side by side, with the result that upon the test panning, Snowdrift computed that they, too, were taking out almost an ounce a day apiece. When the other Indians saw the gold they also began to scrape away the snow, and to cut wood and to build their fires on the gravel. Men and women, and even the children worked all day and took turns tending the fire at night. Trapping and hunting were forgotten in the new found craze for gold, and it became necessary for Snowdrift to tole off hunters for the day, as the supply of meat shrank to an alarming minimum.

By the end of another week interest began to flag. The particles of gold collected in the test pannings were small in size, and few in number, the work was hard and distasteful, and it became more and more difficult for the girl to explain to them that these grains were not the ultimate reward for the work, that they were only tests, and that the real reward would not be visible until spring when they would clean up the gravel dumps that were mounding up beside the shafts. The Indians wanted to know how this was to be accomplished, and Snowdrift suddenly realized that she did not know. She tried to remember what Brent had told her of the sluicing out process, and realized that he had told very little. Both had been content to let the details go until such time as the sluicing should begin. Vaguely, she told the Indians of sluice boxes and riffles, but they were quick to see that she knew not whereof she spoke. In vain, she told them that Brent would explain it all when he returned, but they had little use for this white man who had no hooch to trade. At last, in desperation, she hit upon the expedient of showing the Indians more

gold. From Brent's sack she extracted quantities of dust which she displayed with pride. The plan worked at first, but soon, the Indians became dissatisfied with their own showing, and either knocked off altogether, or ceased work on the shafts and began to laboriously pan out their dumps, melting the ice for water, and carrying the gravel, a pan at a time, to their cabins.

This too, was abandoned after a few days, and the Indians returned to their traps, and to the snaring of rabbits. Only Snowdrift and old Wananebish kept up to the work of cutting and hauling the wood, tending the fires, and throwing out the gravel. Despite the grueling toil, Snowdrift found time nearly every day to slip up and visit Brent's cabin. Sometimes she would go only to the bend of the river and gaze at it from a distance. Again she would enter and sit in his chair, or moving softly about the room, handle almost reverently the things that were his, wiping them carefully and returning them to their place. She purloined a shirt from a nail above his bunk, and carrying it home used it as a pattern for a wonderfully wrought shirt of buckskin and beads. Each evening, she worked on the shirt, while Wananebish sat stolidly by, and each night as she knelt beside her bunk she murmured a prayer for the well-being of the big strong man who was hers.

But whether it was at the shaft, at her needle, at her devotions, or upon her frequent trips to his cabin, her thoughts were always of Brent, and her love for him grew with the passing of the days until her longing for his presence amounted, at times, almost to a physical pain. One by one, she counted the days of his absence, and mentally speculated upon his return. After the second week had passed she never missed a day in visiting his cabin. Always at the last bend of the river, she quickened her steps, and always she paused, breathless, for some sign of his return.

"Surely, he will come soon," she would mutter, when the inspection showed only the lifeless cabin, or, "He will come tomorrow." When the seventeenth and the eighteenth days had passed, with no sign of him, the girl, woman like, began to conjure up all sort and manner of dire accident that could have befallen him. He might have been drowned upon a thinly crusted rapid. He might have become lost. Or frozen. Or, ventured upon a snow cornice and been dashed to pieces upon the rocks below. Every violent death known to the North she pictured for him, and as each picture formed in her brain, she dismissed it, laughed at her fears, and immediately pictured another.

On the nineteenth day she chopped wood until the early darkness drove her from her tasks, then she returned to the cabin and, fastening on her snowshoes, struck off down the river. "Surely, he will be here today," she murmured, "If he is not here today I will know something has happened, and tomorrow I shall start out to find him. But, no—I am foolish! Did he not say it would be two weeks—a month—maybe longer—those were his very words. And it is only nineteen days, and that is not a month. But, he will come sooner!" She flushed deeply, "He will come to *me* —for he does love me, even as I love him. In his eyes I have seen it—and in his voice—and in the touch of his hand."

The last bend was almost in sight and she quickened her pace. She knew to an inch, the exact spot from which the first glimpse of the cabin was to be had. She reached the spot and stared eagerly toward the spruce thicket. The next instant a glad cry rang out upon the still Arctic air. "Oh, he has come! He has come! The light is in his window! Oh, my darling! My own, own man!"

Half laughing, half sobbing, she ran forward, urging her tired muscles to their utmost, stumbling, recovering, hurrying on. Only a minute more now! Up the bank from the river! And, not even pausing to remove her snowshoes, she burst into the room with Brent's name upon her lips.

The next instant the blood rushed from her face leaving it deathly white. She drew herself swiftly erect, and with a wild cry of terror turned to fly from the room. But her snowshoes fouled, and she fell heavily to the floor, just as Johnnie Claw, with a triumphant leer upon his bearded face leaped to the door, banged it shut, and stood with his back against it, leering and smirking down at her, while the Captain of the *Belva Lou* knelt over her and stared into her eyes with burning, bestial gaze.

CHAPTER XX

"YOU ARE WHITE!"

"So! my beauty!" grinned the Captain, "Fer once in his life Claw didn't lie. An' ye didn't wait fer us to go an' git ye—jest come right to us nice as ye please—an' saved me a keg o' rum." He rose with an evil leer. "An' now git up an' make yerself to home—an' long as ye do as I say, an' don't git yer back up, you an' me'll git along fine."

Frantic with terror the girl essayed to rise, but her snowshoes impeded her movements, so with trembling fingers she loosened the thongs and, leaping to her feet, backed into a corner, and stared in wide-eyed horror first at the Captain, then at Claw, the sight of whom caused her to shrink still further against the wall.

The man sneered: "Know me, eh? Rec'lect the time, over to the mission I tried to persuade you to make the trip to Dawson with me do you? Well, I made up my mind I'd git you. Tried to buy you

offen the squaw an' she like to tore me to pieces. I'd of kidnapped you then, if it hadn't be'n fer the Mounted. But I've got you now—got you an' sold you to him," he grinned, pointing to the Captain. "An' yer lucky, at that. Let me make you acquainted with Cap Jinkins. 'Tain't every breed girl gits to be mistress of a ship like the *Belva Lou*."

Her eyes blazing with anger, she pointed a trembling finger at Claw: "Stand away from that door! Let me go!"

"Oh, jest like that!" mocked the man. "If he says let you go, it's all right with me, pervided he comes acrost with the balance of the dust."

The Captain laughed, and turning to the Dog Rib, he ordered: "Slip out to the sled an' git a bottle o' rum, an' we'll all have a little drink."

For the first time Snowdrift noticed the presence of the Indian. "Yondo!" she screamed, "This is your work! You devil!" and beside herself with rage and terror, she snatched a knife from the table and leaped upon him like a panther.

"Git back there!" cried Claw, leveling his revolver.

Quick as a flash, the Captain knocked up the gun, pinioned the girl's arms from behind, and stood glaring over her shoulder at Claw: "Put up that gun, damn ye! An' look out who yer pullin' it on!"

"By God, that's my Injun! I ain't through with him, yet, an' there ain't no damn jade kin carve him up in under my nose."

"An' this here's my woman, too. An' there ain't no damn hooch runner kin pull a gun on her, neither!"

"Ain't no harm done," conciliated Claw, "An' I guess they ain't no call to fight over 'em. How about that drink?"

"Git it!" ordered the Captain, and as the cowering Dog Rib slunk from the room, he snatched the knife from the pinioned hand of the girl and hurled it under the bunk:

"An', now you hell-cat!" he rasped, pushing her from him, "You set to an' git supper! An' don't go tryin' no more monkey business, er I'll break ye in two! They seems to be grub enough here without usin' none of my own," he added, eying the supplies ranged along the opposite wall, "Who owns this shack, anyhow?"

"Carter Brent owns it," cried the girl, drawing herself erect and glaring into the man's eyes. It was as though the very mention of his name, nerved her to defiance. "And when he returns, he will kill you both—kill you! Do you hear?"

"It's a lie!" roared Claw, then paused, abruptly. "I wonder—maybe it is his shack. He come straight from the Yukon, an' that accounts fer the burnin' in."

"Know him?" asked the Captain.

"Know him!" growled Claw, "Yes, I know him—an' so do you. That's Ace-In-The-Hole's real name."

"The hell it is!" cried the Captain, and laughed uproariously. "So that's the way the wind blows! An' the breed's be'n livin' here with him! Things is sure comin' my way! That's most too good to be true—an' you misrepresentin' her to be a virgin, fresh from a school—ho, ho, ho!"

"What'd you mean?" snarled Claw, "How was I to know——"

"Whether ye know'd, er whether ye didn't, it didn't make no difference—I win either way."

"What d'you mean?" Claw repeated.

"You know what I mean," sneered the Captain, truculently, "Secondhand goods—half price—see?"

"You mean I don't git my other five hundred?" yelled Claw jerking the revolver from his holster and levelling at the Captain's head, "Is that what ye mean?"

Surprised at the suddenness of the action, the Captain was caught off guard, and he stood blinking foolishly into the mouth of the gun: "Well," he faltered, moistening his lips with his tongue, "Mebbe we might kind o' talk it over."

"The only talkin' over you'll git out of me, is to come acrost with the five hundred," sneered Claw.

"Ye know damn well I ain't got no five hundred with me. Wait till we git to the *Belva Lou*."

"I'll wait, all right—but not till we git to the *Belva Lou*. Me an' the girl will wait on shore, in sight of the *Belva Lou*, while you go out an' git the money an' fetch it back—an' you'll come back *alone* with it. An' what's more—you ain't ahead nothin' on the rum, neither. 'Cause I'm goin' to slip down to the Injun camp in about five minutes, an' the rum goes along. I'll be back by daylight, an' instead of the rum, I'll have all the fur—an' everything else them Dog Ribs has got. An' I'll git square with that damn squaw fer jerkin' that handful of whiskers out of me, too."

"That's all right, Johnnie," assured the Captain, still with his eyes on the black muzzle of the gun. "Take the rum along—only, we'd ort to split half an' half on that fur."

"Half an' half, hell! You got what you come after, ain't you? An' if I kin pick up an honest dollar on the side, that ain't no reason I should split it with you, is it? I'll jest leave you two to git acquainted while I slip down to the camp."

"Go ahead," grinned the Captain, "An' don't hurry back, we'll wait."

"Yer damn right you'll wait!" retorted Claw, "I'll have the dogs." In the doorway he paused, "An', by the way, Cap. Don't open that door till I git out of range—see?"

The moment the door closed behind Claw, the Captain placed his back against it and turned to the girl: "Git to work now an' git supper! We're goin' to hit the back-trail inside an' hour. We kin pack what grub we'll need, an' we'll git most a hull night's start, cause he'll be busy with them Injuns till mornin'."

Snowdrift confronted him with blazing eyes: At the words her blood seemed to freeze within her, leaving her cold and numb with horror. She had heard of the coastal traffic in winter wives, but always it had seemed to her a thing vague and unreal. But now the full hideousness of it stood revealed to her. She herself, at that very moment stood trapped, bought and sold—absolutely in the power of the two bearded beasts, who in the very loathsomeness of their filthy minds, discussed her as they would discuss a piece of merchandise, bargained and haggled over the price of her living body! A single ray of hope had dawned in her breast as the men began to quarrel. If they would only come to blows, and to grip-lock in their rage, she might be able to seize a weapon, or better still dash from the room. Once in the scrub, she could easily elude them. But the hope died when Claw covered the Captain with his gun. And with the hope died also the numbing terror. A strange, unnatural calm took possession of her. There was still one way out—and she would seek that way. As the two men stood facing each other, she had caught a glimpse of the blade of the knife that lay where the Captain had thrown it, beneath the edge of the bunk. Stealthily her moccasined foot had reached out and slid it toward her, and as the door opened upon Claw's departure, she had stooped swiftly and recovered it. She would plunge the blade into her own heart—no, better, she would attack the Captain now that they were alone, and either kill him, or by the very fury of her onslaught, would force him to kill her. So with the knife concealed by her folded arms, her eyes blazed defiance:

"I'll never cook your supper! You dog! You unspeakable devil! I'll kill you first—or you'll kill me!"

