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THE LADY OF
NORTH STAR

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BOOKS BY
OTWELL BINNS
A MATING IN THE WILDS
THE LADY OF NORTH STAR

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**THE LADY OF
NORTH STAR**

BY

OTTWELL BINNS



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THE LADY OF NORTH STAR

[1]

CHAPTER I

THE END OF A TRAIL

THERE was a smell of burning spruce in the sharp air, and Corporal Bracknell, of the North-west Mounted Police, threw back his head and sniffed it gratefully. His team of dogs had been conscious of it for some time, and now, quickening the pace, they broke into joyous yelps as they turned inward towards the Saskatoon bushes on the left bank of the frozen river. The corporal smiled to himself.

"They're wise dogs," he muttered, "but not wise enough to know the trail's end. I wonder if I shall find the man here."

He followed the well-marked track towards the bank. The aromatic smell of the spruce grew stronger, but there was nothing to be seen save the shadowy woods, and the packed sled-road between. The road had been cut through the trees, and here and there a stump bearing the mark of the ax protruded above the snow. For perhaps three hundred yards it ran in a bee-line between the tall trunks, and then turned abruptly to the right. He reached the turning, and looked about him curiously. The road still continued, but the end of it was not in sight, for again it turned, as it seemed to him into the very heart of the forest.

"There's a house or encampment somewhere about," he said to himself, "but—"

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He broke off abruptly as something caught his eye. It was a new-marked sled-trail debouching from the main track, and he stooped to examine it carefully. When he straightened himself there was an eager light in his eye, and curbing his impatient dogs he stood considering for a full two minutes.

"He may have a shack here," so his thoughts ran, "but if there's more than that, why this broad road?"

He considered the avenue made by the sombre pinewoods on each side of the road, and then shook his head. "Too much style for Koono Dick. There must be a homestead somewhere about, but if those are not the marks of his sled-runners I'm a dutchman."

He spoke a word or two to his well-trained dogs, and slipping off his snowshoes turned towards the trail which led into the wood, and began to follow it carefully. As he walked, he unbuttoned the pistol-holster at his waist, and gripped the handle of the weapon in preparation for action. The man whose trail he believed that he was following was not given to being over-scrupulous. He had pursued him for nearly four hundred miles, and now that the end of the chase was in sight, it behoved him to be cautious, for if Koono Dick suspected his presence his resentment of it might even go to the extreme length of a rifle bullet. He left the trail, and began to move cautiously from tree to tree.

The short Northland day was almost over. Dusk was coming on apace, and the gloom under the trees deepened, little misgivings awake in his mind.

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Was it wise to follow the track into the heart of the wood? His dogs were good dogs, but—

The sudden sharp crash of a rifle echoed through the stillness, followed immediately by a second, and that by the sharp cry of a woman assailed by mortal terror, and then there came the quick yelp of dogs. He turned in his tracks and began to run back under the trees.

How long it was before he reached the main trail he never knew, but never in his life had he run so fast before. Fear was pounding at

his heart. His dogs? If they were gone—

He reached the edge of the wood to find them still where he had left them, and his relief found expression in a quick "Thank God!" He looked round him, up and down the road and into the dark woods on either hand. There was nothing to be seen, and the coming of night had already shortened the range of vision. He stood listening intently. No sound broke the awful silence that had followed the shots and the curdling cry of fear. His hand, resting on the gee-pole of the sled, shook a little.

"It was a woman," he whispered, "a white woman, at that. There's some infernal mystery about. I wonder if Koon Dick—"

He did not finish the thought. Setting his face to the turn in the road, he gave the dogs the word and they moved forward. Somewhere at the end of the road there was a human habitation. Of that he was convinced. He would find it, and perhaps at the same time find Koon Dick and the solution of that mysterious cry which had so suddenly startled the silent woods. [4]

But he was not destined to reach the end of the road without further adventure. As he reached the turn he became aware of a narrow road on the left hand cut at right angles from the main track, and as he looked down it, saw a shadowy figure moving swiftly between the trees straight towards him. Against the fading light and the white background of snow he made out the form of a woman, and instantly halted his dogs with the intention of speaking to her. She was perhaps five and twenty yards away when he first saw her, and the distance between them she covered at a run, approaching him apparently without seeing him. Her line of progression brought her within four yards of the place where he stood waiting in the shadow of a giant spruce. Still she did not see him, and he was about to make his presence known, when the sight of her face checked him.

It was a young face, and beautiful, but as he saw it, it was a picture of incarnate terror. The eyes were staring as in horror. There was a stony look about the cameo-like features, and he caught the gasping intake of breath as she passed him. He had seen terror in feminine faces before, once when a drunken half-breed had lifted a knife to slay, and once on the face of an Indian girl, swept towards the White Horse Rapids on the Yukon in a frail canoe, and he had no doubt whatever as to the emotion which found expression in that stonily beautiful face. The girl was badly frightened. He was quite certain of that, and the fact of her passing both himself and his team without observing them was further evidence that she was in great stress of mind. As she hurried by something in her hand caught his eye. It was a rifle carried at the trail. [5]

For a moment he stood there undecided what to do. Once he made as if to follow the girl, and then checking himself again, stood considering. Those two shots which he had heard—what did they mean? They had sounded quite close, and now there came this girl, clearly badly frightened, carrying a rifle and hurrying from the wood. He looked up the narrow path between the gloomy pines, his trained mind and his instincts working together. Something had occurred in the wood, something tragical, or it had not brought that look on the girl's face. What was it?

Tired as he was with the day's travel, and certain though he was of the nearness of some house of rest, he could not leave the problem unsolved. For the moment he even forgot Koon Dick, and again leaving his dogs he turned into the path from which the girl had emerged. He moved cautiously, with the service pistol in his hand. He did not know what to expect, and he was not inclined to be caught unprepared. Once, as he walked in the darkness of the trees, he paused, and throwing back the ear-flaps of his fur-cap, stood listening. No sound reached him, though a moment before he had caught a noise which had seemed like the snapping of a dry twig. Thinking he must have been mistaken, he resumed his way. As he did so, a shadowy form behind him slid from one tree trunk to another; and as he progressed the form in the wood followed, evidently stalking him. [6]

Corporal Bracknell, however, remained unconscious of the shadow, and moving quickly but silently on his way, came suddenly upon something which brought him to an abrupt halt. In the snow not three yards from where he stood lay the huddled form of a man. For a moment he stared at it as if fascinated, and as the man did not move, when the moment had passed he stepped swiftly forward, and

bent over the inanimate form. The man was lying on his side, and a dark stain in the snow the corporal divined was blood. Apparently the man was dead, and as it was now too dark to see his face, the corporal felt in his pouch and produced a tin box of sulphur matches. Striking one, he waited until the sulphur had finished spluttering, and when the wood was fairly alight, he bent over the prostrate form, shading the match with his hands so as to throw the light upon the man's face. Then suddenly he dropped the match and stood upright.

"Koon Dick!" he muttered, and then whistled softly to himself.

He struck another match and looked again in order to make sure. As for the second time the flickering light fell on the face in the snow, every doubt vanished. The man who was lying there was the man whom he had followed for *four* hundred miles through the waste, the man whom he had hoped to make his prisoner, but who now, if appearances were to be trusted, had finally escaped him. Dropping the match as it burned towards the end, he thrust his hand inside the man's fur parka to feel if the heart were beating. He could detect no movement, and as he withdrew the hand, he stood upright, and as he considered question after question went through his mind at the gallop.

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Who had killed Koon Dick? The girl whom he had met with that look of frozen terror on her face? Who was she? Had she shot the man lying at his feet? Why had she done so? Where did she live? As the last question shot in his mind he knew that the answer to it was in his grasp. He had seen the direction she had followed, and he guessed that whatever homestead lay at the end of that road cut through the forest would be her dwelling place. As this conviction surged into his mind the whining of his dogs came to his ears. They were evidently growing restless, and since he could do nothing by lingering there, after one glance at the still form lying in the snow, he swung on his heel, and made all speed back to where his team awaited him. They yelped with delight as he appeared, and when he gave the word, bounded impatiently forward along the well-beaten track.

Four minutes later, a turn in the road unexpectedly brought into view the homestead that he was seeking. It was set in the midst of a large clearing, and from its outline in the darkness was of considerable proportions for a Northland lodge. Lights shone in three of the windows, and just as he reached the wooden fence which ran round the house, a door opened, and a light within streaming through outlined the form of a man in the act of entering.

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Corporal Bracknell shouted to him, and the man turned round and peered into the darkness, then he rested something against the wooden wall of the passage, shut the door, and moved towards the policeman.

"Who are you?" he asked, as he came nearer.

"Corporal Bracknell—on Dominion service," replied the policeman.

"Corporal Bracknell?"

As the man echoed the words the corporal caught a puzzled note in his tones, and explained further.

"Yes, of the Mounted Police."

"Oh, of course! I was not thinking of the Mounted service. I am a stranger in the Nor'-West—" Bracknell had already divined that such must be the case, but he did not say so. He laughed lightly, and made his wants known.

"I'm on service, and tired. I should be grateful for supper and a bunk if that is possible."

"It is quite possible, Officer, and Joy—I mean Miss Gargrave will be very glad to oblige you. She is always pleased to play the Good Samaritan."

As the man spoke the name, the corporal remembered that he had heard it before. It had been borne by an eccentric Englishman, who had been reported enormously wealthy and who had perished rather tragically on the Klondyke, three years before, and the mystery of whose death had never been cleared up, satisfactorily. He knew now where he was.

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"This is the North Star Lodge, then?" he inquired.

"Yes!" was the reply. "Will you go in now and attend to your team afterwards, or—"

"In my service," laughed Bracknell, "the dogs come first."

"Very well," answered the other. "I will wait for you!"

He lit a cigarette and watched the corporal whilst he loosed the dogs from the traces, and fed them with frozen fish. The light from the window fell on his face and showed that he was less interested in the operation than in the man engaged upon it, for never for a moment did his eyes leave the officer, and there was a ruminative look in them, as if he were speculating what manner of man the policeman was. The corporal was quite conscious of the stare, but gave no sign of it, though once or twice as he moved about, he flashed a glance at the stranger, endeavouring in his turn to take the other's measure. When he had finished his task he turned to him.

"I am ready now."

"So am I," laughed the man; "it is cold waiting about."

He threw his cigarette away, and moved towards the door of the house. Corporal Bracknell followed him, and as the door opened his guide stumbled over something which fell with a clatter on the pinewood floor.

The man stooped and picked it up.

"My rifle," he explained. "I had forgotten it was there. I rested it against the wall when you hailed me."

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The corporal nodded, but made no remark. His thoughts were engaged with Koon Bill lying out there under the shadow of the pines, and he was wondering what the meeting with Joy Gargrave would be like, guessing as he did that she must be the girl who had passed him out in the wood. His companion conducted him to a room that for the Northland was positively luxurious, and waved him a chair near the stove.

"You will like to change your socks and moccasins," he said politely. "I will go and inform Miss Gargrave, and return for you in ten minutes or so. It should be almost dinner time."

Corporal Bracknell nodded, and when the man had departed looked round the room with some curiosity. Nowhere in the wild region where his work was done was there another such room, he was sure. Even the commandant's rooms down at the Post were poor beside it. The furniture was of excellent quality. The wall was match-boarded, hiding the outer logs, and there were furs everywhere. Pictures too! Something familiar in one of them caught his eye, and moving towards it he saw that it was a photograph of Newham College, Cambridge.

He stood looking at it, whistling softly to himself. He himself had been at Caius, and having a sister at Newham, had once or twice had tea in its precincts. He wondered what the picture was doing here in this lodge in the northern wilderness, and he was still wondering when a gong sounded. Hastily he began to change his socks, and the operation was scarcely completed, when the man who had introduced him to the house appeared.

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"Ready, Corporal?"

"Almost," he replied, and half a minute later stood up and nodded.

"This way," said the other laconically, and led the way out of the room and across the wide passage. The policeman was prepared for surprises, but the appearance of the room into which he entered almost took his breath away. Except for the roaring Yukon stove, and the fur rugs on the polished floor, it was a replica of the typical dining-room of an English country house. The furniture was Jacobean, the table was laid with the whitest napery, and silver and glasses gleamed on its whiteness. He had a quick apprehension of oil-paintings on the wall, of a long-cased clock in the corner, and of two girls standing together near the stove, then his companion's voice sounded.

"Corporal Bracknell! Miss Gargrave! Miss La Farge."

He bowed to the two ladies in turn. The second he knew as he glanced at her was of French Canadian extraction, with perhaps a dash of Indian blood in her veins; but the first was a golden-haired English girl, tall, blue-eyed, with face a little bronzed by the open-air, and—the girl who had passed him with her face the index of mortal terror and her rifle at the trail. It was she who spoke in a voice that had the indescribable accent of culture.

"We are pleased to see you, Corporal Bracknell. No doubt, if you have been long on the trail, you will be ready for dinner."

CHAPTER II

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE

FEELING like a man in a dream, the corporal took his seat at the table, and when the soup was served by an Indian youth, he was too much amazed to attempt conversation. Miss Gargrave looked at him and casually asked, "You have never been to North Star before, Mr. Bracknell?"

"No," he answered, shaking his head. "I am new to this district. I was transferred from Edmonton four months ago."

"Then you did not know of our existence?"

The corporal smiled. "I had heard something of it; but the truth is I had forgotten all about it."

The girl nodded. "I can understand that. We are so far out of the track of things that it is easy for the world to forget us."

Bracknell would have liked to ask why such as she should continue to live in the wilderness; but he repressed his curiosity, and looking round smiled again.

"Your solitude is not without its amenities. I did not think there was such a room as this anywhere in the north. It reminds one of home!"

"You are English, of course?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "I come from Kendal, in Westmorland."

"Kendal?" There was an accent of surprise in her voice.

"You know Kendal?" he inquired quickly.

"Yes," she answered. "I have stayed in the neighbourhood. Are you any relation of Sir James Bracknell of Harrowfell?"

"My uncle and guardian," he smilingly replied.

Joy Gargrave looked at him thoughtfully. "I have met your uncle," she said slowly. "I should scarcely have looked for his nephew in the Mounted Police."

"Why not?" he demanded, with a laugh. "The Force is a packet of surprises. My sergeant at Edmonton was the heir to an Irish peerage, and I know a trooper down at Alberta who is the second son of a marquis."

"But Sir James!" she murmured. "He did not seem to me the sort of man who would approve—"

"He does not know," interrupted the corporal.

"It is very likely that he would not approve if he did. But that does not greatly matter; as before I came out here we quarrelled, and the relations between us are likely to continue strained."

"Is it permissible to ask the cause of this quarrel?" inquired the man on the other side of the table, whose name the corporal had not yet learned.

Bracknell frowned at the directness of the question and was about to administer a snub, when he caught Miss Gargrave's eyes fixed upon him expectantly. He laughed shortly as he replied, "Well, Mr.—ar—"

"Rayner is my name," said the other. "I forgot I had not introduced myself."

The corporal nodded. "I was about to say, Mr. Rayner, that it is a private matter; but there can be no harm in saying that my uncle had a matrimonial scheme for me of which I did not approve, so here I am."

He laughed to hide his embarrassment of which he was conscious, and looked at Miss Gargrave to whom the explanation had really been offered. There was a thoughtful look upon her face.

"Sir James is rather dictatorial," she said, and then turned the conversation. "Do you like the service?"

"Yes," was the reply, given wholeheartedly. "It is a man's work, and the open-air life, with all the many hazards of the North, is infinitely preferable to stewing in chambers waiting for briefs; or devilling the K.C. who wants to keep all the crumbs on his own table."

The girl nodded. "I can understand that," she commented, and for a moment she sat there crumbling her bread.

The thoughtful look on her face was accentuated. Remembering what he had seen there when she had passed him in the road, the corporal found himself wondering if there was any connection between the two. Then Miss Gargrave spoke again.

"I suppose you are in this neighbourhood on professional business?"

"Yes," he answered readily enough. "I have been following a man for a month and have trailed him something like four hundred miles."

"That is a long journey in winter," said the girl a trifle absently.

Corporal Bracknell smiled. "Nothing to boast of. There have been many longer trails in the Territory by our men. Did you ever hear how Constable Pedley took the lunatic missionary from Fort Chipewayn to Saskatchewan down the Athabasca River in the very depth of winter?"

"Yes," answered the girl. "That was an epic. The constable lost his own reason in the end, didn't he?"