"Kill ye, eh?" sneered the man, "Well, I might, at that, if I didn't have five hundred good dollars tied up in ye. Guess they ain't much danger of me killin' ye till I get my money back, one way er another—an' I guess they ain't no one knows that no better'n what you do. An' as fer killin' *me*," he laughed, "You look spunky 'nough to—but I'm hard to kill—it's be'n tried."

"I've warned you!" cried the girl, "And I'll kill you!"

"Git to work! Damn ye!" snarled the Captain, "yer losin' time! You cook that supper, er by God I'll make ye wisht I had killed ye! I'll tame ye! I'll show ye who's boss! Mebbe you won't be so pretty when I git through with ye—but ye'll be tame!"

The innermost thought of her brain found voice in words, "Oh, if he were here!"

"Hollerin' fer yer man, eh," taunted the Captain, "Ye ain't his'n now, yer mine—an' he won't come cause he's dead——"

"Dead!" The word shrieked from the lips of the tortured girl, "No, no, no!"

"Yes, yes, yes," mocked the man, "He's dead an' froze hard as a capstan bar, somewheres upon the sea ice, an' his Injun, too. Got dead drunk upon the *Belva Lou*, an' started fer shore in the big storm—an' he never got there. So ye might's well make the best of it with me. An' I'll treat ye right if ye give me what I want. An' if ye don't give it, I'll take it—an' it'll be the worse fer you."

The girl scarcely heard the words. Brent was dead. Her whole world—the world that was just beginning to unfold its beauties and its possibilities to her—to hold promise of the wondrous happiness of which she had read and dreamed, but had never expected to realize—her whole world had suddenly come crashing about her—Brent was dead, and—like a flame of fire the thought flashed across her brain—the man responsible for his death stood before her, and was even now threatening her with a fate a thousand times worse than death.

With a wild scream, animal-like, terrifying in its fury, the girl sprang upon the man like a tiger. He saw the flash of the knife blade in the air, and warding off the blow with his arm, felt the bite and the hot rip of it as it tore into his shoulder. With a yell of pain and rage he struck blindly out, and his fist sent the girl crashing against the table. The force of the impact jarred the chimney from the little oil bracket-lamp, and the light suddenly dimmed to a red flaring half-gloom. Like a flash the girl recovered herself, and again she flew at the man whose hand gripped the butt of his revolver. Again he struck out to ward the blow, and by the merest accident the barrel of the heavy gun struck the wrist of the hand that held the knife hurling it from her grasp, while at the same time his foot tripped her and she crashed heavily to the floor. Before she could get up, the man was upon her, cursing, panting hot fury. Kicking, striking out, clawing like a wild cat, the girl managed to tear herself from his grasp, but as she regained her feet, a huge hand fastened in

the neck of her shirt. There was a moment of terrific strain as she pulled to free herself, holding to the stanchion of the bunk for support, then with a loud ripping sound the garment, and the heavy woolen undershirt beneath gave way, and the girl, stripped bare to the waist, stood panting with the table interposed between herself and the man who rose slowly to his feet. At the sight of her, half naked in the dimly wavering light of the flaring wick flame, his look suddenly shifted from mad fury to bestial desire. Deliberately he picked up the knife from the floor, and without taking his eyes from the girl opened the door and tossed it out into the snow. Then he returned the revolver to its holster and stared gloatingly at the white breasts that rose and fell convulsively, as the breath sobbed from the girl's lungs. And as she looked into his devouring eyes, abysmal terror once more seized hold of her, for the loathsome desire in those eyes held more of horror than had their blaze of fury.

The man moistened his thick lips, smacking them in anticipation, and as he slowly advanced to the table, his foot struck an object that felt soft and yielding to the touch, yet when he sought to brush it aside, it was heavy. He glanced down, and the next instant stooped swiftly and picked up Brent's sack of dust, which the girl had carried inside her shirt. For an instant, greed supplanted the lust in his eyes, and he laughed. Long and loud, he laughed, while the girl, pumping the air into her lungs, gained strength with every second. "So here's where he left his dust, is it? It's too good to be true! I pay five hundred fer the girl instead of a thousan', an' all the dust, that Claw'll be up scratchin' the gravel around Bloody Falls fer next summer. I guess that's poor—five hundred clean cash profit, an' the girl besides!"

The sight of Brent's gold in the man's foul clutch was too much for Snowdrift, and the next instant a billet of stovewood crashed against the wall within an inch of his head. With a low growl, he dropped the sack to the floor and started around the table. In vain the girl cast wildly about for some weapon, as, keeping the table between them, she milled round and round the room. In vain she tried each time she passed it, to wrench open the door. But always the man was too quick for her, and when finally, he pushed the table against it, she once more found herself cornered this time without a weapon, and half dead from fatigue. Slowly, deliberately, the man advanced upon her. When he reached out and touched her bare arm with a thick fingered, hairy hand, she shrieked aloud, and redoubled the fury of her attack, clawing and striking at his face. But, her onslaught was futile. He easily warded off her tiring efforts. Closer and closer he pressed, his eyes aglitter with the fever of lust, his thick lips twisted into a gloating grin, until his arms closed slowly about her waist and his body pressed hers backward onto the bunk.

Joe Pete wanted to camp, but Brent would have none of it. The storm thickened. The wind increased in fury, buffeting them about, and causing the dogs to whine and cringe in the harness until it became necessary to fasten a leash to the leader to prevent their bolting. Hopelessly lost though they were, Brent insisted upon pushing on. "The land lies this way," he kept saying, "and we'll strike it somewhere along the coast." Then he would appeal to the Indian who would venture no opinion whatever, frankly admitting he was lost, and always counseling the making of a camp. Finally, when darkness came they did camp, merely digging into the snow; and tossing blanket and robes and a little food into the pit, crawled in and drew the tarpaulin over them.

Brent slept little that first night. Over and over again he tried to reason out the course, and between times he lay hugging tightly his bottle of hooch. "I wouldn't lose you for a million," he muttered, as each tortured nerve of his body cried out for stimulant, and the little brain devils added their urge, and with sophistry and cunning excuse sought to undermine his resolve. "Just one drink." "You need it." "Taper off gradually." "It's medicine." But to the insidious suggestions of the brain devils he turned a deaf ear, and with clenched teeth, gripped his bottle. "I'll never want you—never need you any more than I do this night," he whispered into the dark. "Right now I'd give half my life for one big swig—but my life isn't mine to give now. It's hers—*hers*, do you hear! It's her fight that I'm fighting, now—and, by God, she's going to win!"

In the morning, despite the protest of Joe Pete, Brent pushed on. The storm had increased in fury, and it was with difficulty they kept their feet. Toward noon, both knew that they had gained land of some kind, for the terrain became rolling, and in places even hilly.

"We ain' goin' right fer de mountaine," shouted the Indian, with his lips close to Brent's ear. "Dey an' no leetle hill dere till we com' to de ridge."

"I don't care," yelled Brent, "We're heading south, and that's the main thing. We can hit for the river when the storm stops."

The third day was a repetition of the second, except that the hills became higher and more numerous, but entirely unlike the ridge formation of the Copper Mountains. That night the storm wore itself out, and the morning of the fourth day dawned bright and clear, with a wind blowing strongly.

"Well, where are we?" asked Brent, as he and Joe Pete ascended a nearby hillock to take observation of their surroundings.

For a long time the Indian studied the horizon, nor did he speak until every degree of the arc had been subjected to minute scrutiny.

"I'm t'ink, we com' too mooch far wes'," he observed, "I'm t'ink, we better strike eas', 'bout wan day, tomor'."

"Tomorrow!" cried Brent. "Why not today—now?"

The Indian pointed to the dogs. "Too mooch tired out. Too mooch no good. We got to res' today. Mebbe-so, travel tomor'!"

A glance at the dogs convinced Brent, anxious as he was to push on, that it would be useless to try it, for the dogs were in a pitiable condition from the three day fight with the storm. He wanted to make up a pack and push on alone, but the Indian dissuaded him.

"S'pose com' nudder beeg snow? W'at you do den, eh? You git los'. You trail git cover up. I kin no fin'. Dat better you wait." And wait they did, though Brent fretted and chafed the whole day through.

The following morning they started toward the southeast, shaping their course by a far-distant patch of timber that showed as a dark spot on the dazzling snow. The ground was broken and hard to travel, and their progress was consequently slow. At noon they cut a dog loose, and later another, the released animals limping along behind as best they could.

At noon of their seventh day of travel, the eighth after the storm, Brent, who was in the lead, halted suddenly and pointed to a small lake that lay a mile or more to the southward.

"I know that lake!" he cried, "It's the one where Snowdrift killed a caribou! The river is six or seven miles east of here, and we'll strike it just below our cabin."

"You sure 'bout dat'?." asked the Indian. "De dogs, w'at you call, all in. I ain' lak' we mak mor' travel we kin help."

"Yes—sure," exclaimed Brent, "I couldn't be mistaken. There is the point where we ate lunch—that broken spruce leaning against those two others."

"Dat good lan' mark," the Indian agreed, "I ain' t'ink you wrong now."

Joyously, Brent led off to the eastward. The pace was woefully slow, for of the seven dogs, only three remained, and the men were forced to work at pulling the sled. "We ought to make the cabin a little after dark," he figured, "And then—I'll grab a bite to eat and hit out for Snowdrift. Wonder if she's looking for me yet? Wonder if she's been thinking about me? It's—let's see—this is the nineteenth day—nineteen days since I've seen her—and it seems like nineteen years! I hate to tell her I didn't make a strike. And worst of all I hate to tell her about—what happened on the *Belva Lou*. But, I'll come clean. I will tell her—and I'll show her the bottle—and thank God I didn't pull the cork! And I never will pull it, now. I learned something out there in the snow—learned what a man can do." He grinned as he thought of Claw and the Captain of the *Belva Lou*, searching the Copper Mountains for his camp, so they could kill him and steal his dust. Then the grin hardened into a straight-lipped frown as he planned the vengeance that was to be his when they came after the girl.

"They won't be in any hurry about starting up river," he argued, "They'll hunt for me for a week. Then, when they do come—I'll kill 'em as I would kill so many mad dogs. I hate to shoot a man from ambush—but there's two of 'em, and I don't dare to take a chance. If they should get me—" he shuddered at the thought, and pressed on.

As he swung onto the river, a sharp cry escaped him and he stooped in the darkness to stare at a trail in the snow.

The cry brought Joe Pete to his side. "Those tracks!" rasped Brent, "When were they made? And who made 'em?"

The Indian stooped close and examined the trail. "Two—t'ree mans, an' a team," he muttered, "An' wan man dat Godam Johnnie Claw!"

"How do you know?" cried Brent, "How old are they?" And leaping to the sled, he cut the pack thongs with one sweep of his knife and grabbed up his rifle.

"I know dem track—seen um on Mackenzie. B'en gon' 'bout two t'ree hour!"

"Bring on the outfit!" Brent called over his shoulder, and the Indian stared in surprise as he watched the man strike out on the trail in great leaping strides.

The distance to the cabin was a scant mile, and Brent covered it without slackening his pace. At the foot of the bank, he noted with relief that the trail swung upward to his own cabin. If they had stopped, there was yet time. His first glance had detected no light in the window, but as he looked again, he saw that a peculiar dull radiance filtered through the oiled parchment that served as a glass. Cautiously he maneuvered up the bank, and made his way to the cabin, mentally debating with himself whether to burst in upon the occupants and chance a surprise, or to lie in wait till they came out. He stood in the shelter of the meat *cache* weighing his chances, when suddenly from beyond the log walls came the sound of a woman's scream—loud—shrill—terrible, it sounded, cutting the black silence of the night. What woman? There could be only one—with a low cry that sounded in his own ears like the snarl of a beast, he dropped the rifle and sprang against the door. It flew inward and for a second Brent could see nothing in the murky interior of the room. There was a sound from the bunk and, through the smoke haze he made out the face of the Captain of the *Belva Lou*. As the man sprang erect, their bodies met with an impact that carried them to the floor. Brent found himself on top, and the next instant his fingers

were twisting, biting into a hairy throat with a grip that crushed and tore. In his blind fury he was only half-conscious that heavy fists were battering at his face. Beneath him the body of the Captain lashed and struggled. The man's tongue lolled from his open mouth, and from beneath the curled lips came hoarse wheezing gasps, and great gulping strangling gurgles. A wave of exultation seized Brent as he realized that the thing that writhed and twisted in his grasp was the naked throat of a man. Vaguely he became conscious that above him hovered a white shape, and that the shape was calling his name, in strange quavering tones. He tightened his grip. There was a wild spasmodic heaving of the form beneath him—and the form became suddenly still. But Brent did not release his grasp. Instead he twisted and ground his fingers deeper and deeper into the flesh that yielded now, and did not writhe. With his face held close, he glared like a beast into the face of the man beneath him—a horrible face with its wide-sprung jaws exposing the slobbered tongue, the yellow snag-like teeth, the eyes, back-rolled until only the whites showed between the wide-staring lids, and the skin fast purpling between the upper beard and the mottled thatch of hair.

A hand fell upon his shoulder, and glancing up he saw Snowdrift and realized that she was urging him to rise. As in a dream he caught the gleam of white shoulders, and saw that one bare arm clasped a fragment of torn shirt to her breast. He staggered to his feet, gave one glance into the girl's eyes, and with a wild, glad cry caught her to him and pressed her tight against his pounding heart.

A moment later she struggled from his embrace. She flushed deeply as his eyes raised from her shoulders to meet her own. He was speaking, and at the words her heart leaped wildly.

"It's a lie!" he cried, "You are not a breed! I knew it! I knew it! My darling—you are white—as white as I am! Old Wananebish is not your mother! Do you hear? *You are white!*"

CHAPTER XXI

THE PASSING OF WANANEBISH

Stepping across to a duffle bag, Brent produced a shirt and an undershirt which he tossed to the girl who, in the weakness of sudden reaction had thrown herself sobbing upon the bunk.

"There, there, darling," he soothed, as with his back toward her, his eyes roved about the room seeking to picture, in the wild disorder, the terrific struggle that had taken place. "Put on those things, and then you can tell me all about it. You're all right now, dear. I will never leave you again."

"But—oh, if you had not come!" sobbed the girl.

"But, I did come, sweetheart—and everything is all right. Forget the whole horrid business. Come, we will go straight to Wananebish. Not another hour, nor a minute will we wait. And we will make her tell the truth. I have never believed you were her daughter—and now I know!"

"But," faltered the girl, as she slipped into the warm garments, "If I am not her daughter, who am I? Oh, it is horrible—not to know who you are! If this is true—she must tell—she has got to tell me! I have the right to know! And, my mother and my father—where are they? Who are they?"

"We will know soon, darling," assured Brent, drawing her to him and looking down into her up-lifted eyes, "But, first let me tell you this—I don't care who you are. You are mine, now, dearest—the one woman for me in all the world. And no matter who, or what your parents were, you are mine, mine, mine!" His lips met hers, her arms stole about his neck, and as she clung to him she whispered:

"Oh, everything seems all strange, and unreal, and up-side-down, and horrible, and in all the world, darling, you are the one being who is good, and sane and strong—oh, I love you so—don't ever leave me again——"

"Never again," assured Brent, smiling down into the dark eyes raised so pleadingly to his. "And, now, do you feel able to strike out for the camp?"

"I feel able to go to the end of the earth, with you," she answered quickly, and he noticed that her voice had assumed its natural buoyancy, and that her movements were lithe and sure as she stooped to lace her snowshoes, and he marveled at the perfect resiliency of nerves that could so quickly regain their poise after the terrible ordeal to which they had been subjected.

"Where is Claw?" he asked, abruptly, as he stooped and recovered his gold sack from the floor where the Captain had dropped it.

"Come we must hurry!" cried the girl, who in the excitement had forgotten his very existence, "He started for the camp, to trade hooch to the Indians—and—oh, hurry!" she cried, as she plunged out into the night. "He hates Wananebish, and he threatened to get even with her! If he should kill her now—before—before she could tell us—" She was already descending the bank to the river when Brent recovering his rifle, hastened after her, and although he exerted himself to

the utmost, the flying figure gradually drew away from him. When it had all but disappeared in the darkness, he called, and the girl waited, whereupon Brent despite her protest, took the lead, and with his rifle ready for instant use, hastened on up the river.

A half mile from the encampment, Brent struck into the scattered timber, "He may watch the back-trail," he flung back over his shoulder, "and we don't want to walk into a trap."

Rapidly they made their way through the scrub, and upon the edge of the clearing, they paused. In the wide space before one of the cabins, brush fires were blazing. And by the light of the leaping flames the Indians could be seen crowding and fighting to get to the door of the cabin. Brent drew Snowdrift into the shelter of a bush, from which point of vantage they watched Claw, who stood in the doorway, glass in one hand, six-gun in the other, dispensing hooch. Standing by his side, Yondo received the skins from the crowding Indians, and tossed them into the cabin. The process was beautifully simple—a drink for a skin. As Yondo took a skin Claw passed out a drink to its erstwhile owner.

"Damn him!" muttered Brent, raising his rifle. But Snowdrift pushed it aside.

"It is too dark," she whispered, "You can't see the sights, and you might hit one of the Indians." Breaking off sharply, she pointed toward her own cabin. The door had been thrown open and, rifle in hand old Wananebish stepped out on the snow. She raised the rifle, and with loud cries the Indians surged back from about the hooch runner. Before the rifle could speak Claw fired, and dropping her gun, old Wananebish staggered a few steps forward and pitched headlong into the snow.

With a yell of rage, Brent broke cover and dashed straight across the clearing. As the cry reached him, Claw looked up, fired one hasty shot at the approaching figure, and leaping straight through the throng of Indians, disappeared in the scrub beyond the cabin, with Yondo close at his heels.

Brent was aware that Snowdrift was at his side. "Go to her," panted the girl, "I will try to handle the Indians." For an instant he hesitated, then, realizing that the girl could deal with her own band better without his presence, he hastened to the squaw who had raised herself to an elbow and was vainly trying to rise. Picking her up bodily, Brent carried her into the cabin and placed her upon the bunk.

"Where—is—she?" the woman gasped, as he tore open her shirt and endeavored to staunch the flow of blood from a wound low down upon the sunken chest.

"She's all right," assured the man, "Claw has gone, and she is trying to quiet the Indians."

The old crone shook her head: "No use," she whispered the words with difficulty, "Take her away—while—there—is—time. They—are—crazy—for—hooch—and—they—will—sell—her—to—him." She sank back gasping, and Brent held a cup of water to her lips as he motioned her to be quiet.

"I am going to take her," he answered, "But, tell me—who is Snowdrift?"

The beady eyes fixed his with a long, searching stare. She was about to speak when the door opened and Snowdrift herself burst into the room and sank down beside the bunk.

With a laboring effort the old woman laid a clawlike hand upon the girl's arm: "Forgive me," she whispered, and summoning all her fast ebbing strength she gasped: "It is all a lie. You are not my child. You are white. I loved you, and I was afraid you would go to your people." A paroxysm of coughing seized her, and a gush of red blood welled from her lips. "Look—in—the—moss—bag," she croaked, the words gurgling through her blood-flooded throat. She fell heavily back upon the blanket and the red torrent gushed afresh from between the stilled lips.

With a dry sob, Snowdrift turned to Brent: "We must go!" she faltered, hurriedly, "I can do nothing with the Indians. I tried to reach the hooch to destroy it, but they crowded me away. He has lied to them—won them completely over by the promise of more hooch. He told them he has plenty of hooch *cached* in the scrub. Already they have sent runners to bring him back, and when he comes," the girl paused and shuddered "They will do anything he tells them to—for hooch, and you know what that will be—come, we must go while we have time!"

"Can't we stay and fight him?" cried Brent, "Surely some of the Indians will be with us."

"No—only a few of the squaws—and they would be no good. No, we must go before they bring him back! My sled is beside the door. Hurry and load it with supplies while I harness the dogs." As she talked, the girl's hands searched beneath the blankets upon which lay the body of the squaw and with a low cry she drew forth the moss-bag which she handed to Brent. "Take it," she said, "and do not trust it to the sled. We have no time to look into it now—but that little bag contains the secret of my life——"

"And I will guard it with my own!" cried Brent, as he took the bag from her hand. "Hurry, now and harness the dogs. I'll throw in some grub and blankets and we will finish the outfit at my cabin where we'll pick up Joe Pete."

While Brent worked at the lashings of the sled pack, Snowdrift slipped silently into the cabin and, crossing to the bunk, bent low over the still form of the squaw: "Good-by, Wananebish," she sobbed, as she pressed her lips to the wrinkled forehead, "I don't know what you have done—nor

why you did it—but, I forgive you." She turned to see Brent examining the two heavy crotches that were fixed, one on either side of the doorway on the inside. "That is our lock," explained the girl. "See, there is the bar that goes across the door, like the bar at the post at Fort Norman. Wananebish made it. And every night when we were inside she placed the bar in the crotches and no one could have got in without smashing the door to pieces. Ever since I returned from the mission, Wananebish has feared someone, and now I know it was Claw."

"If we could only drop the bar from the outside," mused Brent, "Maybe we could gain a lot of time. I know Claw, and when he finds that he has all the Indians with him, and that we are only two, he is not going to give you up without a struggle. By George!" he exclaimed, suddenly, "I believe I can do it!" He motioned the girl outside, and slipped the bar into the crotch at the hinge side of the door, then driving a knife upon the inside, he rested the bar upon it, and stepping outside, banged the door shut. The knife held, and opening the door, he loosened the blade a little and tried again. This time the banging of the door jarred the knife loose. It fell to the floor, and the heavy bar dropped into place and the man smiled with satisfaction as he threw his weight against the door. "That will keep them busy for a while," he said, "They'll think we're in there and they know we're armed, so they won't be any too anxious to mix things up at close quarters."

Swiftly the dogs flew up the well packed trail toward Brent's cabin. The night was dark, and the Indians were fighting over the rum cask that Claw had abandoned. As they hurried down the river, the two cast more than one glance over their shoulders toward the cabin where the Indians milled about in the firelight.