Bracknell nodded. "Yes, but he's better again now; though naturally that experience has set its mark on him. And if I had got my man my return journey would have been much harder than the journey up, as I should have had to look after him; and sleep with one eye open all the time."

"You speak as if you had lost your man," said Rayner. "Is that so?"

"Yes, I have lost him finally," answered the corporal slowly.

"Who was he? What had he done? Was he a very desperate character?" inquired Miss Gargrave, and to the corporal as he turned to her it seemed as if there was a look of troubled expectancy in her face.

"He was an Englishman," answered Bracknell quietly, his eyes fixed on the beautiful face. "I do not know that he was a particularly desperate character, but he certainly was not scrupulous, and he was suspected of selling whiskey to the Indians in the reservation, which is a serious offence in the Territory."

"What name?" asked Miss La Farge.

"His proper name I do not know, but he has been known through the North as Koon Dick!"

As he gave the name he saw Joy Gargrave's face grow white, and the trouble in her eyes was plain. Also, with the tail of his eye, he saw Mr. Rayner start violently, and guessed that both he and his hostess were not unacquainted with the man who lay out there in the snow under the shadow of the pines. For a moment after his reply there was a strained uneasy silence. The corporal removed his eyes from his hostess's face and glanced round the table. Mr. Rayner was fingering the stem of a wine-glass nervously, whilst Miss La Farge was looking from him to Miss Gargrave with puzzled eyes. Evidently she was conscious that something unusual was taking place, but the corporal was sure that to her the name he had just spoken was without any special significance. That it was known to the other two people present he was certain, and he waited to see what would follow. The sense of strain grew more pronounced, then Mr. Rayner shuffled uneasily and broke the silence.

"I notice, Corporal Bracknell, that you speak of this—er—fellow in the past tense, and you say that he has escaped you finally. Do you mean to say that he is—a—dead?"

"He is lying in the snow in a path cut through the trees off the main road to the Lodge," answered the corporal steadily, "and he has been shot, I think."

"Good God!" ejaculated Mr. Rayner, in a voice that, whilst it expressed astonishment, seemed to the corporal to be a little flat. "And we have been sitting here, gassing, whilst—" He broke off abruptly. "Joy," he cried addressing Miss Gargrave, "you are ill. The shock of this story—"

"It is nothing," interrupted the girl in a shaking voice. "I—I—feel a little faint. If you will excuse me—" She rose to her feet, staggered a little, and then, as Miss La Farge ran to her, fainted outright. For a moment Corporal Bracknell did not speak, though a look of utmost concern came upon his face. The situation seemed to him to be thronged with dreadful possibilities. Remembering the look on the girl's face when he had encountered her in the forest road, and the rifle in her hand, he found in this faint further support for the suspicion which had occurred to him when he had stood by the

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supine body of Koona Dick. Living in the wilds, it was scarcely likely that the news of a dead man would affect her thus, if that news were without special significance for her. Death in the Northland—death sharp and sudden was not so uncommon as all that. Moving accidents by flood and field, by wild beasts and wild men, were part of the general circumstances of wilderness life; why, therefore, should the girl be thus affected by the news that he had uttered? Whilst Mr. Rayner assisted Miss La Farge to carry their hostess out of the room, he stood there, his mind occupied by this momentous question. The answer was one which took the form of a further question and which filled him with concern. Had she killed Koona Dick, with whom, as he was sure, she was acquainted?

Again he saw the beautiful face, the picture of terror and the eyes in their unseeing stare of horror, and wondered what was the meaning of it all. Had the girl seen the body of Koona Dick lying there in the shadow of the pines with his blood staining the snow, and was she merely frightened; or was her knowledge of a more intimate and guilty character? He could not decide, and whilst he was still wondering, the door of the room opened and Rayner entered. His face now was mask-like, and his voice was suave and even as he addressed the officer.

"I am afraid your story has been a shock to Miss Gargarve, who has not been very well all day. You will have to excuse her for this evening; but that is no reason why you should not finish your dinner, after which we might go out and look at this dead man. I suppose he will have to have sepulchre?"

"Even the worst of us should have that," answered the corporal quietly, then added, "Miss Gargrave—she is better?"

"Yes, it was only a faint. I expect she found it rather shocking to think that whilst we were sat here, that man was lying dead in the snow outside."

"I can understand that," answered the other in a non-committal voice.

Mr. Rayner nodded. "Feminine nerves are unstable things." A second later he asked, "Did I understand you to say that this man whom you were following was shot?"

"That is only a guess of mine," was the reply. "I found him lying there in the snow, and only a few minutes before I distinctly heard a rifle fire twice."

"But," objected Mr. Rayner, "it does not follow that the shots you heard were directed against this man Koona Dick? I myself fired at a timber-wolf on the outskirts of the homestead just a little while before your arrival."

"Did you fire twice?" asked Corporal Bracknell quickly.

"N—no! Once!"

There was a little hesitation before the reply was given. It was but the fraction of a second, but the policeman marked it, and suspected that the other had been a little uncertain as to what he ought to answer.

"But I heard two shots—one on the heels of the other," answered Bracknell.

"One may have been the echo," suggested Rayner. "Up here when it is still, sounds are easily duplicated."

"No, it was not an echo," asserted the corporal. "I am quite sure of that. I have lived in the wilds too long to be deceived in a small matter of that sort. The second shot was as real as the first. And there is another thing I ought to tell you, Mr. Raynor. Immediately after the second shot I heard a woman cry out."

Mr. Rayner looked interested. "Are you quite sure it was a woman?" he asked. "It may have been the death-cry of this man—er—Koona Dick, which you heard."

"That is just possible," agreed the corporal. "Yet it seemed to me like the cry of a woman in terror."

"It is easy even for trained ears to be mistaken up here," said the other suavely. "Since I came here I have heard a hare scream like a child in agony. The cry you heard may have been no more than that of some small creature falling a victim to the law of the wild, which is that the strongest takes the prey."

"Maybe!" said Bracknell laconically. In his heart he did not accept the explanation, plausible though it was.

"I am sure of it," answered the other, as if determined to

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convince him. "In the silence of these northern forests, as I have noticed often of late, sounds seem to take strange qualities. The loneliness accentuates them, and if one has any reason for suspecting the presence of other humans besides one's self, then every sound one hears seems to have some bearing on the unseen presences."

"Perhaps," replied the policeman, wondering why the other should be so persistent in the matter; "but you forget one thing which is rather fatal to your argument."

"And what is that?" inquired Rayner quickly.

"Well, I was not expecting to find a woman up in this wilderness; indeed, it was the last thought in my mind. That fact makes your argument fail, at any rate as applied to the cry I heard."

To this Mr. Rayner made no reply. He pushed a wine decanter towards the other, and rising from the table crossed the room to a cabinet, from which he took out a box of cigars.

"We will have a smoke, before going to look at this dead man."

Corporal Bracknell accepted the cigar, which was of choice brand, and when he had lit it he looked at the other—and said thoughtfully. "I have been wondering why Miss Gargrave lives up here in the wilds?"

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Rayner laughed a little. "I am not surprised at that. Everybody wonders. But the fact is that she has no real choice in the matter. As I dare say you will have heard, Rolf Gargrave was immensely rich, and he made his daughter his heiress, but on the condition that for three years after his death she should live at North Star Lodge. That is the explanation!"

"But why on earth should he make a condition of that sort— for a girl?"

"He was a crank!" replied Rayner contemptuously. "He was not an admirer of what is called modern civilization—indeed, he detested it most heartily and whilst he sent his daughter to England to be educated, he desired to protect her against society influences; and he believed that a few years in the North here, in touch with primitive life, would give her a distaste for the shams and artificialities of great cities. Also—I believe he was a little afraid of fortune-hunters and wanted Joy's mind to mature before she met the breed."

Bracknell nodded his understanding of the situation, and then remarked. "The place is not without its points—but to my thinking it has grave dangers also. When Miss Gargrave returns to civilization, the reaction from the hard life and the solitude of the North is likely to be so great that in the whirl she may be carried off her feet."

"Yes, Rolf Gargrave does not appear to have thought of that. But there are others who have it in mind." The corporal looked thoughtfully at his companion, and wondered what relation he stood to their hostess. It was a question that could not be asked openly, but remembering how once or twice the girl's Christian name had slipped into Rayner's speech he guessed that whatever the relationship was, it was a fairly intimate one. He was still wondering when his companion rose.

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"If you are ready, Corporal Bracknell, we will go and look at—a—Koon Dick."

The corporal rose with alacrity, and five minutes later, clad in outdoor furs, they were moving briskly down the road cut between the pines. As they walked, the policeman looked about him with keen eyes, and when they reached the point where the narrower path that he had followed branched off, noticed what had escaped him before, namely that the path was evidently continued on the other side of the road also. Rayner did not hesitate between the two. He made a straight line for the path which led to the place where Koon Dick had fallen. As they turned into it, the thought that he might be wrong appeared to strike him, and he halted abruptly.

"This path, wasn't it? The left going towards the house, I think you said, didn't you?"

"Yes, the left!" answered Corporal Bracknell quietly, but as he walked by the other's side the question leaped in his mind. "Did I mention the left?" He could not remember. He doubted, and his doubts were strengthened by the fact that till a moment before he had not known that the path was continued across the main road. Thinking there was only one path, there was no reason why he should have mentioned the position of it. Yet the man by his side

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had known which path to take! As he walked on, he gave no sign, but a question leaped up in his mind. "How did Rayner know?"

Then simultaneously he and his companion came to an abrupt halt. At their feet in the snow was a dark blot. The corporal looked hastily round, then felt for his matches and struck one. As the wood caught, he stooped and examined the ground near the dark blot, where was the impress of a heavy body in the snow, and footmarks all round it. He stared at the trampled snow in amazement, then he examined the snow in the shadow of the trees. Its surface in the immediate neighbourhood was unbroken, save by the print of a single pair of moccasined feet, and those footmarks moved towards the place where Koon Dick had lain, and not away from it. He looked among the underwood in the neighbourhood of the path. The search in the darkness revealed nothing, nowhere was there any sign of the man whom they had come to look for.

"What is it?" asked Rayner in an odd voice. "What has happened?"

"A strange thing has happened," said the corporal laconically. "The body we came to look for has disappeared."

CHAPTER III

THE CORPORAL FINDS A LETTER

“DISAPPEARED!” As he echoed the corporal’s word in a hoarse voice, Rayner looked hastily and fearfully into the shadows, and then added, “Are you sure?”

“Quite sure,” answered Corporal Bracknell tersely. “This is the place where he lay. That is his blood in the snow there; and you can, see the print of his body if you look.”

“Then—then he was not dead after all?” asked Rayner in a strange voice.

“I would not say that. I would have taken my oath that there was no life in him. I even felt his heart!”

“But in that case, how has he got away?” inquired Rayner quickly. “Dead men do not walk away from the place where they die.”

“No,” answered the corporal quietly. “But they may be carried. It seems to me that there are more footmarks here than there were when I came on Koon Dick lying in the track; but I cannot be quite sure of that, as I did not look about very carefully.”

“Why not?” asked the other a trifle critically. “I should have thought that would have been the very first thing that you would have done.”

“In ordinary circumstances it would,” was the reply, “but I had left my team in the main track, and to do that overlong is not wise. One might get separated from it, you know. Also I had already guessed that there was a homestead not very far away, and it seemed the sensible thing to go there first, and learn anything that I could that would help in the elucidation of the mystery of the dead man.”

“Um! And did you learn anything?”

“More than I expected.”

“Indeed!” answered Rayner sharply. There was a new note in his voice, and the corporal felt rather than saw that the other was staring at him in the darkness. “May I ask what that was?”

“It was that you were acquainted with Koon Dick.”

“I have never spoken to him in my life,” replied Rayner quickly.

“But you knew him or you had heard of him. I saw you start when I mentioned his name at table.”

His companion laughed uneasily. “You have sharper eyes than I gave you credit for, Corporal Bracknell. It is quite true that I had heard of Koon Dick. I heard of him in my journey up, and what I heard was not to his credit. Your presence here implied that he was in this district, and one had no hankering for such an unpleasant neighbour.”

“And Miss Gargrave, had she only heard of him also?”

As he asked the question the aurora flashed suddenly in the Northern sky, and in its light reflected from the snow the corporal saw that Rayner’s face was white and troubled. The light faded almost as suddenly as it flamed, and with that look in his mind the policeman waited for the answer to his question. It seemed to be an intolerable time before Rayner spoke in a hoarse and shaking voice.

“How can I tell you? If you feel that it is absolutely necessary to obtain an answer to that question, I can only suggest that you should approach Miss Gargrave herself.”

In his heart Bracknell knew that this answer was a mere evasion. Rayner knew more than he was willing to confess, and the policeman wondered what it was, and what link there was between him and Miss Gargrave and Koon Dick. He considered a moment, and then deliberately forced the pace.

“I have not told you everything, Mr. Rayner. I do not know what relation you stand to Miss Gargrave, but—”

“I am her cousin,” interrupted Rayner, “and my father is her guardian and lawyer.”

“Is that so?” answered the corporal. “Then there is more reason why I should tell you what I intended to do. I have not told you yet how I came to find Koon Dick. I had turned in from the river

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because I smelt burning wood. I thought that maybe the man I was after had encamped somewhere in this immediate neighbourhood. I found the avenue leading to North Star Lodge and began to follow it. I turned from the main road into the wood on a fresh sled-trail which I imagined and still imagine was Koon Dick's. I had gone only a little way, when, as I have already told you, I heard two rifle shots and a woman's cry in quick succession to each other. I ran back to the road, and after waiting a moment I began to follow it. I had reached the point where this path cuts into it, when happening to glance across I saw a woman coming towards me across the snow. I halted in the shadows, meaning to speak to her, but I caught sight of her face, and she did not see either my team or myself."

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"You saw her face—plainly?" interrupted his listener quickly.

"Quite plainly."

"And would you recognize it again?"

"I have already done so," answered the corporal quietly.

"Indeed?"

"Yes, the woman was your cousin, Miss Gargrave."

"My dear fellow," cried Rayner, breaking into discordant laughter. "You surely are not going to charge Joy with shooting Koon Dick?"

The corporal was not disturbed by the laughter. To his ears it sounded forced, and the contemptuous protest in his companion's words left him unmoved.

"There is one little thing that I have not told you, Mr. Rayner, and to me it seems to be significant. Miss Gargrave carried a rifle."

"There is nothing strange or even significant in that," replied the other quickly. "My cousin is an ardent sportswoman, and had probably been after game. Besides, as I told you, I think, there are timber wolves about. They are dangerous beasts in hard weather, and one does not go far unarmed in this district."

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Corporal Bracknell answered these suggestions by some of his own. "Miss Gargrave was running down the path which led to this spot. To my eyes she was plainly distraught, and I may remind you that she fainted when I told you that Koon Dick was dead."

Rayner laughed again hardly. "You are persistent, Corporal, but there is nothing in a girl fainting when she is told rather dramatically that a man has been shot dead almost at her own door. Aren't you a little imaginative? Indeed," he laughed again, "having heard a rifle shot have you not imagined all the rest? I am told that a lonely trail plays the deuce with a man's nerves. You say that you saw Koon Dick lying here, dead; but he is not here—now, and he can't—"

"I haven't imagined that anyhow," interrupted Bracknell, pointing to the dark stain on the snow, "and I haven't imagined any of the other things I have told you, either. Believe me, Mr. Rayner, my nerves are in perfect order."

Rayner stamped his feet in the snow. "Possibly! But there is no need that we should freeze, whilst we discuss the point, is there? I do not understand police procedure, but if you have quite finished here, I think we might return to the house. I have no desire to lose my toes through frost-bite."

"I can do nothing here, tonight," replied Bracknell quickly. "I shall have to wait until morning. I am quite ready to return."

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Rayner did not reply. Swinging on his heel, he began to move in the direction of the lodge. The corporal followed him in silence, and they had almost reached the main-road when something light caught his moccasined foot. He looked down and discerned what looked like a piece of paper. Stooping quickly, he picked it up, and crushed it in his mitten, as his companion turned round, as if to wait for him. At first he thought Rayner must have seen him make the find; but as the other spoke, was reassured.

"I hope you will not disturb my cousin unnecessarily tonight, Corporal Bracknell."

"I shall not trouble her at all, Mr Rayner. There is no need that I should—yet."

"Nor at any other time, I hope."