At the first bend of the river, they paused and looked back. Shots were being fired in scattering volleys, and suddenly Snowdrift grasped Brent's arm: "Look!" she cried, "At our cabin!"

At first Brent could see nothing but the distant glow of the brush fires, then from the direction of the cabin they had just left a tongue of flame shot upward through the darkness. There were more shots, and the flames widened and leaped higher.

"They're piling brush against the cabin," cried Brent. "They think they'll burn us out. Come on, we haven't a minute to lose, for when Claw learns that we are not in the cabin, he'll be on our trail."

At his own shack Brent tore the lashings from the sled, and began to rearrange the pack, adding supplies from his stores. Joe Pete stared in astonishment. "Come on here!" cried Brent, "Get to work! We're off for Dawson! And we've got to take grub enough to last till we hit Fort Norman."

"All day long you have been on the trail," cried the girl, "You are tired! Can't we stand them off here until you are rested?"

Brent shook his head: "You saw what happened at the other cabin," he answered. "And here it would be even worse. With the window and the door on the same side, they could burn us out in no time."

"But they will trail us—and we must travel heavy," she pointed to the loaded sled.

"We will take our chances in the open," said Brent grimly. "And if luck favors us we will get a long lead. The Indians may get too drunk to follow, or they may stop to loot my cabin, and even if they should overtake us, we can give a good account of ourselves. We have three rifles, and the Indians can't shoot, and Claw will not risk his own hide. Strike out straight for Fort Norman, Joe Pete. We will take turns breaking trail."

At daylight they camped upon the apex of a high ridge that commanded a six or seven mile sweep of the back-trail, and all three noted with relief that the stiff wind had filled their trail with the shifting snow. All through the night they had avoided the timbered swamps and the patches of scrub both for the purpose of allowing the wind full sweep at their trail, and also to force their pursuers to expose themselves to the open. It was decided that until danger of pursuit was past they would travel only at night and thus eliminate in so far as possible, the danger of a surprise attack.

Because the men had been on the trail almost constantly for twenty-four hours, Snowdrift insisted upon standing first watch, and as Brent unrolled his blankets, he removed the moss-bag from his shoulders and handed it to the girl. Both he and Joe Pete were asleep the instant they hit the blankets, and for a long time Snowdrift sat with the moss-bag hugged close, and her eyes fixed upon the long sweep of back-trail. At length she thrust her hand into the bag and withdrew the packet, secure in its waterproof wrapping. Over and over she turned it in her hand as she speculated, woman like, upon its contents. Time and again she essayed to untie the thong that bound it but each time her fingers were stilled before the knot was undone.

"Oh, I am afraid—afraid," she murmured, when her burning curiosity urged her fingers to do their task. "Suppose he—my father was a man like—like those two—suppose he was Claw, himself!" She shuddered at the thought. "No, no!" she whispered, "Wananebish said that he was good. My mother, then, who was she? Is some terrible stigma attached to her name? Better never to know who I am, than to know *that*!" For a moment she held the packet above the little flames of her fire as though she would drop it in, but even as she held it she knew she would not destroy it, for she decided that even to know the worst would be better than the gnawing of life-long uncertainty. "He, too, has the right to know," she murmured, "And we will open it together." And

with a sigh, she replaced the packet in the bag, and returned to her scrutiny of the back-trail.

Despite the agreement to divide equally the time of watching, the girl resolved to let the men sleep until mid-day before calling Brent who was to take the second watch.

At noon, Brent awoke of his own accord, and the girl was startled by the sound of his voice in her ear: "Anything doing?"

"No," she answered, "Not even a wolf, or a caribou has crossed the open."

"Have you explored that?" He indicated the moss-bag with a nod, and the girl was quick to note the carefully suppressed eagerness of the words.

"No. I—waited. I wanted you—and—Oh, I was afraid!"

"Nonsense, darling!" laughed the man, "I am not afraid! Give me the bag. Again I swear to you, I do not care who you are. You are mine—and nothing else matters!" Snowdrift slipped her hand into the bag and withdrew the packet, and she handed it to Brent, he placed his arm about her shoulders and drew her close against his side, and with her head resting upon his shoulders, her eyes followed his every movement as his fingers fumbled at the knot.

Carefully he unwrapped the waterproof covering and disclosed a small leather note book, and a thick packet wound round with parchment deer skin. On the fly leaf of the note book, in a round, clear hand was written the name MURDO MACFARLANE, and below, Lashing Water.

"Murdo MacFarlane," cried Brent, "Why, that's the name in the book that told of Hearne's lost mines—the book that brought me over here!"

"And the name on the knife—see, I have it here!" exclaimed the girl. "But, go on! Who was MacFarlane, and what has he to do with me?"

Eagerly Brent read aloud the closely written pages, that told of the life of Murdo MacFarlane; of his boyhood in Scotland, of his journey to Canada, his service with the Hudson's Bay Company, his courtship of Margot Molaire, and their marriage to the accompaniment of the booming of the bells of Ste. Anne's, of the birth of their baby—the little Margot, of his restless longing for gold, that his wife and baby need not live out their lives in the outlands, of the visit of Wananebish and her little band of Dog Ribs, of his venture into the barrens, accompanied by his wife and little baby, of the cabin beside the nameless lake and the year of fruitless search for gold in the barrens.

"Oh, that is it! That is it! The memory!" cried the girl.

"What do you mean? What memory?"

"Always I have had it—the memory. Time and time again it comes back to me—but I can never seem to grasp it. A cabin, a beautiful woman who leaned over me, and talked to me, and a big man who took me up in his arms, a lake beside the cabin, and—that is all. Dim and elusive, always, I have tried for hours at a time to bring it sharply into mind, but it was no use—the memory would fade, and in its place would be the tepee, or my little room at the mission. But, go on! What became of Murdo MacFarlane, and Margot—of my father and my mother. And why have I always lived with Wananebish?"

Brent read the closing lines with many a pause, and with many a catch in his voice—the lines which told of the death of Margot, and of his determination to take the baby and leave her with Wananebish until he should return to her, of his leaving with the squaw all of his money—five hundred pounds in good bank notes, with instructions to use it for her keep and education in case he did not return. And so he came to the concluding paragraph which read:

"In the morning I shall carry my wee Margot to the Indian woman. It is the only thing I can do. And then I shall strike North for gold. But first I must return to this cabin and bury my dead. God! Why did she have to die? She should be buried beside her mother in the little graveyard at Ste. Anne's. But it cannot be. Upon a high point that juts out onto the lake, I will dig her grave—upon a point where we used often to go and watch the sunset, she and I and the little one. And there she will lie, while far below her the booming and the thunder of the wind-lashed waters of the lake will rise about her like the sound of bells—her requiem—like the tolling of the bells of Ste. Anne's."

"Oh, where is he now—my father?" sobbed the girl, as he concluded.

Brent's arm tightened about her shoulders, "He is dead," he whispered, "He has been dead these many years, or he would have found you." He swept his arm toward the barrens, "Somewhere in this great white land your father met his death—and it was a man's death—the kind of death he would have welcomed—for he was a man! The whole North is his grave. And out of it, his spirit kept calling—calling. And the call was heard—by a drunkard in a little cabin on the Yukon. I am that drunkard, and into my keeping the spirit of Murdo MacFarlane has entrusted the life of his baby—his wee Margot." Brent paused, and his voice suddenly cut hard as steel, "And may God Almighty strike me dead if I ever violate that trust!"

Slender brown fingers were upon his lips. "Don't talk like that, dear, it scares me. See, I am not afraid. And you are *not* a drunkard."

"I got drunk on the *Belva Lou*."

"Didn't I say we couldn't expect to win all the battles?"

"And, I carry my bottle with me." He reached into his blankets and drew out the bottle of rum.

"And the cork has not been pulled," flashed the girl, "And you have carried it ever since you left the whaler."

"Yes, darling," answered the man softly, "And I always shall keep it, and I never will pull the cork. I can give you that promise, now. I can promise you—on the word of a Brent that——"

"Not yet, sweetheart—please!" interrupted the girl, "Let us hold back the promise, till we need it. That promise is our heavy artillery. This is only the beginning of the war. And no good general would show the enemy all he has got right in the beginning."

"You wonder woman!" laughed Brent, as he smothered the upraised eyes with kisses, "But see, we have not opened the packet." Carefully he unwound the parchment wrapping, and disclosed a closely packed pile of bank notes. So long had they remained undisturbed that their edges had stuck together so that it was with difficulty he succeeded in counting them. "One hundred," he announced, at length, "One hundred five-pound notes of the Bank of England."

"Why, Wananebish never used any of the money!" cried the girl.

Brent shook his head: "Not a penny has been touched. I doubt that she ever even opened the packet."

"Poor old Wananebish," murmured the girl, "And she needed it so. But she saved it all for me."

When darkness gathered, they again hit the trail. A last look from the ridge disclosed no sign of pursuit, and that night they made twenty-five miles. For three more nights they traveled, and then upon the shore of Great Bear Lake, they gave up the night travel and continued their journey by daylight.

Upon the evening of the eighteenth day they pulled in to Fort Norman, where they outfitted for the long trail to the Yukon. Before she left, Snowdrift paid the debt of a thousand skins that McTavish had extended to the Indians, and the following morning the outfit pulled out and headed for the mountains which were just visible far to the westward.

CHAPTER XXII

CLAW HITS FOR DAWSON

When Claw returned to the flame-lighted clearing, a scant half-hour after he had fled from the avenging figure of Brent, it was to find his keg of rum more than half consumed, and most of the Indians howling drunk. Close about him they crowded, pressing skins upon him and demanding more liquor. The man was quick to see that despite the appearance of Brent and the girl, he held the upper hand. The Indians would remain his as long as the rum held out.

"Ask 'em where the white man went—him an' the girl," he ordered Yondo.

The Indian pointed to the cabin of Wananebish, and a devilish gleam leaped into Claw's eyes: "Tell 'em I'll give a hull keg of rum, er a hundred dollars, cash money to the man that kills him!" he shouted, "an' another keg to the one that brings me the girl!"

The drunken savages heard the offer with a whoop, and yelling like fiends, they rushed to the cabin. The barred door held against their attack, and with sinister singleness of purpose they rushed back to the fires, and securing blazing fagots, began to pile brush against the wall of the building.

With an evil grin on his face, Claw took up his position behind a stump that gave unobstructed view of the door through which the two must rush from the burning cabin, and waited, revolver in hand.

Louder roared the fire, and higher and higher shot the flames, but the door remained closed. Claw waited, knowing that it would take some time for the logs to burn through. But, when, at length, the whole cabin was a mass of flames, and the roof caved in, his rage burst forth in a tirade of abuse:

"They lied!" he shrilled, "They wasn't in there. Ace-In-The-Hole wouldn't never stayed in there an' burnt up! The Injuns lied! An' he's layin' to git me. Mebbe he's got a bead on me right now!" and in a sudden excess of terror, the man started to burrow into the snow.

Yondo stopped, and in the bright light of the flames examined the trail to the river. Then he pointed down the stream in the direction of Brent's cabin, and Claw, too, examined the trail. "They've pulled out!" he cried, "Pulled out for his shack! Tell 'em to come on! We'll burn 'em out up there! I ain't a-goin' to let her git away from me now—an' to hell with Cap Jinkins! I'll take her to Dawson, an' make real money offen her. An' I'll git Ace-In-The-Hole too. I found that girl first! She's mine—an' by God, I'll have her!" He started for the river. At the top of the bank, he paused:

"What's ailin 'em?" he roared, "Why don't they come! Standin' there gogglin' like fools!"