"I share that hope, most fervently," answered Bracknell, with an earnestness that the other evidently found convincing, for he did not speak again until they were seated in the front of the stove in the room where they had dined. Then he tried to make light of the

situation. "Corporal," he laughed, "the laws of hospitality are sacred in the North. Even though you feel you must drag us all down as your prisoners, they must be honoured. We have some very old brandy here, indeed it is incredibly old, and its quality is equal to its age. You will take a glass with me, and another cigar?"

"I shall be delighted, thank you, Mr. Rayner."

Rayner produced a decanter and glasses, and poured out the brandy, and whilst the officer was lighting his cigar, Miss La Farge entered the room.

"How is Joy?" asked Rayner quickly.

"Better, thank you. She sent me to make her excuses for tonight; and to ask how you had sped."

"Only fairly," answered Rayner, with a smiling glance at the corporal. "We did not find the dead man whom Mr. Bracknell averred he saw."

"That is very strange," said the girl wonderingly.

"Yes," was the reply, "very strange, so strange indeed that I have tried to persuade the corporal that all that he has told us is just a snow-dream."

"But you have not persuaded him?" asked Miss La Farge, with a quick glance at the corporal's face.

It was Bracknell himself who answered. "No, I have not, as yet, been persuaded, Miss La Farge."

"My eloquence was wasted, Babette," laughed Rayner easily. "Corporal Bracknell has that British stubbornness which is a nuisance to our friends and a terror to our enemies."

Miss La Farge laughed as she replied, "That is a characteristic of the male persuasion."

With a smiling nod she withdrew, closing the door behind her, and Rayner rose from his chair and drew a curtain of moose-hide over the door.

"Miss La Farge is a good companion for my cousin."

"From French Canada, I suppose?" queried the corporal.

"Father was of that stock, but her mother was partly of Scotch descent, partly native. Joy's mother died young, and Babette's brought them up together. They are foster-sisters and inseparables."

Bracknell nodded, and sipped the brandy thoughtfully, and the other continued, "I do not know what will happen when Joy gets married."

"Is that an early possibility?" asked the corporal, with a sudden quickening of interest.

"I hope so," replied Rayner, with a bland smile.

The corporal made the inference that he was meant to make. "Then you—"

"It is not quite settled yet, but I hope it will be very shortly. The wilderness years necessitated by her father's will are nearly over, and I am to take her 'out' from here. I hope then that we shall be married, and live in England."

For a moment the corporal did not reply. He looked at the bland, mask-like face before him, saw, as he had already noted, that the steel-like blue eyes were too close together, that the lips were sensual; and as he did so, the beautiful face of Joy Gargrave, as he had seen it at table, rose before him, and somehow he found Rayner's suggestion of coming wedlock utterly distasteful. The man, as he felt instinctively, was not a man to be trusted with a girl's happiness. Why he should have that feeling he could not tell; but it was there, and it was only by an effort that he was able to reply affably.

"For Miss Gargrave, England, no doubt, is much to be preferred."

"Much!" agreed Rayner, then added, "Having told you so much, you can understand that I feel rather inclined to resent your suggestion that Joy has anything to do with the mysterious affair out in the wood there. She may have heard the name of Koon Dick as I myself have, but that she knew him, that she shot him, is the very wildest thing for any one to imagine. I really cannot think how you can entertain it for a moment in face of the utter absence of motive."

"That is a strong point certainly," conceded Bracknell.

"That she happened to be in the neighbourhood is nothing. I was

in the neighbourhood, you were in the neighbourhood—”

“Yes,” interrupted the corporal with a smile, “that is true. But there is no reason why I should shoot Koona Dick, and there was every reason why I should take him prisoner.”

“You are not suggesting that there was any reason why Joy or I should have done such a thing, I hope?”

“Far from it. I know of none, but of course in an area where crime is committed every one is suspect until the criminal is found.”

Rayner laughed easily, and to the corporal’s quick ear there was a note of relief in his tones as he replied, “In that case there is no need why we should worry, however one may resent the personal implication of such a general suspicion.”

He pushed the decanter towards the corporal, who shook his head, and rose from his chair.

“Thank you, no more tonight, Mr. Rayner. If you will excuse me, I will go to my sleeping quarters. I have had a very hard day, and must be up betimes in the morning.”

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“As you will,” answered Rayner, and a moment later led the way to the bedroom which the policeman was to occupy. For the North it was a luxurious one, but the corporal scarcely noticed it. The moment the door had closed behind Rayner, he thrust a hand into his tunic pocket and drew forth a crumpled piece of paper. It was the paper he had picked up in the snow. He opened it out, and as he caught a word or two of the writing it contained, a swift light of interest came into his eyes.

Setting a chair in front of the stove, he seated himself, and very carefully smoothed the paper on his knee. Then he took it up and began to read.

“MY DEAR JOY,—

“This note will no doubt be something of a shock to you; as I imagine you must think I am no longer in the land of the living; at any rate I have not heard from you for a very long time, and so can only presume that such must have been your idea. But here I am and in a sweat to see you.

“An accident gave me the knowledge of your whereabouts, and now I learn that you are not alone. Therefore I shall not visit the house, in the first instance, without your invitation, but I must see you, and in an hour’s time after your receipt of this I shall look for you in the little path that goes towards the hill. It is a long time since that day at Alcombe, which I am sure you will not have forgotten, and you and I, my dear, should have much to say to each other. Do not fail to come.

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“Dick....”

When he reached the end, the corporal sat staring at the letter like a man hypnotized. It was in pencil, written on a page torn out of a memorandum book, and the writer had evidently been about to sign his full name, and then had changed his mind, for the beginning of the surname had been crossed out, and the more intimate “Dick” left to stand alone.

“Then she did know him!” he whispered to himself. “She went out to meet him. She—”

He did not finish his utterance, but lifted the paper the more carefully to examine the signature. He was interested in the unfinished surname, and spelled out the letters carefully, “B-r-a.” He repeated them to himself several times, trying to guess the sequence that should follow, then suddenly he started to his feet, and a startled look came into his eyes.

“Good God!” he whispered. “If it should be so?” He stood for quite a long time, his face the index of profound thought and concern, then he bestowed the incriminating letter in a place of safety, and prepared for bed. But it was long before he slept. From somewhere in the forest came the long-drawn howl of a wolf, and in response the dogs outside bayed in chorus, but it was his own silent thoughts, and not these noises of the wilderness, that kept sleep from his tired eyes.

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CHAPTER IV

A PUZZLING SCENT

THE following morning Corporal Bracknell was early astir, but early as he was there were others earlier, for the smell of frying moose-meat reached him before he was dressed. When he left his room he found Rayner awaiting him.

"You are early, Corporal," was the greeting.

"Yes, I thought of going out as far as the place where we went together last night."

"What! before breakfast? Surely there is no need for such haste, and remember there will be no daylight for at least a couple of hours yet."

"That is so, but—"

An Indian servant appeared from somewhere in the rear of the house, bearing a silver coffee-pot on a tray. Rayner pointed to it with a smile.

"That settles the matter, I fancy. Breakfast is being served. You will not allow it to spoil, I am sure."

"It is a convincing argument," laughed the corporal. "I will breakfast first and attend to duty afterwards."

Rayner nodded, and led the way into the room where they had dined on the previous night. Places were laid for four at the table, but neither Miss Gargrave nor her foster-sister had yet appeared.

"We are a little early for the ladies," said Rayner, seating himself, "but we will not wait for them. They may breakfast in their room."

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The corporal took his place, and whilst they ate, conversed with his companion in a desultory kind of way. Both of them steadily avoided any reference to the events and conversation of the night before, and in the course of the meal the policeman learned a little more about his hostess' father.

"He was an odd kind of man," explained Rayner, when reference had been made to him. "Came of a good stock in the Old Country, and was one of the pioneers up here. A man of culture as a glance round the bookshelves will show you, and a man of business also. Some of the best mining properties in the North were secured by him, and unlike many of the Klondyke millionaires he made his home here, and he bought, regardless of cost, the old family estate in England. I think he meant to return there, with his daughter, some day. But the hard life of these wild lands had entered into his blood, and he—"

The sound of a feminine voice outside caught the officer's attention, and made him neglect what his companion was saying. He heard the outer door open, and close, then hurried steps sounded in the passage, and two people passed by the room in which he was seated. The door happened to be ajar, and the corporal saw that one was his hostess, and that the other was her companion and foster-sister, Miss La Farge. They were not late for breakfast because they had dallied in their rooms; they had been outside.

As he realized this a little frown of thoughtfulness puckered the corporal's forehead. Why had they been out at this early hour, and whilst it was still dark? Rayner noticed his pre-occupation, and guessing the cause of it, suavely offered an explanation.

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"Apparently I was mistaken about my cousin and Miss La Farge. They are not the sluggards I thought they were. They have been outside whilst I thought they were still a-bed."

"They are very early," was the reply.

"Yes! There is a silver fox about, and Joy has a line of traps. She hopes to get it. I understand that its pelt is rare."

"Much rarer than it used to be," agreed the policeman absently.

The explanation was a plausible one, but he did not find it satisfactory. He suspected that something other than a silver fox had taken Joy Gargrave and her foster-sister into the woods in the darkness of the morning. He wondered what it was. Had his hostess missed the note which he had picked up the night before, and had she been out to look for it? He did not know, he could only guess, and wait impatiently for the coming of dawn.

As soon as the first leaden light showed through the trees outside he left the house. Rayner offered to accompany him; but the corporal declined the offer.

"Thank you, there is no need, Mr. Rayner. I shall be able to manage what I have to do alone."

"You think I shall be in the way, Corporal?" laughed the other.

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"I did not say so," answered Bracknell, "though of course it is the simple truth that when one has a knotty thing to solve, solitude and quiet are sometimes helpful."

He went out and walked quickly from the house until he reached the by-path where he had made his startling discovery of the night before. As soon as he turned into it, his pace slowed, and he walked with his eyes fixed upon the ground. There were many footmarks in the snow, the most of them stale, as was shown by the powdery snow which had drifted into them. He recognized his own tracks of the night before, going and coming from the point at which he had found Koon Dick, and there were others apparently made about the same time, but those which arrested his eyes as he turned from the main road were a pair of freshly-made well-marked tracks, too small to have been made by the feet of men. He nodded to himself as he saw them, and began to follow them eagerly.

After a couple of minutes walking, he was a little surprised to find that the double trail that he was following, turned from the path into the shadow of the trees. It was still almost dark here, but as he stooped over the tracks, he became aware of the fact which seemed to him to be full of significance. There was a third pair of footprints, not so recently made as the others, as the powdering of snow in them showed, and the tracks that he was trailing apparently followed them. He stooped and with his hand made a rough measure of the stale tracks, and of one set of the fresh ones, with which they seemed almost identical. They were the same size, and about the two sets of impressions were little individual characteristics which were immediately discernible to the trained eyes.

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"Following her own tracks," he muttered softly to himself. "Now, I wonder why?"

He could do no more than guess, and as that was not a very profitable occupation he continued his search. The trail that he was following went but a little way into the forest, and then turned outward towards the path again, and presently reached a point at which he came abruptly to a standstill.

Under a giant spruce, the lower boughs of which had been cut away at some time or another, was a medley of tracks, which called for detailed examination. He stood regarding them for a moment, and then he looked around him. As he did so he saw that the trail, which he was following, moved forward from the huddle of tracks by which he had paused, and that they led into an open lane in the trees. He looked again, took a step or two forward, and then whistled slowly to himself. He was looking at the place where the body of Koon Dick had lain. The stained snow was hidden by freshly drifted snow, the impress of the body however was still visible, and standing near it, Corporal Bracknell looked back. There was a clear line of vision from the place where the fallen man had lain to the great spruce in the shadow of which was that huddle of tracks. He went back to the spruce, bent over the trampled snow for a little time, and then standing upright looked towards the path. Then he nodded his head.

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"She stood just here," he murmured thoughtfully. "There's the mark of her rifle-stock in the snow, and those deeper tracks show that she stood waiting a little time. Then when Koon Dick came, she—But did she?"

As he broke off and asked himself the question he remembered Joy Gargrave's face as he had first seen it when he entered the dining room at the lodge. It had not looked like the face of a girl who had quite recently shot a man, and though he recalled it with that look of terror which it had worn when he had first seen it, and again with that troubled look in the eyes when he had explained that Koon Dick was the criminal that he sought, he felt that his reasoning and his reading of the trail must somehow be at fault.

He stood considering the matter for a minute or two, glancing now and again to the place where Koon Dick had lain, and the frown which had come upon his face deepened. Then he recalled the note which he had picked up on the previous night and the frown lightened a little.

"Of course!" he whispered to himself, "she discovered its loss and came out here to look for it."

But had she shot the man whom he had hoped to make his prisoner, the man who unquestionably had written that note to her? He could not decide, and as it was too cold to stand still for long together, he began to walk in a rather wide circle round the scene of the tragedy. Then he made a fresh discovery. On the other side of the path he found other footprints in the snow, and, following the track, reached a point where the person who had made them had quite evidently come to a standstill behind a clump of bushes. Corporal Bracknell looked through the screen of small branches, and once more found himself in full view of the place where Koon Dick had fallen.

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The frown on his face deepened once more. He carefully examined the footmarks behind the bushes, and decided that they were at least some hours old. Probably they had been made the night before, and it was at least possible that the individual who had made them had witnessed the tragedy which had taken place.

He began to follow the footmarks from the point at which they left the bushes, and had gone but a little way when he found that the trail was crossed by another almost at right angles, a trail much more deeply marked and the first sight of which told him that either the person who had made it was of very heavy build, or had been bearing a considerable burden.

Perplexed beyond measure he stared at this new trail, then he looked round. The tall spruce alone met his eye. The profound silence of the primeval North was over all. There was no sound of life anywhere.

"And yet," he murmured to himself, "there were quite a lot of people here last night. What were they all doing?"

Scarcely had the words slipped from him when he heard some one cough in the shadow of the wood, a little to the left of him. At once his bearing became alert. Moving silently from tree to tree in the direction from which the sound had come, he reached a point which gave him a view of an open glade. In the middle of the glade a girl was standing looking down at the snow. He recognized her instantly. It was his hostess, Joy Gargrave.

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A minute or two passed and then the girl began to move down the glade quickly. He waited until she was out of sight, and himself walked to the middle of the glade where Joy had stood looking down at the snow. Instantly he saw what had held her eyes. A dog team had been halted there. The marks of the runners were visible in the snow, even the places where the dogs had waited, half-filled with new snow, were quite clear. His practised eyes read the signs without trouble. The team had entered the glade, had apparently waited there a little time, and then had turned and departed in the direction followed by his hostess. Impulsively, he turned to follow also, but as he did so, caught sight of footmarks debouching from the trees in a direct line to the place where the sled had been halted. They were deeply marked, and as he recognized instantly were the same as those which he had been following, when the sound of the cough had attracted his attention. The person who had made them had followed a devious path, making for the glade.

He frowned to himself. The mystery was growing deeper. But as no solution of the affair offered itself to his mind, after a little delay he began to follow the sled tracks down the glade, noting that side by side with them, were the fresh tracks made by Joy Gargrave's moccasined feet.

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The glade led out into the main road from the river to the house, and the sled-tracks turned towards the river, and then were lost in the hard-packed snow of the road. But as the sled had manifestly turned in the direction of the river, Corporal Bracknell also turned that way, walking quickly and keeping a sharp look-out on either hand for any indication of the sled having turned aside.

To or three minutes' quick walking brought him in sight of the frozen river, and at the top of the bank, seated on a fallen tree, he perceived Joy Gargrave.

Her back was towards him, and her bent head and hunched-up shoulders were eloquent of dejection. He moved towards her quietly, and as he drew nearer a flutter of white caught his eye. It was the corner of a handkerchief which the girl was holding to her face, and apparently she was crying. A quick sympathy moved him as he stepped up to her, the snow deadening his steps.

"Miss Gargrave, you are in trouble. I wonder if I can be of any assistance?"

Startled by the sound of his voice, the girl looked up, and for one fleeting moment he had a vision of the beautiful face, tear-stained, and of the blue eyes full of trouble. Then the face was hidden in the handkerchief again, and a succession of sobs was the only answer vouchsafed to him. He stood for a little while in silence, looking down at the shaking shoulders. His own eyes filled with sympathetic concern, then he spoke again.

"Please, Miss Gargrave. Let me help. I am sure your trouble is very grave."

At that she looked up again, her face expressive of deep misery.

"I am in deepest trouble," she said brokenly, "I do not think that you or any one else can be of help to me."

"Tell me," he urged. "At least let me try."

She sat for a moment in thought, her eyes veiled by the long lashes, then she lifted her head and looked at him as if she would measure his quality. Then she broke, out impulsively.

"Yes," she cried, "I will trust you, I will tell you all. Perhaps you can help me, at least you can give me advice."

"Then let us walk," he said quickly. "You will freeze if you sit there long."

He offered her his hand, and as she took it, their eyes met, and in the corporal's there flashed a new light, and as he turned and fell into step at her side his heart was beating tumultuously, and his blood was running as if heated with a generous wine.

CHAPTER V

A REVELATION

JOY GARGRAVE did not begin her story immediately. For a full two minutes they walked on, environed by the solemn pinewoods, and enveloped in the strange, white silence of the North. The corporal waited, and at last the girl spoke.

"You wonder why I was sitting on the bank, crying?"

"Yes," he replied frankly. "I am wondering why you should do that, though I may tell you that I already have an idea."

"You already have an idea?" the girl's tones, as she echoed his question, betrayed surprise.

"Yes," he answered, and thrusting a hand inside his fur parka, he produced the note which he had found, and held it towards her. He saw from her face that she recognized it, and he continued slowly: "You see, I found this last night—not far from the place where Koon Dick was lying. I did not know to whom it had been written; and if I had known, I am afraid duty would have compelled me to read it. If I am not mistaken, it was written to you; at any rate it bears your Christian name."

"It was written to me," answered the girl quickly. "It is mine."

"And the writer of it? Was he Koon Dick?"

"Yes," was the reply.

Corporal Bracknell glanced at the note, and his eyes were fixed upon the half-erased signature. "Tell me," he said, "what is Koon Dick's name?—I mean the second half of his name which he had begun to write apparently from force of habit, and then crossed out?"

"I am afraid it will be something of a surprise to you," said the girl.

"Perhaps not so great a surprise as you think," was the reply. "I think I have already guessed."

"His name is the same as your own, Corporal. It is Bracknell!"

"Ah!" said the corporal in the tone of a man who had found his thoughts confirmed. "Richard Ascham Bracknell, of course."

"You have the name perfect," answered Joy quietly.

"Of Harrow Fell, Westmorland, England?" inquired the corporal.

"He was born there," replied the girl, "and Sir James is his father, as you are his cousin."

The corporal walked on a few paces without speaking, his eyes staring at a distant hill, and from the vacancy of their gaze it was evident that he was lost in thought. Joy Gargrave watched him curiously, and, after a little time, she spoke again.

"You did not know—you did not guess until you saw that note?"

"I had not the slightest idea. I knew that Koon Dick was an Englishman—that was all. But when I read the note last night, and recalled your acknowledged acquaintance with Harrow Fell and Sir James, I suspected."

"If you had known you would not have undertaken to follow him—to take him prisoner, I mean?"

"I could not very well have refused, without resigning from the force. Perhaps you know how the oath of allegiance runs?"

Joy shook her head, and he quoted—"And will well and truly obey and perform all lawful orders and instructions, which I shall receive as such, without fear, favour or affection of or towards any person. So help me, God!"

The girl shivered a little. "It is a hard service, yours," she said. "And you would have arrested your cousin?"

"My cousin, or any other man—or woman. I have no choice in the matter. Duty, after all, is the greatest word in the language."

Joy considered him thoughtfully. His lean face was stern, and there was a hard light in the unwavering grey eyes. It was clear to her that he meant just what he said, and that he would do whatever duty dictated without fear or favour.

"It is not every one who would agree with you," she replied. "Your cousin, for instance, he—"

"Tell me," he interrupted. "What was Dick Bracknell to you? This letter suggests an intimacy beyond that of mere acquaintance or friendship."

"You are right," the girl answered quickly. "He was my husband."

"Good God!"

As that expression of extreme amazement broke from him, Corporal Bracknell halted abruptly, looking at the beautiful girl by his side, with incredulous eyes.

"It is quite true," she said. "I am Koon Dick's wife—or widow."

Still he did not speak, and watching him the girl saw a flash of something like horror come into his eyes.

"And you went to meet him—last night?" he said, at last, in a shaking voice.

"I have not said so," answered the girl quickly. "You have read that note, but you must not surmise—"

"I saw you," broke in the corporal quickly.

"You saw me?" It was Joy Gargrave's turn to be astonished, and as he looked at her it seemed to him that fear was shining in her eyes.

"Yes, I saw you," he answered mechanically.

"Where?" she demanded.

"You were coming out of the path between the woods. You had a rifle in your hand. There was a strange look upon your face. I was standing with my dogs in the shadow of a spruce and you passed me without seeing me. I was about to speak to you, but the sight of your face kept me silent. It was that, and the thought of two shots which I had heard, which sent me along the path you had just left to investigate. At the end of it, I found Koon Dick!"

"Dead?" asked the girl sharply.

"He seemed so to me!" was the reply. "Indeed, I was quite sure that there was no life left in him, or I should have done my best to revive him, and not have left him lying there in the snow."

"If he were dead, where is he now?" came the swift question.

"I do not know," replied the corporal. "The thing is a mystery to me. When I returned to the place with Mr. Rayner last night the body had already disappeared."

"But how could it do that, if he were really dead?" objected his companion.

"Some one must have removed—" Corporal Bracknell stopped suddenly.

It was clear to Joy that some new thought had just occurred to him. She saw that he was looking at her thoughtfully, and she wondered what was in his mind.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. "What are you thinking?"

"Tell me," he countered, "did you see your husband last night?"

"I did," she answered frankly.

"And when I had said that Koon Dick was lying dead in the snow, you left the table. You went out of the room, and you did not return."

He spoke like a man pursuing a thought which seemed to him almost incredible, but which was thrust upon him by force of circumstances, and the girl divined what that thought was.

"You do not think that I went back?" she cried. "You cannot think that I am responsible for the disappearance?"

"It is a natural thought," he answered, "though I am loathe to believe it. You must remember that I saw your face as you came out of the path; and that the man was your husband, though apparently your friends do not know it. My cousin—your husband—"

"Oh! but you do not understand!" cried the girl quickly. "You do not realize that I would give all I have to know that the body of the man who was my husband was still where you first saw it. It is the uncertainty of the fact which troubles and worries me, and not his death."

"Not his death!"

"No!" was the almost appalling reply. "The certainty of that would be like a deliverance."

For a little time Corporal Bracknell stared at her, too much amazed for speech. It was clear to him that she was in deadly earnest and that she meant every word she said. He wondered what marital tragedy was behind her attitude, and was still wondering,

when she spoke again in a hard voice.

"You seem surprised," she said; "you know your cousin fairly well?"

"Yes," he answered, nodding his head.

"Then you cannot suppose that I loved him, even though he was my husband! No girl could love Dick Bracknell when she knew him for what he was, and any woman, married as I was, would almost rejoice to know that—that she was released."

"You do not know what you are saying," protested the corporal quickly. "You cannot realize what implication your words may have to any one who knows what I know. It would almost seem that you had wished for Dick Bracknell's death, and that fact in view of the circumstances in which I found him last night might assume a terrible significance."

"You mean that people might think I shot my husband?"

"Yes," was the reply. "At least many people would ask that question."

"And you?" inquired the girl. "You have asked yourself that question?"

"Naturally," replied Bracknell. "You must remember that I saw you coming from the place where he was lying."

"I wonder what conclusion you have reached," said Joy, looking at him keenly.

"None," was the prompt reply.

"You are in doubt, then?"

"I am very loath to believe what the circumstances would seem to indicate," answered the corporal quietly. "As you must see, they are terribly against you, and your visit to the place this morning—"

"You know of that?"

"I saw you and Miss La Farge come in whilst Mr. Rayner and I were at breakfast, and whilst you were supposed to be still in your rooms. I found your tracks in the snow."

"And you cannot guess why I—why we went?"

"No."

"We went to look for that note which you showed me just now. I had meant to destroy it, and missed it this morning. Then I remembered that I had put it in my pocket last night, and naturally concluded that I had lost it outside. That is the explanation of the journey this morning. No one here but Miss La Farge has any idea that Dick Bracknell is my husband, and I did not want any of them to know."

Corporal Bracknell was conscious of a sense of relief. The explanation was so simple that he felt it to be altogether true. But there were questions that still required answering, and he proceeded to ask them.

"I can well believe, that," he answered slowly. "I suppose Mr. Rayner was among them from whom you wished to keep this knowledge?"

"Yes," was the reply, given frankly. "I did not wish him to know how foolish I had been."

The corporal remembered what Rayner had hinted as to his hopes of making Joy Gargrave his wife, and the girl's answer started fresh questions in his mind. Did she love Rayner and favour his aspirations, and knowing herself to be already a wife, had she deliberately removed the barrier which lay between them, but of which Rayner had no knowledge? He could not tell, and looking steadily at the girl he proceeded to ask his next question.

"Miss Gargrave—I mean Mrs. Brack—"

"No! No!" interrupted the girl. "Do not give me that name. I do not want it. I hate it. Call me Gargrave."

He bowed. "As you please, Miss Gargrave. There is a question I wish to ask you. Tell me, did you have speech with Dick Bracknell last night?"

"Not a word."

"But you saw him?"

"Yes," she agreed quietly. "I saw him."

"You stood in the shadow of the trees at a point which would give you a clear view of the place where you knew your husband would be waiting for you, and you took a rifle with you. Why did you take that rifle, Miss Gargrave?"

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As he asked that question he saw the pallor of the beautiful face grow more pronounced. The frank blue eyes wavered, and for a second or two he thought she was going to faint. Then she drew a quick, gasping breath.

"You know these woods," she said unsteadily. "There are wolves and—and bears. To carry a rifle is the merest prudence."

A frown came on the corporal's face. He knew that the answer was a mere evasion, and he was not pleased. But he did not challenge the answer directly.

"Miss Gargrave," he asked, "were you afraid of Dick Bracknell?"

"Not afraid, exactly," was the reply candidly given, "but I loathed him, and hated the thought of his coming into my life again."

The corporal considered for a few seconds, and then asked his next question bluntly.

"Tell me, did you fire your rifle at all whilst you were out, or whilst you were waiting for your husband?"

As he made the inquiry the girl came to a sudden standstill, her lips trembling, her pale face working strangely, the blue eyes expressive of awful fear. He waited in far more distress than his impassive face indicated, and at last the answer came in a shaking whisper.

"Yes, I did. But, oh, believe me, I—I did not know that I had done so till afterwards. I do not know what happened.... I saw him fall in the snow, and I waited. Then I went up to him. He seemed to be dead—and after that I must have fled homeward."

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As he listened the corporal visioned the tragedy of the night before, and as he looked into her troubled face, his heart smote him. His voice was almost sympathetic as he asked the next question.

"You say you saw your husband fall? Was it after your rifle was discharged or before?"

"I—do not know," the girl replied. "This morning the whole thing is like a disordered nightmare dimly remembered. I know there was a moment when I was tempted to wickedness. There was a terrible hatred in my heart for my husband, and as I saw him standing there, it flashed on me how easy it would be to free myself from him for ever. It was only a moment—like a sudden madness, and then I saw him drop in the snow.... I do not know what happened, but this morning I examined my rifle."

Her voice quivered and failed, and suddenly she bent her face in her mittened hand and broke into a storm of weeping. The corporal himself was greatly moved by her distress, but the sight of it somehow relieved his worst fears.

"Miss Gargrave," he said hopefully, "you examined your rifle this morning. Tell me what you found?"

"An empty shell in the chamber," said the girl, sobbing bitterly.

"Yes," he said quickly, a touch of excitement in his manner, "and in the magazine? Tell me, quick."

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"There was a full clip—but for the shell which had been fired."

"Ah!" said Bracknell with a sigh of relief. "I thought so. Now think carefully, and tell me, did you hear another shot fired?"

The trouble in the girl's face cleared suddenly, and a light of hope flashed in her eyes. "Why do you ask?" she cried. "I thought I did, but this morning I could not be sure. I thought it might be the echo of my own rifle—"

"It was not an echo," interrupted the corporal quickly. "It was the discharge of a rifle. I was a little distance away, and I distinctly heard the reports, one so close on the heels of the other that the two seemed almost like one."

Wonder mingled with the hope in the girl's face.

"You are sure," she cried. "Yes! Then there must have been some one else, some one who fired at my husband, and perhaps I did not kill him after all. Oh! thank God! Thank God! I hated him, and though I was tempted, it was only a flaming moment of madness, from which I was saved. You think that? Say you think that, Mr. Bracknell?"

"Indeed I do," answered the corporal reassuringly, "I feel convinced of it. At first, I was doubtful, and will own I suspected you. But your frankness in the matter has set the whole affair in a new light."

A thoughtful look came on his face. For a full minute he stood there without speaking, and the girl watched him, wondering what

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was in his mind. Then he spoke again.

"The affair is very mysterious. There certainly were two reports and one only came from your rifle. It is evident to me that a third person was in the neighbourhood when your husband was shot. I have found the place where he stood, and I was following the track of a sled, when I came upon you just now. The track is a fairly recent one, made, I should say, no later than last night."

"Possibly it was my husband's team," suggested the girl.

The corporal nodded. "That of course is just possible, but the man who took it away cannot have been Dick Bracknell. If he were not dead—and I am sure he was—he certainly was in no condition to walk away. And the team did not go away of itself, for there is the track of a man's feet, both going and returning."

"If he should not be dead—" faltered the girl. The corporal looked at her, and the sight of her distress moved him to a deeper sympathy. He knew his cousin, and Koon Dick's record in the territory was not an attractive one. He wondered how this beautiful girl had been induced to marry Dick Bracknell, and frowned at the thought that if he were not dead, she was still his wife. The girl noticed the frown.

"What are you thinking, Mr. Bracknell?"

"I was wondering however you came to marry such a scally-wag as I know Dick Bracknell to have been."

Joy Gargrave flushed and then grew pale. "I am not surprised that you should wonder.... If you will walk on I will tell you how—how it happened."

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Without speaking he fell into step by her side, and waited for her to begin.

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CHAPTER VI

THE CORPORAL HEARS A STORY

A LITTLE time passed before the girl spoke, and Corporal Bracknell, to avoid embarrassing her, looked steadily at the snowy waste ahead. The frozen river, bordered by the sombre pinewoods, was visible for some two miles, and where it turned round a high rampart of the cliff, a moving figure, clearly visible on the snow, caught his eyes. He watched it attentively as it came to a halt, and wondered idly who it might be. A wandering Indian possibly, or—The girl's voice broke on his speculations.

"I met your cousin first, whilst I was staying in the neighbourhood of Harrow Fell. There was a shooting party, and Dick Bracknell made himself very agreeable to me. You are to understand that I was rather lonely, and that I was new to English ways, having lived most of my life up here."

She was silent for a moment, and Corporal Bracknell nodded.

"I think I understand how you must have felt, Miss Gargrave, and I know that Dick could make himself attractive."

As he spoke his eyes looked in the direction of the bluff where the river turned. The small black figure which he had observed was moving again, and if he were not mistaken was coming down the river. He kept an observant eye upon it, whilst his companion resumed.

"You are quite right. All the vacation, which I spent in Westmorland, your cousin was very attentive to me, and knowing that he was Sir James Bracknell's heir, I was flattered by his attentions, and a little proud that he should find me attractive, when there were others who—who might have meant more to him."

"You were too humble, Miss Gargrave," said the corporal.

"Perhaps I was," replied the girl, smiling wanly. "But that is how I felt at the time.... At the end of the autumn, just before I went back to Newnham for the Michælmass term, he proposed to me."

Again for a moment she was silent, and the corporal glancing at her caught a pensive look upon her face, and guessed that she was reviewing that occasion in her mind. He waited for what seemed quite a long time, then he said encouragingly, "Yes?"

"I did not accept him then."

"Why not?"

"For two reasons; the first because I was not quite sure that I loved him, and the second because I was not prepared to take such a step without first consulting my father."

"They were both very excellent reasons."

"So they seemed to me, but Lady Alcombe, under whose care I was whilst in England, did not agree with me."

"You were under the care of Lady Alcombe?"

There was an accent of surprise in the young man's voice, which the girl was quick to note.

"You know her?" she asked quickly. "You are surprised that I should have been under her chaperonage?"

"Yes," he admitted frankly. "I know Lady Alcombe, and I know her set. It is a fast and exclusive one. I am a little surprised that any one should have selected her to chaperone a young girl."