"They say," explained Yondo, in jargon, "That they want to see the rum first."

"Tell 'em I left it up to his shack!" roared the man, "Tell 'em anything, jest so they come. Git my dogs an' come on. We'll lead out, an' they'll foller if they think they's hooch in it."

Yondo headed the dogs down the trail, and Claw threw himself upon the sled and watched the drunken Indians string out behind, yelling, whooping, staggering and falling in their eagerness for more hooch.

When they came in sight of the cabin, Claw saw that it was dark. "You slip up and see what you kin find out," he ordered Yondo, "An' I'll stay here with the dogs an' handle the Injuns when they come along."

Five minutes later the Indian returned and reported that there was no one in the cabin, and that the door was open. With a curse, Claw headed the dogs up the bank, and pushed through the open door. Match in hand, he stumbled and fell sprawling over the body of the Captain of the *Belva Lou*, uttering a shriek of terror as his bare hand came in contact with the hairy face. Scrambling to his feet, he fumbled for another match, and with trembling fingers, managed to light the little bracket lamp. "Choked him to death bare handed!" he cried in horror, "And he'd of done me that way, too! But where be they? Look, they be'n here!" The man pointed to the disordered supplies, that had been thrown about in the haste of departure. "They've pulled out!" he cried. "Git out there an' find their trail!"

Yondo returned, and pointed to the westward, holding up three fingers, and making the sign of a heavily loaded sled.

"That'll be him, an' her, an' the Injun," said Claw, "an' they're hittin' fer Fort Norman." Reaching down, he picked up a sack of flour and carrying it out to the sled, ordered Yondo to help with the other supplies. Suddenly, he sprang erect and gazed toward the west. "I wonder if he would?" he cried aloud, "I'll bet he'll take her clean to Dawson!" He laughed harshly, "An' if he does, she's mine—mine, an' no trouble nor risk takin' her there! Onct back among the saloons, Ace-In-The-Hole will start in on the hooch—an' then I'll git her."

From far up the river came the whoop-whoroo of the drunken Indians. "Quick," cried Claw, "Git that pack throw'd together. When they git here an' find out they ain't no more hooch, they'll butcher me an' you!" And almost before the Indian had secured the lashings, Claw started the dogs, and leaving the Indian to handle the gee-pole, struck out on the trail of Brent.

It was no part of Claw's plan to overtake the trio. Indeed, it was the last thing in the world he wanted to do. At midnight they camped with a good ten miles between themselves and the drunken Dog Ribs. In the morning they pushed on, keeping a sharp lookout ahead. Soon Brent's trail began to drift full of snow, and by noon it was obliterated altogether. Thereupon Claw ordered the Indian to shape his own course for Fort Norman, and because of Yondo's thorough knowledge of the country, arrived in sight of the post on the evening of the sixteenth day.

When he learned from an Indian wood chopper, that no other outfit had arrived, Claw pulled a mile up the river and waited.

Two days later, from the summit of a nearby hill, he saw the outfit pull in, and with glittering eyes he watched it depart, knowing that Brent would hit for the Yukon by way of the Bonnet Plume Pass.

Claw paid off Yondo and struck straight westward alone, crossing the divide by means of a steep and narrow pass known only to a few. Thus, shortening the trail by some four or five days, he showed up in Cuter Malone's Klondike Palace at the height of an evening's hilarity.

Cuter greeted him from behind the bar: "Hello, Claw! Thought you was over with the whalers!"

"Was," answered Claw, "Jest got back," he drained the glass Malone had set before him, and with a sidewise quirk of the head, sauntered into a little back room.

A few minutes later, Cuter followed, carefully closing and locking the door after him: "What's on yer mind?" he asked, as he seated himself beside the little table.

"They's aplenty on it. But mostly it's a girl."

"What's the matter? One git away from you?"

"She ain't yet, but she's damn near it. She'll be here in a few days, an' she's the purtiest piece that ever hit the Yukon."

"Must be right pert then, cause that's coverin' quite a bit of territory."

"Yes, an' you could cover twict as much an' still not find nothin' that would touch her fer looks."

"Where is she?"

"She's comin'. Ace-In-The-Hole's bringin' her in."

"Ace-In-The-Hole! Yer crazy as hell! First place, Ace-In-The-Hole ain't here no more. Folks says old R.E. Morse got him an' he drounded hisself in the river. Camillo Bill an' that bunch he used to

trot with, has combed Dawson with a fine tooth comb fer him, an' they can't find him nowheres."

"Drounded?—hell!" exclaimed Claw, "Ain't I be'n to his shack on the Coppermine? Didn't he come up to the *Belva Lou* an' git drunk, an' then git lost, an' then find his way back to his shack an' choke the life out of Cap Jinkins? Yes sir, bare handed! I looked at Cap's throat where he lay dead on the floor an' it was damn near squose in two! An' he'd of squose mine, if he could caught me!"

"What about the gal? What's he got to do with her? He wouldn't stand fer no such doin's, an' you'd ort to know it. Didn't he knock you down fer whalin' one with a dog whip!"

"Yes, an' I'll even up the score," growled Claw savagely, "An' me an' you'll shove a heft of dust in the safe fer profits. It's like this. She's his girl, an' he's bringin' her here."

"His girl! Say Claw, what you handin' me? Time was when Ace-In-The-Hole could of had his pick of any of 'em. But that time's gone. They wouldn't no *klooch* look at him twict, now. He's that fer gone with the hooch. He's a bum."

"You know a hell of a lot about it! Didn't you jest git through tellin' me he was drounded? An' now he's a bum! Both of which they ain't neither one right—by a damn sight. He's be'n out there where they ain't no hooch, an' he's as good a man as he ever was—as long as he can't git the hooch. But here in Dawson he kin git it—see? An' me an' you has got to see that he does git it. An' we'll git the girl. I've figured it all out, comin' over. Was goin' to fetch her myself, but it would of be'n a hell of a job, an' then there's the Mounted. But this way we git her delivered, C.O.D. right to our door, you might say. Startin' about day after tomorrow, we'll put lookouts on the Klondike River, an' the Indian River. They're comin' in over the Bonnet Plume. When they git here the lookout will tell us where they go. Then we rig up some kind of excuse to git him away, an' when we've got him paralysed drunk, we'll send a message to the girl that he needs her, an' we'll bring her here—an'—well, the middle room above the little dance hall up stairs will hold her—it's helt 'em before."

Malone grinned: "Guess I didn't know what I was up to when I built that room, eh? They kin yell their head off an' you can't hear 'em outside the door. All right, Claw, you tend to the gittin' her here an' I'll pass the word around amongst the live ones that's got the dust. We ain't had no new ones in this winter, an' the boys'll 'preciate it."

It was evening. Brent and Snowdrift had climbed from the little trail camp at the edge of the timber line, to the very summit of the great Bonnet Plume Pass to watch the sun sink to rest behind the high-flung peaks of the mighty Alaskan ranges.

"Oh, isn't it grand! And wonderful!" cried the girl as her eyes swept the vast panorama of glistening white mountains. "How small and insignificant I feel! And how stern, and rugged, and hard it all looks."

"Yes, darling," whispered Brent, as his arm stole about her waist, "It is stern, and rugged, and hard. But it is clean, and honest, and grand. It is the world as God made it."

"I have never been in the mountains before," said the girl, "I have seen them from the Mackenzie, but they were so far away they never seemed real. We have always hunted upon the barrens. Tell me, is it all like this? And where is the Yukon?"

Brent smiled at her awe of the vastness: "Pretty much all like this," he answered. "Alaska is a land of mountains. Of course there are wide valleys, and mighty rivers, and along the rivers are the towns and the mining camps."

"I have never seen a town," breathed the girl, "What will we do when we get there?"

"We will go straight to the Reeves," he answered, with a glad smile. "Reeves is the man who staked me for the trip into the barrens, and his wife is an old, old friend of mine. We were born and grew up in the same town, and we will go straight to them."

"I wonder whether she will like me? I have known no white women except Sister Mercedes."

"Darling, she will love you!" cried Brent, "Everyone will love you! And we will be married in their house."

"But, what will he think when you tell him you have not made a strike?"

Brent laughed: "He will be the first to see that I have made a strike, dear—the richest strike in all the North."

"And you didn't tell me!" cried the girl, "Tell me about it, now! Was it on the Coppermine?"

"Yes, it was on the Coppermine. I made the great strike, one evening in the moonlight—when the dearest girl in the world told me she loved me."

Snowdrift raised her wondrous dark eyes to his: "Isn't it wonderful to love as we love?" she whispered, "To be all the world to each other? I do not care if we never make a strike. All I want is to be with you always. And if we do not make a strike we will live in our tepee and snare rabbits, and hunt, and be happy, always."

Brent covered the upturned face with kisses: "I guess we can manage something better than a tepee," he smiled. "I've got more than half of Reeves' dust left, and I've been thinking the matter over. The fact is, I don't think much of that Coppermine country for gold. I reckon we'll get a house and settle down in Dawson for a while, and I'll take the job Reeves offered me, and work till I get him paid off, and Camillo Bill, and enough ahead for a grub-stake, and then we'll see what's to be done. We'll have lots of good times, too. There's the Reeves' and—and——"

Brent paused, and the girl smiled, "What's the matter? Can't you think of any more?"

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't know any others who—that is, married folks, our kind, you know. The men I knew best are all single men. But, lots of people have come in with the dredge companies. The Reeves will know them."

"There is that girl you called Kitty," suggested Snowdrift.

"Yes—" answered Brent, a little awkwardly, "That's so. But, she's—a little different."

"But I will like her, I am sure, because she nursed you when you were sick. I know what you mean!" she exclaimed abruptly, and Brent saw that the dark eyes flashed, "You mean that people point at her the finger of scorn—as they would have pointed at me, had I been—as I thought I was. But it is all wrong, and I will not do that! And I will hate those who do! And I will tell them so!" she stamped her moccasined foot in anger, and the man laughed:

"My goodness!" he exclaimed feigning alarm, "I can see from here where I better get home to meals on time, and not forget to put the cat out."

"Now, you are making fun of me," she pouted, "But it is wrong, and you know it is, and maybe the very ones who do the pointing are worse in their hearts than she is."

"You said it!" cried Brent, "The ones that look down upon the frailties of others, are the very ones who need watching themselves. And that is a good thing to remember in picking out friends. And, darling, you can go as far as you like with Kitty. I'm for you. She's got a big heart, and there's a lot more to her than there is to most of 'em. But, come, it's dark, and we must be getting back to camp. See the little fire down on the edge of the timber line. It looks a thousand miles away."

And as they picked their way, side by side, down the long slope, Brent was conscious that with the growing tenderness that each day's association with his wonder woman engendered, there was also a growing respect for her outlook upon life. Her years in the open had developed a sense of perception that was keen to separate the dross from the pure gold of human intent. "She's a great girl," he breathed, as he glanced at her profile, half hidden in the starlight, "She deserves the best that's in a man—and she'll get it!"

CHAPTER XXIII

IN THE TOILS

Late one afternoon, a dog sled, with Joe Pete in the lead, and Brent and Snowdrift following swung rapidly down the Klondike River. A few miles from Dawson, the outfit overtook a man walking leisurely toward town, a rifle swung over his shoulder. Recognizing him as one Zinn, a former hanger-on at Cuter Malone's, Brent called a greeting.