"My father did not understand," was the quick reply. "He had known Lady Alcombe before her marriage, and she was a distant relation of ours. He did not know the set to which she belonged, and it was perhaps natural that he should have looked to her to watch over me.... For myself, I was young, I had no experience, and though there were things that I did not understand, things that shocked me, I did not mention them to my father, or indeed to any one."

"And Lady Alcombe approved of my cousin Dick?"

"She did. She laughed at my scruples, and urged me to accept him, declaring that my father would be only too ready to see me the wife of a man who would some day be the Squire of Harrow Fell. But I did not yield—then. I knew there was plenty of time, and as my father was expecting to visit England a few months later, I said that I would wait until he arrived."

"And afterwards?" asked the corporal.

"Afterwards!" A tragic look came on the girl's face, and to his surprise she broke again into tears.

He waited patiently, and as he did so noted that the figure up the river was certainly drawing nearer. After a little time the girl recovered her composure, and when she resumed there was a tragic note in her voice.

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"I was very ignorant, and your cousin and Lady Alcombe presumed upon my ignorance. I was to stay with her at Alcombe Manor for the Christmas season, and towards the end of the term she sent word that she and Dick were going to fetch me by car, as the rail journey was rather an awkward one.... When the day came, your cousin showed up alone, explaining that Lady Alcombe had an attack of influenza which, of course, had made it impossible for her to accompany him. It was all so natural that I thought nothing of it until afterwards, and I set out on the journey accompanied only by your cousin."

A stern look came on the corporal's face, though the girl, looking straight ahead and absorbed in her thoughts, did not notice it.

"We missed the way, and went astray, I say missed the way, though now I am quite sure that it was done of deliberate purpose, and that your cousin knew our whereabouts all the time. It began to snow, and late in the evening we reached a little village in Wiltshire when something went wrong with the engine. I do not believe now that there was anything at all the matter with the car, but Dick said there was, and as it was impossible to proceed further, and there was no train service on the little local line five miles away, there was nothing for it but to stay the night at the little inn, half tavern, half farm, which was all the accommodation that the village afforded.... There was a motherly woman there who did her best to make me comfortable, and I shared a room with her two daughters, whilst your cousin was accommodated with a settle in the kitchen. Next morning, Dick tinkered at the car, and about noon we started afresh, and reached the Manor just before dinner time.... Lady Alcombe, who had apparently recovered from her influenza, was in a great state of perturbation, and when I entered the hall, where a number of guests were assembled, she rushed to me. 'My dear Joy,' she cried, 'where *have* you been? I have been worried almost to death about you, and have been telegraphing and telephoning all over the place.'

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"I laughingly explained, and whilst I was doing so, one of the men gave a whistle of surprise, and a girl whom I had never liked began to giggle. Lady Alcombe allowed me to finish my explanation, there before all her guests, then she said icily—

"'After so many adventures you must be tired. You had better go to your room. I will come to you.'

"As I went, I knew there was something wrong somewhere. One or two of the men looked at me in an unpleasant way, and the girl whom I have mentioned was giggling hatefully.... Lady Alcombe came to me before I had changed, and ordered the maid out of the room, then she said, 'My dear Joy, you have behaved most indiscreetly.... I do not know what to say ... what to think. And to tell a story like that before all those people not one of whom will believe it! It is dreadful, positively dreadful!'

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"I was bewildered. I did not know what was wrong, and I said so, adding that I had only told the simple truth.

"'They will not believe it,' she said. 'You and Dick will be the talk of the place. I really do not know what to say. I am surprised at Dick Bracknell, and at you for being so simple as to tell.... That Jolivet girl was openly laughing at you.'

"Her tone and manner told me better than her words the vile thing she was hinting at, and when I realized it, I broke down and cried."

She paused, and as the corporal recalled what Lady Alcombe was, and visioned that scene between the fast woman of the world and the innocent girl in her care, he ground his teeth, and looked away from the beautiful face which was working with emotion.

"... When I did that Lady Alcombe changed her tone. 'There's only one thing to do,' she said, 'and that is to make the best of it. Thank goodness! Dick is over head and ears in love with you, and, as you know, he is only too anxious to marry you. You will have to take him now—to save your good name, Joy. It is the only way, for no one

will believe your story, however true it may be, and so I advise you to make up your mind to the inevitable.... Things might be a great deal worse. Dick will be a baronet some day, and his wife will have a position that no one will challenge. Just think it over, my dear, and you will see that I am altogether right.'

"I did think it over," said the girl slowly, "and in the end I agreed to marry Dick privately, making up my mind to explain the matter to my father, later. What else was there that I could do? I had no suspicion of anything at the time. Dick wanted me, and I liked him, whilst there were people at Alcombe who did not fail to let me see what they thought, and Lady Alcombe did not stint persuasion."

"When did you find out that the delay in arriving at Alcombe was anything but an accident?" asked the corporal thoughtfully.

"On the very morning I was married. We had returned from the church, just Dick and myself and Lady Alcombe, and I was in the library writing a note to a friend at Newnham, when I heard two people enter. The library is a little draughty, and a footman had placed a screen for me, and this completely hid me from any one entering at the door. The two who entered were Lady Alcombe and Dick. I heard her laugh and say—

"You owe me five thousand pounds, Dick. I hope you won't be very long in paying, for the truth is, I am beastly hard up, and I daren't ask Sir Alfred for a penny at the present time.'

"Dick laughed also, and I caught his answer. 'As soon as that old duffer in the Klondyke makes his settlements I'll pay you, Mary. You deserve it. That was a pretty little scheme of yours, and it has gone like clockwork....'

"It came on me like a flash then. I saw how everything had been arranged, and how I had been trapped and hustled into marrying your cousin. In that moment I hated him, and I have done so ever since.... I sat there too startled to make my presence known, and after a little time they went out, without learning that I had overheard them. I continued to sit there thinking. I scarcely knew what to do. It was arranged that we were to go to Paris for the honeymoon; and I was afraid that they would somehow make me accept that arrangement, and bewildered though I was, I was determined that I would not do so, that I would never allow Dick Bracknell to be in fact what he was in name.... I went to my room, secured my travelling coat and some money, and fled from the house, without leaving so much as a note to indicate where I was going—I went to Cambridge to the friend to whom I had been writing, and who was staying there reading through the vacation. I told her everything, and on her advice wrote to Lady Alcombe, explaining the situation, and averring that I would never live with Dick Bracknell. In reply I got a telegram from him saying that he would be down to see me the next day, and praying me to grant him an interview. He never came. Something happened and he had to leave England. Do you know what it was? I have never heard."

"Yes," answered the corporal slowly. "I know, and I think it is only right that you should know. You knew perhaps that Dick was in the Artillery?"

"Yes!" answered the girl.

"He was interested in his job. He was a good officer. It is the one thing to his credit that I know. There was a new gun, and he had access to the plans. He stole a copy, and sold them to the agent of a foreign government. The theft was discovered and traced, but a friend dropped Dick a telegram which was forwarded to Alcombe Manor—and he ran for it, and got clear away. I imagine that explains why he did not visit you at Cambridge. Of course, the affair was hushed up, as such affairs are, and it is nearly forgotten now, though England would not be a safe place for him. Did you ever hear from him afterwards?"

"Not until last night," was the reply. "When his note came to me, it was a great shock."

The corporal nodded. "I can readily imagine that it would be.... Did your father ever know of your marriage?"

"No, thank God! I wrote to him, but before he received the letter the accident occurred by which he lost his life. I found the letter here unopened, when I came here to comply with the terms of his will. I was glad to get here. I was so overborne by the deceit and vileness of those I had thought were my friends in England!"

"They were not all deceitful, surely?" expostulated the young

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man.

"No! Some are my friends still. I am going to England very shortly, and I shall stay with one of them in Westmorland."

"Will you ever return here?"

"Most certainly. North Star is my home—I love it, and I have always felt myself safe here—until last night."

Bracknell understood that she meant that she had felt that in this lodge in the wilderness she was safe from his cousin, and nodded his head.

"I understand," he said, but forbore to add what was in his mind; namely, that if Dick Bracknell had not died on the previous night, North Star would be no longer the sanctuary it had been. [67]

They walked forward for a moment without speaking. A rise in the ground covered with snow-laden saskatoon bushes hid the river from them for a little time, and as they breasted it, and the river came into view again, they surprised a pedestrian climbing up the bank. It was Mr. Rayner.

He was obviously a little startled by the meeting, but a moment later recovered himself.

"Been out for a constitutional," he explained, "as far as the bend of the river, and I've had quite sufficient. Are you ready to return?"

The girl nodded, but the corporal, whose eyes were surveying the empty landscape in front, shook his head.

"I shall walk on a little," he said, "I may be going up stream tomorrow. The Elkhorn falls in somewhere about here, doesn't it?"

"Just beyond the bluff there," answered Joy.

"Then I'll take a look at it, and see what the trail is like."

He nodded and walked on leaving Joy Gargrave to return with Rayner. He waited until they were out of sight and then descended to the frozen surface of the river, where the going was easier, the trail having been packed by prospectors moving up and down. He reached the bluff in a short time, but did not go round it. His gaze was arrested by the trail of a sled which had come down the bank to the river at a point just below the bluff, and by recent footmarks. He remembered the figure he had seen whilst walking with Joy Gargrave, unquestionably that of Rayner, for there were his footmarks turning south from the bluff. A thought struck him, and examining the snow carefully, he found no tracks running northward. A little puzzled he looked at the sled trail again, and there made the discovery that the single footmarks that ran side by side with the sled-trail, had been made not by one pair of feet but by two, some one having quite recently adapted his stride to the tracks already made. Puzzled and interested he followed the sled trail up the bank and began to trace it through the wood at the top. [68]

An hour later, still following the sled-trail he struck the river again, and found himself exactly opposite the landing which led to North Star Lodge. As he realized this he nodded thoughtfully. The sled trail he had been following, when he had encountered Joy Gargrave, led directly across the river. But whose sled was it? And why had Rayner traced it so carefully, at the same time endeavouring to cover his own trail? The first question was one for which he had no answer, and the second was an equal puzzle. Clearly Rayner had been interested in the sled-trail since he had followed it for two miles; and plainly he was anxious to conceal his interest, since he had walked so carefully in the footsteps of the unknown driver, and had made no reference to the matter whatever. Did he know something—something that he did not wish to make known?

The corporal thought that very likely he did, but could not even conjecture what the secret knowledge might be. There was a puzzled frown on his face, as he turned in the direction of the Lodge, and when he came in sight of the house he became aware of a considerable bustle. In the open space in front two sleds were drawn up, and a considerable number of dogs were lying about or nosing in the snow for lost fragments of food. Two Indians and a half-breed were standing near the sleds smoking and talking. Bracknell recognized the half-breed for a man who had been in the service of the police as a driver. [69]

"Hallo, Jacques," he asked, "what brings you to North Star?"

Jacques grinned responsively. "I bring a letter—I and dese, Co'pral. Yees two dog teams to deelever one petite lettre. But we take sometings else back weeth us, I tink."

"Indeed!" laughed the corporal. "What may that be?"

"I tink we take a lady, de lady of North Star!" The corporal gave vent to a whistle of surprise, and after a few more words passed into the house. There he met Mr. Rayner, who smiled at him.

"We have news for you, Corporal. We start for England tomorrow. A message has just reached us from my father, and Miss Gargrave's presence is urgently required on a matter of business."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, and I think we shall all be glad to get away. That mysterious affair of last night would be rather a disturbing thing to reflect upon in a lonely place like this."

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The corporal nodded, made some casual remark, and passed to his own room, where he sat for quite a long time, smoking, with a very thoughtful look upon his face.

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CHAPTER VII

JOY MAKES A REQUEST

AFTER the mid-day meal, at which Joy Gargrave did not appear, Corporal Bracknell left the house, and strolled down the road until he reached the place where the girl had passed him on the previous night. There he came to a standstill, his brow puckered in thought, then he swung to the right into the same path where he had found Koon Dick lying in the snow. He had gone but a little way however, when a noise behind him caused him to look round. Joy Gargrave was following him. He waited for her, and as she came up to him she said, "Mr. Bracknell, do you mind if I accompany you a little way? I should like to talk to you—if I may."

"It will be a pleasure, Miss Gargrave," he answered quite sincerely.

"Then if you do not mind we will turn aside into the wood. I—I do not care for this path, now, and we might be seen and interrupted by some one, and I have a request to make of you."

"I am entirely at your service, Miss Gargrave."

"Then we will turn—here."

She indicated a place where the wood thinned a little, and turning with her, he fell into step at her side, and waited for her to begin, wondering what she might have to say to him. Half a minute passed in silence, then she began abruptly: "You will have heard that we are starting for England tomorrow?"

"Yes," he answered. "Mr. Rayner told me. The decision is rather sudden, isn't it?"

She nodded. "The journey is a quite unexpected one, just now. We had thought of waiting until the ice broke up and of canoeing down the river. But a letter has just come from Sir Joseph—Mr. Rayner's father—stating that my presence is required in England at the earliest possible moment. The letter has been delayed, and Mr. Rayner tells me that it is requisite that we should start at once."

"The business must be very urgent if you have to start on such a long journey at a day's notice," commented the corporal.

"It is not altogether that," was the reply, "though Mr. Rayner insists that it is imperative that we shall make an early start. The truth is—" she broke off, and then resumed in a quavering voice: "I am much upset by that mysterious affair of last night, and, Mr. Bracknell, I am afraid—horribly afraid."

"Of what?" he asked, looking into her beautiful face to find it white and tense with emotion.

"Of my—my—of Dick Bracknell," she answered quietly.

"But if he is dead, what—"

"Do you think he is dead?" she cried sharply. "Tell me, Mr. Bracknell, what do you really think?"

"Last night," he answered slowly, "I had no doubt whatever about it. But today—"

"Yes, today?" she prompted anxiously.

"I am not quite so sure. His complete disappearance perplexes me. If he were dead as I thought, then some one has carried his body away; and if he were not dead, then some one must still have helped him, for he was in no condition to help himself."

"That is what you think? Mr. Bracknell, do you know that there was a sledge in the wood to the left of that path?"

"I saw the trail," he answered quietly, "and I saw you following it."

"Whose sled was it?" she asked thoughtfully. "It was none of ours, and it was not yours, and it could not be that of a miner, for any such would have come to the Lodge, as we keep open house for the men on trail."

"I do not know whose it can have been," answered the corporal thoughtfully. "If we knew that we should have the key to the whole of this mysterious affair, possibly. But whoever it was he was anxious as far as possible to cover his tracks. He did not follow the trail up the river. He crossed to the track on the other side, and then turned off into the wood; he lit a fire there. I found the ashes

after I left you this morning. He must have halted there for a little time, for the snow was pretty well trampled, and when he resumed his journey, he marched parallel with the river, and descended to the ice again just south of the bluff. I found his tracks coming down the bank there, and I imagine that from the point he must have followed the trail up-river."

"Whoever could he be?" asked the girl in perplexity.

"I do not know. But tomorrow I am going to find out; my dogs will be fresh then, and after the rest I shall be able to travel fast. Of one thing I am convinced: whoever the man was he was not your husband. Dick Bracknell, as I said just now, was in no condition to help himself, certainly not to take the trail."

For a moment Joy Gargrave did not speak, and as he looked at her he wondered what her thoughts were. He was still wondering when she broke the silence.

"Mr. Bracknell, I am afraid, terribly afraid. Somehow I feel that your cousin is not dead. I feel that he will come back here, and that is why we are hurrying away tomorrow morning. The letter from Sir Joseph Rayner serves for an excuse. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," answered the corporal sympathetically. "You are afraid that Dick, having found out where you are, will return to worry you?"

"You know him, I have told you how I was trapped into marrying him, do you think that he is the man to leave me in peace?"

"He is likely to consult only his own interests," agreed her companion.

"But I shall be safe from him in England, if what you tell me is true. He dare not go there openly, and if he were to appear at all, I should be able to protect myself, by invoking the police."

"The police would only be too happy to afford you protection here," answered the corporal earnestly.

The girl looked at him with grateful eyes. "You mean yourself. Yes! I know, but there is another service that I want from you—"

"You have but to name it, Miss Gargrave," he answered as she hesitated. "So far as duty allows, I am entirely at your service. Tell me what it is that I can do for you."

"You can find out for me whether Dick Bracknell is alive or dead."

The corporal had not anticipated the request, and he was a little startled by it. Instantly his mind reverted to the conversation he had had with Rayner. He recalled the hopes which the latter entertained, and wondered if this white-faced girl at his side was willing to help their realization. As that possibility flashed into his mind, he was conscious of a constriction about his heart. But he gave no sign.

"I should be compelled to do that in any case," he answered quietly. "I cannot relinquish the work on which I started until I know what has become of the man who is known at headquarters as Koon Dick. Some one must know about him—probably the driver of the sled whose trail I followed, and I've got to find out. Vague reports are not regarded as satisfactory by the heads of the force."

"You will let me know?" she asked instantly.

"I shall be glad to do so," he answered quietly, and again he was conscious of the tightening about his heart.

"You see," she explained, "my position is so anomalous. All my little world with the exception of my Newnham friend and yourself, my foster-sister, whom I told only last night, thinks of me as a spinster."

"You are sure Mr. Rayner does not know of your marriage?" asked the corporal quickly, as a thought struck him.

"I am quite sure," answered Joy readily, without giving any indication that she found any special significance in the question. "You see the part played by Lady Alcombe was not very credible, and I used my knowledge of it to ensure her silence. I wrote to her and told her that if the wedding was not kept secret, I should proclaim all that had happened to the world. Her vulnerable spot is the position she holds in society, and she knew how that would suffer if it became a matter of common knowledge that for a bribe she had schemed to marry to a scamp an innocent girl left in her charge. She wrote me a short note in reply, in which she said, that she would forget that the marriage had even taken place, and that I

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need not fear that it would ever become known. That is why I am so sure Mr. Rayner does not know. Lady Alcombe dare not betray me."

Bracknell nodded. "I dare say you are right, but of course you cannot marry again until you are sure of that—"

"I do not want to marry again!" interrupted the girl quickly, the blood flaming in her pale face. "Why should you think that I do, Mr. Bracknell?"

As the corporal met her blue eyes, clear and unshadowed by guile, his heart grew suddenly light, and on the moment he dismissed from his mind the thought that Joy Gargrave in any way shared Mr. Rayner's aspirations. He laughed cheerfully as he replied, "I did not say that I thought you wished to marry again, Miss Gargrave. I was merely stating the law on the matter, and there is no personal significance to be attached to such a statement."

Joy Gargrave smiled austere. "I am not likely ever to marry again," she said. "Once bitten, twice shy, you know."

The corporal smiled in return, but as he marked her loveliness and remembered the figure at which the Northland had estimated Rolf Gargrave's wealth, he thought to himself that many a man would endeavour to persuade her to a different mind, but he did not say so.

"Miss Gargrave, one never knows what the future holds—but whatever happens you can count me as your friend. I am not proud of my relationship to Dick Bracknell, even though it does make me some sort of a cousin to you. There is nothing that I will not do to serve you, and if anything that I learn will deliver you from your anomalous position, you may rest assured that I will let you know of it at the earliest possible moment."

"Thank you, Mr. Bracknell," she answered simply. "I shall be very grateful."

They walked on a little way without speaking, then she turned to him suddenly. "You are my cousin, more or less, Mr. Bracknell, but I do not know your christian name."

"It is Roger," he answered smilingly.

"And if at any time I want to communicate with you, where—"

"Headquarters at Regina. That will always find me sooner or later, no matter what part of the Territory I may be in."

"I am glad to know that," she said, "and if at any time you have news for me, any letter sent care of Sir Joseph Rayner will reach me." She turned in her steps as she spoke. "I think I had better return now. There is much to do at the Lodge, and they will miss me. But I am glad to have met you, and glad to think that I can count you among my friends."

She held out her mittened hand, and as he took it Roger Bracknell felt the blood surge warmly in his face, and in his grey eyes as he looked at her there was a flame that had she observed it would have told her that she had secured more than a friend. But she did not see it, and as she walked away there was a pensive look on the beautiful face.

The next day Corporal Bracknell, with his own team ready harnessed, watched Joy Gargrave and her escort take their departure. Four full teams of dogs drew their equipment, and snow having fallen during the night, Joy and her foster-sister wore the great webbed snowshoes of the North. They stood making their good-byes, then the half-breed driver gave the word.

"Mooch! Mooch! Linka!"

The leading dog gave a yelp, and strained at his collar, and a moment later all the teams were moving southward. Joy Gargrave waved her hand as she moved on, and he waved back and stood watching till the cavalcade was out of sight, then turning to his own dogs, he gave the word to move and set his face towards the snowy solitudes of the North.

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CHAPTER VIII

KOONA DICK

AS HE TRAVELLED, Roger Bracknell's mind was busy with the events of the past two days, and with the information he had gathered. That his cousin Dick should have turned out to be the man whose trail he had followed had occasioned no wonder after the first shock of surprise; but the mystery of the attack upon him, and of his subsequent disappearance, afforded him much food for thought. Some one had determined that Dick Bracknell should die, and some one had shot him. The question was—who was it? He had dismissed from his mind any idea that Joy herself had any complicity in that business, her frankness having quite killed the suspicions he had at first been inclined to entertain.

His thoughts swung round to Rayner. Did he know anything of the matter? He could find no satisfactory answer. It was true that immediately after the crime he had seen him entering the Lodge with a rifle, and he had certainly shown a keen interest about the sled which had waited in the wood, but from the first he had casually offered a sufficient explanation, and the instinct which turns every man into an amateur detective on the occasion of a mysterious crime would easily account for the second.

Besides—Rayner could have had nothing to do with the disappearance of Dick Bracknell's body, for the corporal was quite sure that he had never left the house until he had done so with himself. True, he had betrayed a certain knowledge as to the place where the crime had been committed, but he himself might easily have communicated that knowledge to Rayner, though he could not recollect having done so, whilst on the other hand, the motive for such a serious crime as murder was not immediately apparent. It was true that Rayner designed to marry Joy Gargrave, but that of itself was not a sufficient motive unless he knew of the previous marriage.

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"But does Rayner know of that marriage?" He uttered the question aloud, and answered it the same way, speech helping him to precipitate his thoughts.

"I think not! The girl is so positive ... and Rayner has given no sign. There's the deuce of a coil to be unwound somehow."

He reached the bluff, turned it, and saw the junction of the tributary Elkhorn with the main river. When he reached it he halted his dogs and made a careful inspection of the trail. The new snow had drifted, but the thick pinewood which grew on the banks of the smaller stream had turned the snow in places, and about two hundred yards up, he came on the half-obliterated traces of sled-runners. He examined them carefully, stood for a minute or two in thought, then nodded his head.

"Turned up here out of the main trail, and will probably have made a camp somewhere. Anyway it is worth trying."

He went back for his dogs, and turned up the Elkhorn. The trail at first was not very bad, and he made a good pace; but after the first two miles it worsened, and he struck an abundance of soft snow, presenting an absolutely virgin surface. This made the going very hard, and he marched ahead of his labouring dogs, packing the snow with the great webbed shoes of the North, lifting each foot clear almost perpendicularly, then planting it down to harden the surface for his canine team. Three miles or so he made, in spite of the cold, sweating like a bull, and then he reached a place where the wind had swept the ice like a broom leaving it almost clear of snow.

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He examined the frozen surface, and after a little search found the marks of sled-runners on the ice. He searched further, but found nothing save these twin scars running parallel to one another. But one sled had passed that way, and he was sure that he was on the right track. A smile of satisfaction came on his lean face, and seating himself, on the sled he swung forward at a rattling pace.

The short day was coming to a close when the leading dog yelped suddenly, and with his followers began to manifest signs of canine excitement. Roger Bracknell himself sniffed the keen air. There was a fire somewhere, for the unmistakable odour of burning resinous

wood reached his nostrils. He stepped off the sled, and hanging on to the gee-pole tried to check the pace of his team. His efforts however, were in vain. The dogs bent their heads to the ice and threw themselves against the collars, hurrying forward, as they had not hurried all day. They too smelt the burning pinewood, and to them it signified not merely human habitation, but freedom from the traces, and the frozen salmon which constituted their evening meal.

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The corporal, finding his endeavours to restrain them vain, prepared for eventualities. Hanging on to the sled with one hand, with the other he unfastened the holster wherein he carried his service pistol. He did not know what to expect. That aromatic odour might come from an Indian tepee, from the hut of some lonely prospecting party, or from the camp of the man he was following; in any case it was as well to be prepared.

The leading dog yelped again, and the others responded in joyful chorus. The team swung suddenly towards the left bank, up a slight incline towards a clearing in the wood. Out of the gathering gloom a faint glow appeared, and then the shadowy outline of a hut. The glow was from a frosted parchment window, and the hut was the typical miner's cabin of the North. Corporal Bracknell smiled and dropped his hand from the pistol-holster, finding the look of the place altogether reassuring. The dogs came to a standstill on the packed snow in front of the cabin, yelping delight, and whip in hand Bracknell waited, listening. If there were dogs at the cabin they might be expected to charge the new-comers, who fastened in the traces would be heavily handicapped. The charge he waited for did not come. There was no challenging answer to the yelping of his own team, and apparently the owner of the cabin was without dogs, or if he owned a team it was absent from home. This fact further reassured him and threw him still more off his guard. He stepped forward to the door of the cabin and rapped upon it with the butt-end of his dog-whip.

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"Come in," answered a hoarse voice.

The corporal felt for the moose-hide thong that worked the wooden catch, opened the door, and stepping inside turned to close it behind him.

"That's right," said the voice again. "Now put your hands up."

The corporal jumped and his hands moved instinctively towards the holster as he swung round.

"Don't!" snapped the voice. "Put them up, or by—" Bracknell recognized the folly of resistance, and as he raised his hands above his head, his eyes swept the cabin for the speaker. A slush lamp against the wall, and the glow from the roaring Yukon stove gave light to the middle of the cabin, but the corners were in comparative darkness, and it was a second or two before he located the owner of the voice. Then, in a bunk in the corner furthest from the door, he caught sight of a man propped among furs and blankets. On the edge of the bunk rested a hand which held a heavy pistol pointing at himself. The face that he looked into was that which he had last seen in death-like repose in the snow near North Star Lodge—the face of Koon Dick. The eyes of the latter glittered wickedly in the firelight, and whilst the officer waited the voice spoke again, mockingly.

"The end of the long trail—hey, bobby?"

The corporal did not reply. Apparently his cousin was alone and comparatively helpless, or he would scarcely have waited his entrance lying in the bunk. His eyes measured the distance between them and he speculated what chance there was of the success of a sudden spring proving successful. But the man on the bunk evidently divined what was passing through his mind, for a second later he broke the silence again.

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"I wouldn't try it, officer, not if I were you. I may be a sick man, but I can still shoot."

Roger Bracknell looked at the hand resting on the edge of the bunk. It was perfectly steady. He recognized the hopelessness of any attack proving successful, until the sick man was off his guard, and nodded casually.

"I give you best," he answered, speaking for the first time.

The man on the bunk gave a chuckling laugh. "You seem wise," he replied, "and if you do just what I tell you you'll prove you are. You've got a gun, of course, in that holster of yours? Well, when I give the word, you will unbuckle the belt, and fling it pistol and all

under the bunk here. No tricks, mind you. If your hand strays an inch from the buckle, I fire, and I warn you that I am a dead shot.... Now you can get to work."

The corporal dropped his hands to his belt, and as his fingers worked at the stiff buckle, wondered if he might run the risk of trying for his pistol.

"Quick! You're too long!" cried the man in the bunk. Roger Bracknell hesitated for a second. His fingers fumbled at the buckle, then the belt swung loose in his hands.

"Throw it!" came the command in a peremptory voice.

The corporal threw it along the floor and it slid to the edge of the bunk, then his cousin laughed again.

"'Wisdom is justified of her children.' If you had a pious upbringing, bobby, you will recognize the Scripture. And now having got rid of your arsenal, you can sit down at the table, and put your hands upon it. That will be easier for you than standing there trying to touch the roof, but I warn you again—no monkey tricks or —"

The pistol moved significantly, and the corporal moved towards the rough table, constructed out of a packing case.

"Keep your hands up, and shove that stool forward with your feet."

The "stool" referred to was a log of wood, which as the corporal recognized, would prove a very good missile if a man had time to lift and throw it. Evidently his mentor realized that also, and was taking no chances, so, still at the pistol point, Corporal Bracknell pushed the log forward to the table, and then on his captor's instructions seated himself with his arms resting on the table.

"Now," said the sick man, with a short laugh, "we can talk in peace."

"Talk away," answered the corporal cheerfully.

"I will," replied the other sharply. "There's a question that I want to ask you.... Why did you pot me in the wood at North Star Lodge three nights ago? That sort of thing is against the rules of your service, isn't it?"

"It is," answered the corporal, "and the answer to your other question is that I didn't pot you."

"You didn't, hey? Then who the devil did?"

"I would give a goodish bit to know," was the corporal's reply. "The thing is a mystery to me."

"But it's no mystery to me," answered the other, a trifle passionately. "You did it, and it's no use trying to bluff me. I know you've been on my track for weeks, and that you were determined to get me by fair means or foul. If you think that lying is going to help you—"

"I am not lying," interrupted Roger Bracknell. "I give you my word of honour that I am telling you the truth—and I say that not because I am afraid. It is true that I was trailing you, and that I was close at your heels at North Star. But I never shot you, I found you lying in the snow, as I thought, dead, but I'd nothing whatever to do with the shooting."

"The devil!" cried the sick man, and from his tones the corporal knew that he was convinced. "Then who did it?"

The corporal saw a chance of further surprising his questioner—and took it.

"Well, there was the person whom you went to meet—your wife, you know."

"My wife!" There was amazement in Dick Bracknell's tones, and for a moment after the exclamation he stared at the officer like the man who could not believe his ears.

"Yes, your wife, Joy Gargrave," answered the corporal steadily. "You went to meet her in the wood, didn't you?"

Dick Bracknell did not reply. His lips pursed themselves and he began to whistle thoughtfully to himself the while he stared at the man whose question he left unanswered. The corporal smiled a little, and continued—

"I should think that you would be the first to admit that Joy Gargrave was not without grievances sufficient to warrant extreme action on her part."

"You can put that notion out of your noddle, at once," replied the other harshly. "If you know Joy at all, you know that the idea of

shooting me is the very last thing that would enter her head. She's not that sort."

The corporal remembered Joy's confession and smiled whimsically at the unconscious irony of her husband's testimony, then, still trying to move the other to some indiscretion of speech, he answered quietly, "You believe in Joy Gargrave? But have you thought what she must feel like? There are plenty of women who—"

"Drop it," broke in the sick man harshly. "The motion is preposterous. I won't listen to it; and I warn you, I don't share Joy's scruples about shooting."

"Nor about anything else, I imagine?" answered the corporal with a short laugh. "But we can easily settle whether Joy did it or not. Which side did the shot come from?"

"Now you're asking me something," answered the wounded man. "There were two shots, and they came from both sides of me. It was a regular ambush, and whoever fired meant to get me."

"Where were you hit?" asked the corporal.

"Left shoulder! Drilled clean through," was the reply.

"And which way were you facing when the thing happened?" asked the corporal. "Think carefully. It is rather important."

"I was facing up the path, with my back to the main road. I had heard something moving and had turned round, just at the moment."

"That settles it," answered the corporal emphatically. "It was the shot from the left that did for you, and your wife was on the right."

"But who was on the left? Tell me that if you can, my Solomon."

Corporal Bracknell shook his head. "There you hit one of the mysteries of this business. I don't know, I wish I did, but as sure as my name is Roger Bracknell—"

"As sure as what?" The interruption came like a pistol shot, and the wounded man leaned forward with amazement showing in his face. "What name did you say you called yourself?"

"Roger Bracknell!" answered the corporal quietly.

"H'm!" responded the other, peering at him thoughtfully, then he said suddenly, "Take off that chapeau of yours!"

The corporal removed his fur cap, and sat with it in his hand, whilst the other searched his face with inquisitive eyes. There was a moment's silence, and then the wounded man spoke again.

"It beats the band. You are my cousin Roger right enough, and this is a nice dramatic meeting. Drury Lane isn't in it with us, though what the blazes you are doing as a 'Mounter' beats me. I thought you were at the bar."

"And I didn't know you were Koon Dick until three nights ago. I had your description given me, and that cut across your cheek bone was particularized. That and the beard you wear are acquisitions since the old days at Harrow Fell, and even when I looked at your face the other night I never associated Koon Dick with Dick Bracknell."

"How did you come to know?" asked the other curiously.

"I picked up that note which you sent to your wife asking her to meet you, and naming the place. You had begun to write your surname and then crossed it out. That gave me the first inkling that you and Koon Dick were one and the same, and of course when I talked to Joy Gargrave I knew that what I suspected was the fact."