"Damned if it ain't Ace-In-The-Hole!" cried the man, in well simulated surprise. "They'll be rollin' 'em high in Dawson tonight!"

Brent laughed, and hurried on. And behind him upon the trail Zinn quickened his pace.

At the outskirts of town the three removed their snowshoes and, ordering Joe Pete to take the outfit to his own shack, Brent and Snowdrift hurried toward the Reeves'.

As they passed up the street Brent noticed that the dark eyes of the girl were busily drinking in the details of the rows upon rows of low frame houses. "At last you are in Dawson," he said, including with a sweep of the arm the mushroom city that had sprung up in the shadow of Moosehide Mountain, "Does it look like you expected it would? Are you going to like it?"

The girl smiled at the eagerness in his voice: "Yes, dear, I shall love it, because it will be our home. It isn't quite as I expected it to look. The houses all placed side by side, with the streets running between are as I thought they would be, but the houses themselves are different. They are not of logs, or of the thin iron like the warehouse of the new trading company on the Mackenzie, and they are not made of bricks and stones and very tall like the pictures of cities in the books."

Brent laughed: "No, Dawson is just half way between. Since the sawmills came the town has rapidly outgrown the log cabin stage, although there are still plenty of them here, but it has not yet risen to the dignity of brick and stone."

"But the houses of brick and stone will come!" cried the girl, enthusiastically, "And take the place of the houses of wood, and we shall be here to see the building of another great city."

Brent shook his head: "I don't know," he replied, doubtfully, "It all depends on the gravel. I wouldn't care to do much speculating in Dawson real estate right now. The time for that has passed. The next two or three years will tell the story. If I were to do any predicting, I'd say that instead of the birth of a great city, we are going to witness the lingering death of an overgrown town." He paused and pointed to a small cabin of logs that stood deserted, half buried in snow. "Do you see that shack over there? That's mine. It don't look like much, now. But, I gave five thousand in dust for it when I made my first strike."

The girl's eyes sparkled as she viewed the dejected looking building, "And that will be our home!" she cried.

"Not by a long shot, it won't!" laughed Brent, "We'll do better than that. I never want to see the inside of the place again! Yes, I do—just once. I want to go there and get a book—the book that lured me to the Coppermine—the book in which is written the name of Murdo MacFarlane. We will always keep that book, darling. And some day we will get it bound in leather and gold."

Before a little white-painted house that stood back from the street, the man paused: "The Reeves' live here," he announced, and as he turned into the neatly shovelled path that led to the door, he reached down and pressed the girl's hand reassuringly: "Mrs. Reeves is an old, old friend," he whispered, "She will be a sister to you."

As Brent led the way along the narrow path his eyes rested upon the slope of snow-buried earth that pitched sharply against the base of the walls of the house, "Hardest work I ever did," he grinned, "Hope the floor kept warm."

As he waited the answer to his knock upon the door, he noticed casually that Zinn sauntered past and turned abruptly into the street that led straight to Cuter Malone's. The next instant the door was opened and Reba Reeves stood framed in the doorway. Brent saw that in the gloom of early evening she did not recognize him. "Is Mr. Reeves home?" he asked.

"Yes, won't you step in? answered the woman, standing aside.

"Thank you. I think we will."

Something in the man's tone caused the woman to step quickly forward and peer sharply into his face: "Carter Brent!" she cried, and the next instant the man's hands were in both of hers, and she was pulling him into the room. Like a flash Brent remembered that other time she had called his name in a tone of intense surprise, and that there had been tears in her eyes then, even as there were tears in her eyes now, but this time they were tears of gladness. And then, from another room came Reeves, and a pair of firm hands were laid upon his shoulders and he was spun around to meet the gaze of the searching grey eyes that stared into his own. Brent laughed happily as he noted the start of surprise that accompanied Reeves' words: "Good Lord! What a change!" A hand slipped from his shoulder and grasped his own.

A moment later, Brent freed the hand, and as Mrs. Reeves lighted the lamp, turned and drew Snowdrift toward him. "And now I want you to meet—Miss Margot MacFarlane. Within a very few hours she is going to become Mrs. Carter Brent. You see," he added turning to Reba Reeves, "I brought her straight to you. The hotel isn't——"

The sentence was never finished, already the two women were in each other's arms, and Reba Reeves was smiling at him over the girl's shoulder: "Carter Brent! If you had dared to even think of taking her to the hotel, I'd never have spoken to you again! You just let me catch you talking about hotels—when your *folks* are living right here! And now take off your things because supper is most ready. You'll find warm water in the reservoir of the stove, and I'll make an extra lot of good hot coffee, because I know you will be tired of tea."

Never in his life had Brent enjoyed a meal as he enjoyed that supper in the dining room of the Reeves', with Snowdrift, radiant with happiness, beside him, and his host and hostess eagerly plying him with questions.

"I think it is the most romantic thing I ever heard of!" cried Reba Reeves, when Snowdrift had finished telling of her life among the Indians, and at the mission, "It's easy enough to see why Carter chose you, but for the life of me I can't see how you came to take an old scapegrace like him!" she teased, and the girl smiled:

"I took him because I love him," she answered, "Because he is good, and strong, and brave, and because he can be gentle and tender and—and he understands. And he is not a scapegrace any more," she added, gravely, "He has told me all about how he drank hooch until he became a—a bun——"

"A what?"

"A bun—is it not that when a man drinks too much hooch?"

"A bum," supplied Brent, laughing.

"So many new words!" smiled the girl. "But I will learn them all. Anyway, we will fight the hooch together, and we will win."

"You bet you'll win!" cried Reeves, heartily, "And if I'm any judge, I'd say you've won already. How about it Brent?"

Deliberately—thoughtfully, Brent nodded: "She has won," he said.

"On the word of a Brent?" Reba Reeves' eyes were looking straight into his own as she asked the question.

"Yes," he answered, "On the word of a Brent."

A moment's silence followed the words, after which he turned to Reeves: "And, now—let's talk business. I have used about half the dust you loaned me. There is nothing worth while on the Coppermine—now." He smiled, as his eyes rested upon the girl, "So I have come back to take that job you offered me. Eleven hundred miles, we came, under the chaperonage of Joe Pete——"

"And a very capable chaperonage it was!" laughed Reeves, "Funniest thing I ever saw in my life—there in your cabin the morning you started. It was then I learned to know Joe Pete. But, go on."

"That's about all there is to it. Except that I'd like to keep the rest of the dust, and pay you back in installments—that is, if the job is still open. I've got to borrow enough for a start, somewhere—and I reckon you're about the only friend I've got left."

"How about that fellow, Camillo Bill? I thought he was a friend of yours."

"I thought so too, but—when I was down and out, and wanted a grub-stake, he turned me down. He's all right though—square as a die."

"About that job," continued Reeves, gravely, "I'm a little afraid you wouldn't just fill the bill."

For a moment Brent felt as though he had been slapped in the face. He had counted on the job—needed it. The next instant he was smiling: "Maybe you're right," he said, "I reckon I am a little rusty on hydraulics and——"

"I'd take a chance on the hydraulics," laughed Reeves, "But—before we go any further, what would you take for your title to those two claims that Camillo Bill has been operating?"

"Depends on who wanted to buy 'em," grinned Brent.

"What will you sell them to me for?"

"What will you give?"

"How would ten thousand for the two of them strike you?"

Brent laughed: "Don't you go speculating on any claims," he advised, "I'd be tickled to death to get ten thousand dollars—or ten thousand cents out of those claims—but not from you. It would be highway robbery."

"And if I did buy them from you at ten thousand, or a hundred thousand, you would be only a piker of a robber, as compared to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that if anybody offers you a million for 'em—you laugh at 'em," exclaimed Reeves, "Because they're worth a whole lot more than that."

Brent stared at the man as though he had taken leave of his senses. "Who has been stringing you?" he asked, "The fact is, those claims are a liability, and not an asset. Camillo Bill took them over to try to get the million I owed him out of 'em—and he couldn't do it. And when Camillo Bill can't get the dust out, it isn't there."

"How do you know he couldn't do it?"

"Because he told me so."

"He lied."

Brent flushed: "I reckon you don't know Camillo Bill," he said gravely, "As I told you, he wouldn't grub-stake me when I needed a grub-stake, and I don't understand that. But, I'd stake my life on it that he never lied about those claims—never tried to beat me out of 'em when I was down and out! Why, man, he won them in a game of stud—and he wouldn't take them!"

"But he lied to you, just the same," insisted Reeves, and Brent saw that the man's eyes were twinkling. "And it was because he is one of the best friends a man ever had that he did lie to you, and that he wouldn't grub-stake you. You said a while ago that I was about the only friend you had left. Let me tell you a little story, and then judge for yourself.

"About a week after you had gone, inquiries began to float around town as to your whereabouts. I didn't pay any attention to them at first, but the inquiries persisted. They searched Dawson, and all the country around for you. When I learned that the inquiries emanated from such men as Camillo Bill, and Old Bettles, and Moosehide Charlie, and a few more of the heaviest men in the camp, I took notice, and quietly sent for Camillo Bill and had a talk with him. It seems that after he had taken his million out of the claims, he went to you for the purpose of

turning them back. He had not seen you for some time, and he was—well, it didn't take him but a minute to see what would happen if he turned back the claims and dumped a couple of million dollars worth of property into your hands at that time. So he told you they had petered out. Then he hunted up a bunch of the real sourdoughs who are your friends, and they planned to kidnap you and take you away for a year—keep you under guard in a cabin, a hundred miles from nowhere, and keep you off the liquor, and make you work like a nigger till you found yourself again. They laid their plot, and when they came to spring it, you had disappeared."

Brent listened, with tight-pressed lips, and as Reeves finished, he asked:

"And you say he got out his million, and there is still something left in the gravel?"

Reeves laughed: "I would call it something! Camillo Bill says he only worked one of the claims—and only about half of that. Yes, I would say there was something left."

"I reckon a man don't always know his friends," murmured Brent, after a long silence, "I wonder where I can find Camillo Bill?"

"He's in town, somewhere. I saw him this afternoon."

Brent turned to Snowdrift, who had listened, wide-eyed to the narrative: "You wait here, dear," he said, "And I'll hunt up a parson, and a ring, and Camillo Bill. I need a—a best man!"

"Oh, why don't you wait a week or so and give us time to get ready so we can have a real wedding?" cried Mrs. Reeves.

Brent shook his head: "I reckon this one will be real enough," he grinned, "And besides, we've waited quite a while, already."

As he turned into the street from the path leading from the door he almost bumped into a man in the darkness:

"Hello! Is that you, Ace-In-The-Hole? Yer the man I'm huntin' fer. Friend of yourn's hurt an' wants to see you."

"Who is it, Zinn? And how did he know I was in town?"

"It's Camillo Bill. I was tellin' I see'd you comin' in—an hour or so back, in Stoell's. Then Camillo, he goes down to the sawmill to see about some lumber, an' a log flies off the carriage an' hits him. He's busted up pretty bad. Guess he's goin' to cash in. They carried him to a shack over back of the mill an' he's hollerin' fer you."

"Come on then—quick!" cried Brent. "What the hell are you standin' there for? Have they got a doctor?"

"Yup," answered Zinn, as he hurried toward the outskirts of the town, "He'll be there by now."