"And knowing what you now know, you would still arrest me?"

As he asked the question, Dick Bracknell leaned forward a little, and the hand that held the pistol hung loosely over the edge of the bunk. The corporal noticed it, and shifted his grip on the heavy fur cap in his hand.

"I should be compelled to. Duty is duty—you know."

"But, man, I'm your cousin!" came the protest.

"Yes! more's the pity."

As he replied, the corporal's arm moved suddenly, and the fur cap was jerked across the room right into the sick man's face. The corporal himself followed it like lightning, and, as he reached the bunk, gripped his cousin's pistol-hand. The weapon went off, once, twice, and the bullets plugged the logs of the cabin, whilst Dick Bracknell shouted imprecations. The policeman caught the barrel of the pistol, and turned it away from himself, whilst with the other hand he caught his cousin's wrist, and dug his thumb into the

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sinews of it, in order to force him to release his hold. In the midst of the struggle there was a sudden clamour of dogs outside, but neither of the men noticed it. The pistol cracked again, and at that moment the door opened, and an Indian rushed in. Apparently, he took in the situation in a glance. There was a heavy dog-whip in his hand, and in an instant he had swung it, and brought the loaded stock down on the corporal's head. The latter did not even cry out. He doubled up like a doll out of which the stuffing had been ripped, and lay in a crumpled heap upon the hard mud floor.

CHAPTER IX

THE HUSKS OF THE PRODIGAL

WHEN Roger Bracknell came to himself, he had a splitting head, and no exact recollection of recent events. His head ached so much that he felt moved to press his temples with his hands, but found that it was impossible to do so, owing to his arms being bound to his side. On making that discovery, he lay quite still, with his eyes closed, thinking over the situation. Little by little memory came back to him, and he remembered what had befallen, but his remembrance of events ceased with the moment when his cousin's pistol had cracked for the third time. Had the bullet struck him? He did not know, but at that moment through the drums throbbing in his head, a voice sounded in his ears, a voice that had external reality, and the tones of which he recognized.

"Do you think he's dead, Joe? He lies still enough."

A guttural voice grunted some reply, and there was a sound of movement near him. He opened his eyes, to find himself looking into a dark, frost-scarred face, from which a single eye gleamed malevolently. As that eye encountered his, the dark face was lifted and turned from him, and he caught the reply given over the speaker's shoulder.

"Him eyes open. He alright!"

"That's good hearing. I don't want him to die on our hands, at least not until I have had a little more conversation with him."

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The man Joe gave a careless reply, and moved away. Corporal Bracknell craned his neck a little and looked round.

The slush lamp was still burning, but through the parchment window the grey light of the Northland day penetrated, from which fact he deduced that he had lain where he was many hours. In front of the stove, the man of the evil face, whom he had seen on opening his eyes, was busy preparing a meal, and the odour of frying moose-steak and bacon filled the cabin. In the bunk, propped up among the furs, with his left arm in an improvised sling, he descried his cousin, puffing at a pipe, and regarding him with thoughtful gaze. Their eyes met, and Dick Bracknell smiled.

"Morning, Cousin Roger. I hope that head of yours is not very bad."

"It is only middling," answered the corporal truthfully.

"Um! I suspected so! Joe there," he indicated the Indian bending over the stove, "doesn't know his strength, and he's a holy terror with a whipstock. You should see him tackle a big wolf dog that's turned savage. It's a sight for gods and men!"

Roger Bracknell did not reply. He had not been aware of the Indian's entrance on the previous night, but in a flash he divined what had happened to him, and why his head ached so intolerably. His cousin continued with mocking affability.

"He hit you rather hard, I am afraid, but we Bracknells are all a little thick in the skull, and I hope no real harm will follow on Joe's forceful intervention. In any case you must own that his arrival was a most opportune one."

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"I can well believe you found it so," answered the corporal.

"I did, Roger my boy, I did. You surprised me last night. I didn't think you would have gone for a wounded and disabled man. It was scarcely chivalrous, you know."

"You were armed," was the reply. "I wasn't."

Dick Bracknell waved his pipe airily. "We will let it pass. What is done is done, and the past is always to be reckoned as irrevocable, as I know better than most of the parsons. The present and the future are my immediate concern, and the question is what am I to do with you?"

"That," answered the corporal quietly, "is scarcely for me to decide."

"No," replied his cousin with a little laugh, "but it is a question in which you should be interested."

Roger Bracknell was interested, intensely interested, but he

strove his best to appear unconcerned, and after a moment his cousin continued—

“Joe there has a very simply solution. He suggests another knock on the head, and sepulchre in the river through an ice-hole. It is a course that would be advantageous to me, since your body would not be found before the ice breaks up in the spring, if then, and in the interval we should have time to clear out of the Territories.”

The corporal knew that what he said was true, and shivered a little as he contemplated the suggested way of getting rid of him, but his voice was firm as he asked casually, “Why don’t you accept that solution?”

“Why don’t I accept—” began the other, and then broke off, glowering at the man who though in his power was apparently undismayed. Then a sneer came on his face. “Blood is thicker than water,” he remarked. “Though you’re willing to forget that we are cousins, and regardless of family ties are prepared to follow your d—d sense of duty, I can’t forget it; and I’m inclined to spare you, and even to cut those bonds of yours on conditions.”

“On conditions! What are they?” asked the corporal.

“That you give me your word of honour that you will not attempt to escape or to attack Joe or myself whilst you are with us.”

The corporal wondered what was in his cousin’s mind and what was behind the offer, but he was careful not to probe into the matter openly.

“You will accept my word of honour?” he asked with a faint touch of surprise in his voice.

“Yes,” answered his cousin sneeringly. “You see, I know you of old. The Bracknell strain runs true in you, whilst it has a twist in me. I know you won’t break your parole—if you give it. And of course, you will give it. It’s your word or your life. Ha! Ha! Quite a Dick Turpin touch there, hey?”

Roger Bracknell considered the matter swiftly. So far as he could see there was nothing to gain by rejecting the offer, since he was completely in the other’s hands, and though his cousin sneered he was clearly quite in earnest.

“I might be disposed to give my word, if—”

“Man,” broke in the other savagely, “you had better. There are no ifs and buts about it. Look at Joe there. He doesn’t strike you as one who will be over delicate, does he? If I let him loose you’ll be running down the Elkhorn under the ice inside ten minutes. You’d better agree—and quickly. No!” he lifted his pipe to check the words on the corporal’s lips. “Hear me out. There’s another condition yet, and it is this. As soon as I am able to travel you will accompany me without demur for four days. On the fifth day, I’ll release you and you can do your worst.”

The corporal hesitated. There was something here that he did not understand, and again he wondered what lay behind the proposal. His cousin watched him, and as he did not speak, addressed him again.

“I may remind you what the situation is. You are in my power. If you can’t give me your word, if I don’t fall in with Joe’s more primitive suggestion, I can keep you tied up here, and I can leave you tied up when we move on; or I can lash you on to a sledge, and, willy nilly, take you along with us. That must be quite plain to you. But I prefer an amicable arrangement.... You will give me your word?”

Corporal Bracknell recognized the truth of his cousin’s utterances. There was little choice in the matter, and after a little more reflection he agreed.

“Yes, Dick, I give you my word of honour.”

“I thought you would!” Dick Bracknell laughed shortly as he spoke, and then turned to his Indian companion. “Just take your knife, Joe, and cut those thongs.”

The Indian turned from the stove and growled something in a dialect which the corporal did not understand. He guessed, however, that the Indian was demurring, and with mingled feelings waited to see what would happen. His cousin spoke again, and this time there was a peremptory note in his voice.

“Cut those thongs, I tell you; and don’t stand there growling at things you don’t understand.”

He added something in his native tongue, and watching the

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Indian's scowling face, the corporal saw the frown lift, and a flicker of evil laughter leap into the single eye. A moment later the Indian stepped up to him, and with a hunting knife cut the hide thongs which bound him, and then returned to the stove.

The corporal stretched his arms, then his whole body, and after that rose slowly to his feet. His cousin watched him with eyes that smiled inscrutably.

"Feels better, hey? You're a sensible man, Cousin Roger, and now I guess we shall get along famously. A pity, though, that I shan't be able to sit down to breakfast with you."

"What I can't understand is how you come to be here at all," blurted the corporal.

"Oh," laughed the other, "that's as simple as you please. When I was plugged down by North Star, I must have lapsed into unconsciousness—for the first time on any stage. Whilst I was lying there in the snow—"

"I examined you," broke in the corporal. "I thought that you were dead!"

"But as you see I wasn't," replied the other, "and whilst I was lying there in the snow; Joe, who was waiting with the dogs, having heard the shots came to look for me. He carried me to the sled, took me to the woods on the other side of the river, made a fire, and having doctored me brought me along here. He's a good sort is Joe, though his looks are against him."

The corporal did not reply. From the trails he had found in the snow, he had already guessed part of the story which he had just heard and was not surprised at it. The wounded man laughed shortly.

"Joe is attached to me. I once did him a service, and if I told him to do it he'd run amuck through Regina barracks without demur. He doesn't love the mounted police, as he owes his lost eye to one of them, so you will see, cousin, that only my family affection saves you."

The Indian turned his scarred face from the stove, and laid the table in primitive fashion. Then having attended to his master, he placed a tin plate with moose meat and beans before the corporal, filled a mug with steaming coffee, and with a grunt invited him to eat. The officer did so readily enough. He had eaten nothing for fourteen hours and was feeling hungry.

"Plain fare," commented his cousin, "but wholesome, and if one brings to it the sauce of hunger, it's at least as good as anything we had at Harrow Fell.... And that reminds me, cousin. How is the governor?"

The corporal remembered the dignified Sir James Bracknell as he had last seen him, and although he had had his own quarrel with him, felt resentment at the tone in which the question was asked.

"He was very well when last I saw him," he answered stiffly.

"How long ago is that?"

"Two years."

"Um! that's a goodish time. May I inquire if he knows your whereabouts?"

"I think not. I didn't tell him of my intentions when I came here. We—er—had a difference of opinion."

Dick Bracknell laughed. "I don't blame you for that. He's a starchy old buffer is the governor, and a regular perambulating pepper pot." He was silent for a moment, and then he inquired jerkily, "How—a—did he take—that—a—a—little affair of mine?"

"You mean the selling of the plans of the Travis gun?"

"There's no need for you to be brutal!" was the sharp reply. "I've paid pretty heavily for that piece of madness. You've to remember that I'm the heir of Harrow Fell, and that if I show my nose in England I shall probably get five years at Portland or Dartmoor."

The corporal knew that this was true, and was conscious of a little compunction. Without alluding to it he answered the question. "Sir James took that very badly. It was hushed up, of course, but when you disappeared, and your name was gazetted among the broken, he pressed for an explanation, and got it. As you can guess, proud old man as he is, it wasn't a nice thing for him to hear."

"No.... Poor old governor!"

A strained silence followed, and a full two minutes passed without any one speaking. Then the corporal glanced at his cousin.

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The latter was sitting in his bunk, staring straight before him, with a troubled look in his eyes. He moved as the corporal looked at him, and as their eyes met, he laughed in a grating way.

"The husks are not good eating," he commented, "and I've been feeding on them ever since the day I skipped from Alcombe."

The corporal was still silent, a little amazed at his cousin's mood, and the other spoke again. "Don't you go thinking I never regret things, Roger my boy. There never was a prodigal yet who didn't lie awake o' nights thinking what a fool he'd been. And for some of us there's no going back to scoop the ring and the robe and to feast on the fatted veal.... There are times when I think of the Fell, and hear the pheasants clucking in the spinney. And I never sight at a ptarmigan but I think of the grouse driving down the wind on Harrow Moor. Man—it's Hell, undiluted."

The corporal pushed the tin plate from him. He felt strangely moved. He had thought of his cousin as wholly bad, and now he found good mingled with the evil. He turned round.

"Dick, old man," he said in an unsteady voice, "you might make good yet, if you tried."

His cousin laughed harshly. "Not me, you know better. What were you after me for? Whisky-running? Yes! I thought so. That's bad enough for a man of—a—my antecedents. But there are worse things credited to Koon Dick, as you'll learn. I've got too far. What is it that fellow Kipling says? 'Damned from here to Eternity'? That's me, and I know it."

"You can pull up!" urged the other. "You can make reparation."

"Reparation!" exclaimed the other. "Ah! you are thinking of—Joy—my wife, aren't you?"

"Yes," answered the corporal simply.

Dick Bracknell's mood changed swiftly. "What's Joy to you?" he demanded hoarsely. "You know her, you've talked with her, consoled her, I don't doubt. What's she to you?"

As he spoke his tones became violent, and he half threw himself out of the bunk, as if he would attack his cousin. The Indian started to his feet, and his one eye glared at the officer malevolently. The corporal did not move. As his cousin shouted the question the blood flushed his face, and in his heart he knew that he could not answer the question with the directness demanded.

"Don't be a fool, Dick," he replied quietly. "I never saw Joy Gargrave till four days ago, and if I talk of reparation, well, you'll own it is due to her."

Dick Bracknell's jealous passion died down as suddenly as it had flamed. He threw himself back in the bunk and laughed shakily.

"Perhaps you're right," he said, "but it is one of the things that can't be done."

"You could let her divorce you!" blurted out the corporal. "It would be the decent thing to do."

"When did I ever do the decent thing," retorted his cousin sneeringly. "No, Joy's my wife—and I'll keep her. It is something to know that there are millions I can dip my hands in some day, and a warm breast I can flee to—"

"Not now at any rate," broke in the corporal sharply, only by an effort restraining himself. "Joy has started for England."

"For England—when?" Dick Bracknell's face and tones expressed amazement, but his next words were burdened with suspicion. "You're not lying to me?"

"No, it is the truth. Joy started for England yesterday morning. I saw her start."

"And I can't follow," commented the prodigal bitterly. "That's part of the price I pay."

He did not speak again for a long time, and the corporal charged his pipe, lit it, and sat smoking, staring into the stove, and reflecting on the mess his cousin had made of his life.

At the end of half an hour the Indian went out, and then Dick Bracknell broke the silence.

"I wonder what Joy thinks of me? Did she tell you?"

"She knows how she was trapped—you are aware of that, of course? I think she will never forgive you."

"I'm not surprised," was the reply, "and yet, Roger, I think the world of her. When I married her I loved her—and I wasn't thinking of her money overmuch. It was Lady Alcombe who put that rotten

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scheme in my head. If I'd only been patient, and run straight, and not been tempted by that agent to sell the secret of the Travis gun—but there's a whole regiment of 'if's' so what's the use of gassing? Anyway, Joy's mine—and no man else can get her while I live."

It was the last word he said upon the subject, and nearly three weeks later, having recovered sufficiently to travel, he journeyed with his cousin and the Indian up the Elkhorn. On the fourth morning of that journey Roger Bracknell woke, to find that preparations were already well advanced for departure. One team was already harnessed with a larger complement of dogs than usual, whilst his own sled, with three dogs standing by, was still unharnessed. His cousin indicated it with a jerk of his head.

"We part company today, Roger. I'm sorry to rob your dog team, but Joe insists as he's afraid you'll get down to the police-post too soon for us, if we leave you your full team. Besides, we're tackling a stiff journey and we shall need dogs before we're through. We're starting immediately, and you'll have to breakfast alone, and by the time you're through with it your parole is off. You understand?"

The corporal nodded, and his cousin continued, "With only three dogs you won't be such a fool as to try and trail us, and we've left you enough grub to get you down to North Star comfortably. Your rifle's there on the top of your sled, and I trust you not to try and use it on us till you've eaten your breakfast.... So long, old man."

He turned lightly away, without waiting for his cousin to speak, and the corporal heard him humming an old chanson of the Voyageurs—

"Ah, ah, Babette,
We go away;
But we will come
Again, Babette—
Again back home,
On—"

The song failed suddenly, and as Joe the Indian cracked his whip to the waiting dogs, Dick Bracknell looked back over his shoulder. His face was white and twisted as if with pain, and there was anguish in his eyes. The corporal took a hasty step towards him, but was waved back, and the team moved forward, the runners singing on the windswept ice. For ten minutes the officer stood watching, until the cavalcade passed out of sight behind a tree-clad island, but Dick Bracknell did not look back once. The corporal turned to the fire with a musing look upon his face, and whilst he prepared breakfast, his mind was with the man travelling up the river. The interrupted chanson haunted him and he found himself searching for the unsung fragment. For a time it eluded him, but presently he found it and hummed to himself—

"—On Easter Day—
Back home to play
On Easter day,
Babette! Babette!"

and as he found it he understood to the full the look of pain upon his cousin's face. Again he looked up the river. Beyond the island a line of black dots appeared, and by them marched two larger dots.