Along the dark streets, and through a darker lumber yard, hurried Zinn, with Brent close at his heels urging him to greater speed. At length they passed around behind the sawmill and Brent saw that a light showed dimly in the window of a disreputable log shack that stood upon the edge of a deep ravine. The next moment he had pushed through the door, and found himself in the presence of four as evil looking specimens as ever broke the commandments. One of them he recognized as "Stumpy" Cooley, a man who, two years before had escaped the noose only by prompt action of the Mounted, after he had been duly convicted by a meeting of outraged miners of robbing a *cache*.

"Where's Camillo Bill?" demanded Brent, his eyes sweeping the room.

"Tuk him to the hospital jest now," informed Stumpy.

"Hospital!" cried Brent.

"Yes—built one sence you was here. But, you don't need to be in no hurry, 'cause he's out of his head, now." The man produced a bottle and pulling the cork, offered it to Brent: "Might's well have a little drink, an' we'll be goin'."

"To hell with your drinks!" cried Brent, "Where is this hospital?" Suddenly he sensed that something was wrong. And whirling saw that two of the men had slipped between himself and the door. He turned to Stumpy to see an evil grin upon the man's face.

"When I ask anyone to drink with me, he most generally does it," he sneered, "Or I know the reason why."

"There's the reason!" roared Brent, and quick as a flash his right fist smashed into the man's face, the blow knocking him clean across the room. The next instant a man sprang onto Brent's back and another dived for his legs, while a third struck at him with a short piece of scantling. Brent fought like a tiger, weaving this way and that, and stumbling about the room in a vain effort to rid himself of the two men who clung to him like leeches. Stumpy staggered toward him, and Brent making a frenzied effort to release one of his pinioned arms, saw him raise the heavy quart whiskey bottle. The next instant it descended with a full arm swing. Brent saw a blinding flash of light, a stab of pain seemed to pierce his very brain, his knees buckled suddenly and he was falling, down, down, down, into a bottomless pit of intense blackness.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE FIGHT AT CUTER MALONE'S

The porter at Cuter Malone's Klondike Palace was lighting the huge oil lamps as the girl called Kitty sauntered to the bar with her dancing partner who loudly demanded wine. Cuter Malone himself, standing behind the bar in earnest conversation with Johnnie Claw, set out the drinks and as the girl raised her glass, a man brushed past her. She recognized Zinn, one of Malone's despicable lieutenants, and was quick to note that something unusual was in the air. A swift meaning glance passed between Claw and Malone, and as Zinn stepped around the bar to deposit his rifle, he whispered earnestly to the two who stepped close to listen.

Unperceived, Kitty managed to edge near, and the next instant she was all attention. For from the detached words that came to her ears, she made out, "Ace-In-The-Hole," and "the girl," and then Malone, whose voice carried above the others issued an order, "The shack behind the saw mill. Git him soused. Knock him out if you have to—but don't kill him. Once we git the girl here me an' Claw—" the rest of the sentence was lost as it blended with an added order of Claw's. "Ace-In-The-Hole!" thought Kitty, "What did it mean? And who is 'The girl?' Ace-In-The-Hole is dead. And, yet—" she glanced toward Claw whose beady eyes were glittering with excitement. "He just came back from somewhere—maybe he knows—something."

She saw Zinn cross the room and speak in a whisper to four men who were playing solo at a table near the huge stove. She knew those men, Stumpy Cooley, and his three companions. The men nodded, and went on with their game, and Zinn returned and resumed his conversation with Malone and Claw. But the girl could hear nothing more. The "professor" was loudly banging out the notes of the next dance upon the piano, and her partner was pulling at her arm.

For two hours Kitty danced, and between dances she drank wine at the bar, and always her eyes were upon the four men at the solo table, and upon Zinn, who loafed close by, and upon Malone and Claw, who she noted, were drinking more than usual, as they hob-nobbed behind the bar.

The evening crowd foregathered. The music became faster, the talk louder, the laughter wilder. At the conclusion of a dance, Kitty saw Malone speak to Zinn, who immediately slipped out the door. The four men at the table, threw down their cards, and sauntered casually from the room and declining the next dance, the girl dashed up the stairway to her room where she kicked off her high heeled slippers, pulled a pair of heavy woolen stockings over her silk ones, and hurriedly laced her moccasins. She jammed a cap over her ears and slipping into a heavy fur coat, stepped out into the hall and came face to face with Johnnie Claw. "Where do you think you're goin'?" asked the man with a sneer.

"It's none of your business!" snapped the girl, "I don't have to ask you when I want to go anywhere—and I don't have to tell you where I'm goin', either! You haven't got any strings on me!"

"Well—fergit it, 'cause you ain't goin' nowhere's—not right now."

"Get out of my way! Damn you!" cried the girl, "If I had a gun here, I'd blow your rotten heart out!"

"But, you ain't got none—an' I have—so it's the other way around. Only I ain't goin' to kill you, if you do like I say.

"Listen here, I seen you easin' over and tryin' to hear what me an' Malone, an' Zinn was talkin' about. I don't know how much you heard, but you heard enough, so you kep' pretty clost cases on all of us. G'wan back in yer room, 'fore I put you there! What the hell do you care anyhow? All we want is the girl. Onct we git her up in the strong room, you kin have Ace-In-The-Hole. An' as long as she's around you ain't nowhere with him. Why don't you use yer head?"

"You fool!" screamed the girl, in a sudden fury, and as she tried to spring past him, Claw's fist caught her squarely in the chin and without a sound she crashed backward across the door sill. Swiftly the man reached down and dragged her into the room, removed the key from the lock on the inside, closed and locked the door, and thrusting the key into his pocket, turned and walked down stairs.

How long she lay there, Kitty did not know. Consciousness returned slowly. She was aware of a dull ache in her head, and after what seemed like a long time she struggled to her knees and drew herself onto the bed where she lay trying to think what had happened. Faintly, from below drifted the sound of the piano. So, they were still dancing, down there? Then, suddenly the whole train of events flashed through her brain. She leaped to her feet and staggered groggily to the door. It was locked. In vain she screamed and beat upon the panels. She rushed to the window but its double sash of heavily frosted panes nailed tight for the winter was immovable. In a sudden frenzy of rage she seized a chair and smashed the glass. The inrush of cold air felt good to her throbbing temples, and wrenching a leg from the chair she beat away the jagged fragments until only the frame remained. Leaning far out, she looked down. Her room was at the side of the building, near the rear, and she saw that a huge snowdrift had formed where the wind eddied around the corner. Only a moment she hesitated, then standing upright on the sill, she leaped far out and landed squarely in the centre of the huge drift. Struggling to her feet she

wallowed to the street, and ran swiftly through the darkness in the direction of the sawmill. And, at that very moment, Zinn was knocking upon the door of the Reeves home.

When the door had closed behind Brent, Mrs. Reeves had insisted upon Snowdrift's taking a much needed rest upon the lounge in the living room, and despatching Reeves upon an errand to a neighbor's, busied herself in the kitchen. The girl lay back among the pillows wondering when her lover would return when the sound of the knock sent her flying to the door. She drew back startled when, instead of Brent she was confronted by the man they had passed on the river.

"Is they a lady here name of Snowdrift?" asked the man.

A sudden premonition of evil shot through the girl's heart. She paled to the lips. Where was Brent? Had something happened? "Yes, yes!" she answered quickly, "I am Snowdrift. What has happened? Why do you want me?"

"It's him—yer man—Ace-In-The-Hole," he answered.

"Oh, what is it?" cried the girl, in a frenzy of impatience, "has he been hurt?"

"Well—not jest hurt, you might say. He's loadin' up on hooch. Some of us friends of hisn tried to make him go easy—but it ain't no use. I seen you an' him comin' in on the river, an' I figgered mebbe you could handle him. We're afraid someone'll rob him when he gits good an' drunk."

And not more than an hour ago he had given his promise—on the word of a Brent—a promise that Mrs. Reeves had just finished telling her would never be broken. A low sob that ended in a moan trembled upon the girl's lips: "Wait!" she commanded, and slipping into the room, caught up her cap and parka, and stepping out into the darkness, closed the door noiselessly behind her.

"Take me to him—quickly!" she said, "Surely he will listen to me."

"That's what I figgered," answered the man, and turning led the way down the dark street.

Presently the subdued light that filtered through the frosted windows of the Klondike Palace came into view, and as they reached the place Zinn led the way to the rear, and pushed open a door. Snowdrift found herself in a dimly lighted hallway. Cuter Malone stepped forward with a smile:

"Jest a minute, lady. Better put this here veil over yer face. He's up stairs, an' we got to go in through the bar. They's a lot of folks in there, an' they ain't no use of you bein' gopped at. With this on, they won't notice but what it's one of the women that lives here."

Snowdrift fastened the heavy veil over her face, and taking her arm, Malone piloted her through the bar-room and up the stairs. Through the mesh of the veil, Snowdrift caught a confused vision of many men standing before a long bar, of other men, and women in gay colors dancing upon a smooth stretch of floor, and her ears rang with the loud crashing of the piano. Bewildered, confused, she tightened her grasp upon Malone's arm. At the head of the stairs, the man paused and opened a door. "You kin take off the veil, now," he said, as he locked the door behind them, "They ain't no one up here."

A sudden terror possessed the girl, and she glanced swiftly into the man's face. "But—where is he?"

"Oh, he's on up," he assured her, "This way." He led the way across the room known as the small dance hall, and through a passage from which doors opened on either side, to a flight of stairs in the rear. At the head of the stairs the girl could see a light burning. He motioned her to proceed, and as she gained the top, a man stepped out from the shadow and seized her arms.

One look into his face and the girl gave a wild shriek of terror.

The man was Johnnie Claw.

The next moment she found herself thrust into a room lighted only by a single candle. It was a bare, forbidding looking room, windowless and with a door of thick planking, secured by a hasp and padlock upon the outside. Its single article of furniture was a bed.

"So," leered Claw, "You thought you could git away from me did you? Thought you was playin' hell when you an' Ace-In-The-Hole hit fer Dawson, did you? Well, you played hell, all right—but not like you figgered. Yer mine, now." Trembling so that her limbs refused to support her, Snowdrift sank down upon the bed.

"Oh where is he?" she moaned.

Claw laughed: "Oh, he's all right," he mocked, "He's soused to the guards by this time, an' after I an' some friends of mine git him to sign a deed to a couple of claims he owns, we'll feed him to the fish."

The girl tried to rise, but her muscles refused to obey the dictates of her brain, and she sank back upon the bed.

"You'll be all right here when you git used to it. The girls all have a lot of fun. I'm goin' below now. You stay here an' think it over. Tain't no use to holler—this room's built a purpose to tame the likes of you in. Some of 'em that's be'n in here has walked out, an' some of 'em has be'n carried out—but none of 'em has ever *got* out. An' jest so you don't take no fool notion to burn the

house down, I'll take this candle along. I got a horror of burnin'." Again he laughed harshly, and the next moment Snowdrift found herself in darkness, and heard the padlock rattle in the hasp.

Kitty drew swiftly into the intense blackness between two lumber piles. She heard the sound of voices coming toward her, and a moment later she could distinguish the words. "Damn him! He like to busted my jaw! Gawd, what a wallop he's got! But I fixed him, when I smashed that quart over his head!"

"Maybe he'll bleed to death," ventured another.

"Naw, he ain't cut bad. I seen the gash over his eye. He's bloody as hell, but he looks worse'n he is. Say, you sure you tied him tight? He's been out damn near an hour an' he'll be comin' to, 'fore long—an' believe me——"

The men passed out of hearing and Kitty slipped from cover and sped toward the shack the outline of which she could see beyond the corner of the sawmill.

She made sure that all four of the men were together, so she pushed in without hesitation. "Hello!" she called, softly. "Ace-In-The-Hole! You here?" No answer, and she moved further into the room and stumbled over the prostrate form of a man. Swiftly she dropped to her knees and assured herself that his hands and feet were tied. Deftly her fingers explored his pockets until they found his knife, and a moment later the thongs that bound him were severed. Her hand rested for a second upon his forehead, and with a low cry she withdrew it, wet and sticky with blood. Leaping to her feet, she procured a handful of snow which she dashed into his face. Again and again she repeated the performance, and then he moved. He muttered, feebly, and received more snow. Then she bent close to his ear:

"Listen, Ace-In-The-Hole—it's me—Kitty!"

"Kitty," murmured the man, uncertainly. "Snowdrift!"

"Yes I lit in a snowdrift all right when I jumped out the window—but how did you know? Come—wake up! Is there a light here?"

"Where am I?"

"In the shack back of the sawmill."

"Where's Camillo Bill?"

"Camillo Bill—he's up to Stoell's, I guess. But listen, give me a match."

Clumsily Brent fumbled in his pocket and produced a match. Kitty seized it, and in the flare of its flame saw a candle upon the table. She held the flame to the wick, and in the flickering light Brent sat up, and glanced about him. The air was heavy with the reek of the whiskey from the broken bottle. His head hurt, and he raised his hand and withdrew it red with blood. Then, he leaped unsteadily to his feet: "Damn 'em!" he roared, "It was a plant! What's their game?"

"I know what it is!" cried Kitty, "Quick—tell me—have you got a girl—here in Dawson?"

"Yes, yes—at Reeves—her name is Snowdrift, and she——"

"Come then—we ain't got any time to lose! It's Cuter Malone and that damned Johnnie Claw——"

"Johnnie Claw!" cried Brent. "Claw is a thousand miles from here—on the Coppermine!"

"He's right this minute in the Klondike Palace—and your girl will be there too, if you don't shake your legs! They framed this play to get her—and I heard 'em—partly. If I'd known where she was, I'd have gone there first—but I didn't know."

Already Brent was staggering from the room, and Kitty ran close beside him. The cold air revived the man and he ran steadily when he reached the street. "Tell me—" panted Kitty, at his side. "This girl—is—she straight?"

"I'm going to marry her tonight!" cried the man.

"Then hurry—for Christ's sake!" sobbed Kitty, "Oh, hurry! Hurry!"

At a certain street corner Kitty halted suddenly, and Brent ran on. He rushed into Reeves' house like a whirlwind. "Where's Snowdrift?" he cried, as the Reeves' stared wide-eyed at the blood-soaked apparition.

"What has happened——?"

"Where is she?" yelled Brent, his eyes glaring like a mad man's.

"I—we don't know. I was in the kitchen, and—" but Brent had dashed from the room, and when Reeves found his hat, the madman had disappeared in the darkness.

Quite a group of old timers had foregathered at Stoell's, Moosehide Charlie drifted in, and seeing Camillo Bill, Swiftwater Bill, and Old Bettles standing at the bar, he joined them.

"What do you say we start a regular old he-man's game of stud?" he asked. "We ain't had no real game fer quite a while."

Camillo Bill shook his head slowly: "No—not fer me. I'll play a reasonable game—but do you know since Ace-In-The-Hole went plumb to hell the way he done over the game—I kind of took a dislikin' to it."

"It was the hooch, more'n the stud," argued Bettles.

"Mebbe it was—but, damn it! It was 'em both. There was one hombre I liked."

"Wonder if he'll come back?" mused Swiftwater Bill.

"Sure as hell!" affirmed Camillo.

"Will he have sense enough to lay off the hooch?"

"I don't know, but I got twenty thousan' dollars says he will."

Camillo Bill looked defiantly around.

"Take it!" cried Swiftwater Bill, "An' I hope to hell I lose!"

The door burst open and Kitty, gasping for breath hurtled into the room: "Camillo Bill!" she screamed. "Quick! All of you! Hey you sourdoughs!" her voice rose to a shriek, and men crowded from the tables in the rear, "Come on! Ace-In-The-Hole needs us! He's back! An' he's brought a girl! They're goin' to be married. But—Claw and Cuter Malone, framed it to steal her! He's gone down there now!" she panted. "Come on! They hired a gang to get Ace-In-The-Hole, and they damn near did!"

With a yell Camillo Bill reached clear over the bar and grabbed one of Stoell's guns, and an instant later followed by a crowd of lesser lights the big men of the Yukon rushed down the street, led by Kitty, and Camillo Bill, and Stoell, himself, who another gun in hand, had vaulted the bar without waiting to put on his coat or his cap.

"They'll take her up stairs—way up—" gasped Kitty as she ran, "And—for God's sake—hurry!"

Bareheaded, his face covered with blood, a human cyclone burst through the door of the Klondike Palace. Straight for the bar he rushed, bowling men over like ten pins. Cuter Malone flashed one startled glance and reached for his gun, but before he could grasp it the shape hurdled the bar and the two went to the floor in a crash of glass. Brent's hand first found the gun, and gripping it by the barrel he brought it crashing down on Cuter's head. Leaping to his feet he fired, and the bartender, bung-starter in hand, sprawled on top of his employer.

Across the room came a rush of men—Stumpy Cooley, Zinn, and others. Again Brent fired, and Zinn crumpled slowly to the floor. Stumpy whirled a chair above his head and Brent dodged as the missile crashed into the mirror above the back bar. The bar-room was a pandemonium of noise. Men crowded in from the dance hall bent upon overpowering the madman who had interrupted their frolic. Screaming women rushed for the stairs.

Brent was lifted from his feet and rushed bodily half way across the room, the very numbers of his assailants protecting him from a hundred blows. Weaving—milling, the crowd surged this way and that, striking at Brent, and hitting each other. They surged against the stove, and it crashed upon its side, filling the room with smoke from the toppling pipe, and covering the floor with blazing chunks of wood and live coals.

Suddenly through the doors swept a whirlwind of human shapes! The surging crowd went down before the onrush, and Brent struggled madly to free himself from the thrashing arms and legs. Revolvers barked, chairs crashed against heads and against other chairs. Roulette and faro layouts were splintered, and poker tables were smashed like kindling wood, men seizing upon the legs for weapons. And above all rose the sound of crashing glass and the shrill shrieks of women. The room filled with choking smoke. Flames ate into the floor and shot up the wooden walls.

The door at the head of the stairs opened suddenly and Brent caught sight of the white face of Claw. He was afraid to shoot, for the frenzied girls, instead of seeking safety in the street, had crowded upon the stairs and were pouring through the door which Claw was vainly trying to close. The smoke sucked upward, and the flames crackled more loudly, fanned by the new formed draught. Struggling through the fighting, surging men, Brent gained the foot of the stairs. He saw Claw raise his gun, and the next instant a figure flashed between. The gun roared, and the figure crumpled to the floor. It was Kitty. With an oath, Brent sprang up the stairway, as the flames roared behind him.

He turned for an instant and as his eyes swept the room he saw Camillo Bill stoop and gather Kitty into his arms, and stagger toward the front door. Other men were helping the wounded from the room. Someone yelled at Brent to come down and save himself. He glanced toward the speaker. It was Bettles, and even as he looked the man was forced to retreat before the flames and was lost to view. At the head of the stairs Brent slammed the door shut. The little dance hall was full of girls huddled together shrieking. Other girls were stumbling from their rooms, with their belongings in their arms. From the narrow hallway that led to the rear rushed Claw. The man seemed beside himself with terror. His eyes were wide and staring and he made for a window, cursing shrilly as he forced his way through the close-packed crowd of girls, striking them, knocking them down and trampling on them. He did not see Brent and seizing a chair drove it through the window. The floor was hot, and the air thick with smoke. Claw was about to

leap to safety when like a panther Brent sprang upon him, and bore him to the floor. He reached out swiftly and his fingers buried themselves in the man's throat as they had buried themselves in the Captain's. He glared into the terror-wide eyes of the worst man in the North, and laughed aloud. An unnatural, maniacal laugh, it was, that chilled the hearts of the cowering girls. "Kill him!" shrilled one hysterically. "Kill him!" "Kill him!" Others took up the cry, Brent threw Claw onto his belly, placed his knees upon the small of his back, locked the fingers of both hands beneath the man's chin and pulled slowly and steadily upward. Backward came Claw's head as he tore frantically at Brent's arms with his two hands. Upward—and backward came the man's head and shoulders, and Brent shortened his leverage by suddenly slipping his forearms instead of his fingers beneath Claw's chin. Strangling sounds came gurgling from his throat. Brent leaned backward, adding the weight of his body to the pull of his arms. Claw's back was bent sharply upward just in front of the knees that held him to the floor, and summoning all his strength Brent surged backward, straining every muscle of his body until it seemed he could not pull another pound.

Suddenly there was a dull audible snap—and Claw folded backward.

Brent released his grip and leaping to his feet rushed back through the hallway, and up the stairs. A door of thick planking stopped him and upon a hasp he saw a heavy padlock. Jerking the gun from his belt, he placed the muzzle against the lock and pulled the trigger. There was a deafening explosion and the padlock flew open and swung upon its staple.

Dashing into the room, Brent snatched Snowdrift into his arms, and rushed down the stairs. Pausing at the window Claw had smashed, he stood the girl upon her feet, and knocking the remaining glass from the sash with the butt of the gun, he grabbed one of the screaming girls and pitched her into the big snowdrift that ranged along the whole length of the burning building.

It was light as day, now, the flames were leaping high above the roof at the front, and already tongues of red were showing around the doorway at the head of the stairs. A great crowd had collected, and at the sight of the girl's form hurtling through the air, they surged to the spot. Spurts of smoke and tiny jet-like flames were finding their way through the cracks of the floor. Brent realized there was no time to lose, and seizing another girl, he pitched her out. Then he took them as they came—big ones and little ones, fully dressed and half dressed, screaming, fighting, struggling to get away—or to be taken next, he pitched them out until only Snowdrift remained.

Lifting her to the window, he told her to jump, and watched to see her light safely in the snow.

Smoke was pouring through the fast widening cracks in the floor. Brent leaped to the window sill. As he stood poised, a section of the floor between himself and Claw dropped through, and a rush of flames shot upward. Suddenly he saw Claw's arms thrash wildly: "My Gawd!" the man shrieked, "My back's broke! I'm burnin' up!" The whole floor let go and a furnace of overpowering flame rushed upward as he jumped—almost into the waiting arms of Camillo Bill.

"It's Ace-In-The-Hole, all right!" yelled the big man, as he grasped Brent's shoulders, and rocked him back and forth, "An' by God! *He's as good a man as he ever was!*"

"Where's Kitty?" asked Brent, when he could get his breath. "I saw her go down. She stopped Claw's bullet that was meant for me! And I saw you carry her out!"

"Kitty's all right," whispered Camillo Bill in his ear, and Brent glanced quickly into the man's shining eyes. "Jest nicked in the shoulder—an' say—I've always wanted her—but she wouldn't have me—but—now you're out of the way—I told her all over again how I stood—an' *damned if she didn't take me*!"

THE END

Transcriber's Notes:

Normalized punctuation,

Maintained dialect in it's original spelling and format.

Silently corrected a few obvious typesetting errors.

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