"Poor devil!" he murmured as he turned again to the fire.

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CHAPTER X

A DESPERATE SITUATION

AN HOUR LATER Roger Bracknell started on his way back to the police-post, in a not very happy frame of mind. The chief of Fort Pilgrim was a man with little tolerance for failure, and the corporal knew that when he made his report it would be received with frowns. That was inevitable, but there was nothing for it but to return. His cousin and the Indian Joe had taken very effective measures to prevent him following on their trail when they had left him with a depleted dog-team and with only sufficient rations to carry him as far as North Star Lodge. Sorry as he was for his cousin he yet resented the action which had left him helpless, and his failure rankled as he swung steadily forward on the southward trail. Before the end of the day, however, a thought came to him. Duty was duty, and if he could reach North Star Lodge, there would be dogs there, and he could requisition them in the King's name, and return to the pursuit. It did not seem a very nice thing to contemplate, but his oath of service left him no option, whilst the officer at Fort Pilgrim was bound to look askance at the whole affair, if he returned to explain that Koona Dick was his cousin, and that he had escaped him. Besides, there was Joy to consider. She could never be safe from molestation whilst Dick Bracknell was at large. It was even possible that the latter, finding the Territory growing too hot for him, might venture to follow her to England, and as her husband claim his rights. That must be prevented at all costs, even at the cost of Dick suffering incarceration in the penal prison at Stony Mountain.

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The end of the day, however, brought an unlooked-for event, which made an end of these half-formed plans. He had camped for the night, and having fed his dogs with the dried salmon-roe which formed their staple food, was preparing his own meal, when one of the animals gave a sudden sharp howl of pain. He looked hastily round, and saw the dog twisted in some kind of spasm, its backbone arched, its legs jerking in a strange fashion. He went to it, and as he approached the spasm ended, and the dog lay in the snow completely exhausted. He was stooping over it, wondering what was the matter when the other two dogs howled simultaneously, and he turned swiftly to see one of them leap straight in the air, and in a moment both of them were in spasms similar to the one he had already witnessed, and before his eyes one of them curled up like a bow, then suddenly relaxed, and lay stark and dead.

A dark suspicion shot through his mind, as he jerked himself upright. The first dog was plainly at the point of death, whilst the third was twisted by spasms that could have but one ending. He knew that there could be no recovery, that he could do nothing for them, and in a swift impulse of mercy he drew his pistol and shot them. Then he strode to the sled, and lifting the small bale of dog food carried it to the fire, and by the flames of the burning pine examined it carefully. He had not to look long before he came upon some small white crystals in the creases of the roe. They might be snow, they might be frost crystals, but he did not think that they were either, and selecting one of the smallest of the white specks he placed it on his tongue. It was exceedingly bitter in taste.

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"Strychnine!" he cried aloud, and then stood looking at the dead dogs with horror shining in his eyes. As he stood there one question was beating in his brain. "Who has done this thing? Who? Who?"

His thoughts flew back to his cousin. Had he—No! He could not believe that; for whoever had placed the strychnine in the dog food, had callously planned to murder him. And bad as Dick Bracknell was, the corporal felt that his cousin would not have done a thing like this.

"There's that Indian—Joe," he said, speaking his thoughts aloud. "From what Dick said he was afraid of me ... and he would have disposed of me at the beginning if he had had his way!" He was silent for a little time, then he nodded his head. "Yes! The Indian did it without Dick's knowledge."

For the moment he refused to think further about the matter. About him was the gloom of the pines, with their pall of snow, and

everywhere the terrible silence of the North. Alone and without dogs to carry his stores, the situation was altogether desperate; and to reflect upon it overmuch was to court madness. So he put the thought of it from him for the time being, and after dragging the dead dogs into the shadow of the forest, resumed the preparation of his evening meal. When he had eaten it, he erected a wind-screen, and lying in his sleeping bag, with his feet to the fire, lighted a pipe, and once more considered the problem before him.

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It was at least four days' journey to North Star Lodge, probably five or six, since he would have to carry the necessaries of life himself, and so burdened would not be able to travel fast. There was food for four days on the sled, and to make sure of reaching North Star, he would have to put himself on rations, and travel as fast as he could. Barring accidents there was an even chance of his getting through, but if any ill-chance arose then—He did not finish the thought. Knocking the ashes out of his pipe, he stretched himself down in the sleeping berth, and presently fell asleep.

When he awoke it was still dark, and the fire was burning low. He looked at his watch. It was five o'clock. He stretched himself a little, and thrusting his arm out of the sleeping bag, he threw a couple of spruce boughs on the fire. The resinous wood quickly caught, and as it flared up he looked round. On the edge of the circle of light, which his fire cut out of the darkness, something caught his eye. He looked again. Two tiny globes of light, about three feet above the ground, appeared to be suspended on nothing. He watched them steadily, and for the briefest moment of time, saw them eclipsed, then they reappeared. He looked further. There were other twin globes of light, scattered all round, and, as the spruce crackled into flame, he caught sight of an animal's head, and the outline of its form.

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"Timber-wolves!" he whispered to himself.

Feeling for his automatic pistol, he lay waiting his opportunity. Undoubtedly, the bodies of his dead dogs had already served the savage beasts for a meal, and now they were watching him, perhaps already counting him their prey.

He did not feel particularly afraid. He knew that the wolf is really a coward, and that unless driven by hunger, it seldom attacks man, but all the same he thought it wise to teach the beast a lesson. So when the shadowy form of one of the beasts moved, he sighted and fired. The wolf gave a yelp, jumped clean in the air, and dropped dead well within the circle of firelight. He looked round again. The watching eyes in the darkness had disappeared. Presently however they returned, and lying perfectly still, he saw a gaunt dog wolf slink out of the shadows towards its dead comrade, and fall on it with its teeth. Another followed and another, and a moment later there was a snarling tangle of furry beasts where the dead wolf had been.

"Phew!" he whistled to himself, as he noted their disregard of the firelight, "they're mad with hunger!"

He emptied his pistol into the bunch, and the pack fell back, leaving three of its number dead in the snow. Of the first wolf nothing remained but the skull and tail. Behind the trees the snarling and yelping continued, and as he crept out of his sleeping bag, he conjectured that others of the beasts had been injured by his shots, and were falling a prey to their hungry companions. There was a serious look upon his face, as, crossing to the other side of the fire, he picked up the dead wolves, and one by one flung them into the darkness, where as his ears assured him they also became food for their famished pack-mates.

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He had meant to commence his journey at an early hour, but the presence of the wolf-pack forced him to reconsider his plans, and to delay until dawn. The interval he filled in by packing his stores in a convenient form for carrying, and with the aid of things from the sled and his sleeping bag he devised a knapsack, which whilst it bulked large was not really heavy. Then he breakfasted, and that done, as the dawn broke, looked round once more. On one side of him the wolves were still in the shadows of the trees, and as he turned to look on the other, his eye caught the package of poisoned salmon roe, which was still upon the sledge. A thought struck him.

"The very thing!" he muttered, and going to the sled, he broke up the food with an ax and then scattered it in small portions about the camping place.

"I shall bag some of them for certain," he said, as he saw the

wolves watching him. "When they find it they'll bolt it like one o'clock."

The day had well broken when, adjusting his snowshoes, he shouldered his pack, and stepped out on the trail. None of the wolves were now in sight, but he had gone only a little way, when a sharp howl behind him, told him that they were still about. He looked back. A little spur of trees on the bank hid his late camp, but as he glanced back, a wolf leaped on the ice, ran howling a short way, then dropped in the snow. Other yelps of pain came from behind the screen of trees, and as the sounds reached him a sigh of satisfaction came in his eyes.

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"It's working like a charm," he said to himself. "There's an end of Mr. Wolf for this trip, I fancy."

As he journeyed he kept a sharp look out, turning frequently to observe the trail behind him. Not a single wolf appeared, and through the short day he marched on, the solitary living thing in a landscape that was unutterably forlorn and desolate. The quick night drew on, and he decided to camp. Halting in a sheltered cove he felled a small spruce, gathered some dry twigs and built himself a fire, then he thrust his hand to his tunic pocket for matches. They were gone. He had lost them. For a minute or two he was filled with dismay, and real terror clutched at his heart-strings, for to be without means of making a fire in the desolate Northland, is to have entered the valley of the shadow of death.

Then he recalled an old device of the Voyageurs, and proceeded to put it into execution. With his jack knife he cut some thin shavings of spruce, mixed them with a handful of dead lichen scraped from trees, and biting the bullets from a couple of cartridges shook the powder of one over the little heap that he had made, and with that from the other cartridge made a short train. Then he fired his pistol to light the train. The powder caught, spluttered and burned out without lighting the lichen and the pine-shavings, and the operation had to be performed three times before it was successful. He built up his fire, and when it was well going, and he was congratulating himself on his success a thought struck him. Hastily he examined his bandolier. He had but three cartridges left.

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As he weighed the metal shells in his hand, his face grew very serious. Each of them carried a message of death, but to him, as his sole means of making a fire, they were to him the bridge of life, and a precarious bridge at that. With at least three camps to make before he reached North Star Lodge, he recognized that the chances were almost desperate, and that only care and skill and a large slice of luck could carry him through. Very carefully he stowed the cartridges where they would be safe against damp or accidental loss, and then proceeded to cook his meal.

The next morning he started an hour before dawn. Light snow was falling, but he could not afford to regard that, and on snowshoes he pressed forward steadily. It began to blow, and he sought the lee of the river-bank for shelter, then that happened which put a term to his journey. A great tree, well up the bank, collapsed under its weight of snow. Roger Bracknell caught the rending sound of its fall and instinctively leaped aside, but the snowshoes embarrassed him and he fell. A bough of the falling tree alighted on his right leg, snapping it like a pipestem, and pinning him down in the snow.

Under the first shock of pain, he almost fainted, but in a minute or two recovered himself sufficiently to take stock of the situation. It was, as he instantly recognized, very desperate. He sat up, and tried to move the weight from his leg. The bough which held him fast was not a very thick one, but the weight of the tree was behind it, and with his hatchet he began to cut through the branch. Every stroke he made jarred him terribly, and more than once he had to desist, but at last the bough parted, and he was able to push the weight from his leg. He was, however, in little better case, since he could not stand upright; and to crawl would have been futile, even if the deepening snow had allowed the possibility of doing so.

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He looked round, and through the falling snow caught sight of the sombre pinewoods. They had a funereal look, and in their shadows brooded the menace of the North, which had surely overtaken him at last. Death was staring him in the eyes. He took out his pocket book, and made shift to write a note to his superior down at the Post. Then he took out his pistol, and loaded it with one

of the cartridges that had held his life, but which now carried only death, swift and merciful. It was no use waiting. He held the pistol ready, and for a moment his thoughts strayed to Joy Gargrave. Would she ever hear? Would she guess that he—

His thoughts broke off suddenly. Through the gloom of the falling snow he caught a sound of voices. Some one, it seemed, was urging a dog-team to greater efforts. Was he dreaming? He listened carefully. No! There it was again, and with it came the yelp of a dog cut by a whip. A great wave of thankfulness rolled over him. He shouted and fired his pistol in the air. A moment later came an answering shout, and he called back again. Presently, out of the snow-murk emerged the forms of two men—Indians, and as they bent over him he lapsed into unconsciousness.

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CHAPTER XI

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

SIR JOSEPH RAYNER, as a solicitor, was at the very head of his profession, and was supposed to be trusted with more family secrets than any other man in England. The confidence in him was extraordinary, but no one could be found to urge that it was not merited, and it was notorious that he had averted more scandals and saved more reputations than any other half dozen men in his profession. Erring husbands, and wives deeply wronged, sought his advice, and to the husbands he was a man of the world, and to the wives a sympathetic counsellor, always against the extreme remedy of the divorce courts. To prodigal sons he was the dispenser of paternal allowances, and to the men caught in the toils of the blackmailer he was like a delivering providence. As a family solicitor he was unsurpassed, discreet as a cabinet minister at question time, and as secret as the grave. And in spite of his burden of secrets, usually as he walked abroad among men, he wore a jaunty air, as befitted a man with not a trouble of his own in the wide world.

But one winter morning as he sat in his private office his brow was black with care, and his demeanour was as far removed as possible from the gay one which his confreres knew. Before him was a small ledger with a lock upon it, and a number of documents, and as he bent over them, from time to time he wrote figures upon a sheet of foolscap. Presently he began to add up the figures, and that done sat staring at the total.

"Ninety-seven thousand," he whispered to himself. "God! If anything were to come out!"

He sat looking at the figures, tapping softly with his pencil, something like despair shining in his eyes.

"Suppose Adrian's fine scheme goes awry? Or suppose Joy refuses to sign?"

He rose from his chair and began to walk to and fro, in the manner of a man whom nervousness has made restless. Once he stopped and glanced at the ledger, then nodded his head.

"The others will be all right, if——"

The whirr of the telephone bell on his desk interrupted his thoughts. Frowningly he picked up the receiver, and gave the stereotyped "Hallo!"

"Is that really you, Adrian? I didn't know you had arrived.... Last night you say.... I didn't get your telegram. I was dining with the Chancellor, and went on to the theatre afterwards.... Yes, you are in time, though I have been praying for your arrival for days. Things are very tight, and that banker is getting nervous.... Yes, the sooner the better. In half an hour? That will do very nicely. I shall expect you both without fail. How goes your matrimonial scheme?... Um! Hangs fire a little does it, but you're certain of the end. Well the earlier it is arranged, the better I shall be pleased. My nerves are not what they were. But we can talk the whole business over later. Thank heaven, I'm her guardian, and there's only my consent to be obtained. What sort of a savage has she become in these three years?"

As he listened to the reply to his last question a cynical smile came on his face. "Sounds as if you had fallen in love!... You have, hey? Well, well (he laughed a little), love is as good a qualification for matrimony as anything I know, except a thundering big bank account.... Yes, yes, I know.... I shall be waiting. That's all, I think."

Putting down the receiver, he began to gather up the scattered papers on his desk, and after tying them together with tape, he placed them in a large envelope and sealed them with his private seal. Then he locked the books and placed both the book and the envelope in the safe. Care appeared to have fallen from him like a garment. He even hummed a little catch from the halls as he took from the safe a new set of papers. Any one looking at him would not have known him for the care-ridden man of ten minutes before. Once more he was the Sir Joseph Rayner, whom the city knew, smiling, cheerful, and exceeding prosperous.

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"That will do, I think," he said as he arranged the papers on the desk. "Fortunately the girl has no business experience."

Then he went to a small cabinet in the room, and helped himself to a glass of port of a favourite vintage, and to while away the time smoked a couple of cigarettes, gazing into the fire with a musing look upon his face. At the sound of voices in the office of the head clerk, he threw away his cigarette and turned to the door. A knock sounded, and the door opened.

"Miss Gargrave and Mr. Adrian, Sir Joseph."

A moment later he was on his feet welcoming the travellers.

"This is a pleasure, Joy. I did not know that you had arrived until half an hour ago, not having had the telegram which Adrian sent me. You look wonderfully well, and Adrian looks all the better for his vacation. Take this chair, Joy, and throw off your furs! The cigarettes are on the mantelpiece, Adrian, if Joy does not mind."

He looked at her with a smile and Joy shook her head.

"Not in the least, Uncle Joseph! Adrian knows that!"

"Then we can indulge. But how are you? You have not yet told me, though of course there is no need. You have the authentic hue of health in your cheeks, and goodness! what a woman you have become! I could almost find it in my heart to envy Adrian the long journey you have made together!" He laughed a little as he spoke, and glanced from Joy to his son. A slight frown showed itself on the young man's face, and interpreting it rightly, Sir Joseph deftly took another line.

"You have not found the journey too trying, I hope, my dear Joy? But I forget. Of course you are inured to difficulties and hardships at North Star, and a journey of four or five thousand miles does not daunt you as it would a city man like myself."

Joy laughed a little. "There was not much hardship once we struck the railway. A first-class Pullman and a state-room on a Cunarder are in themselves alleviations of the tedium of a winter journey!"

Sir Joseph laughed with her. "Possibly! But it is not every one who would find them so. I think I could not undertake such a journey now. And I hope there will be no need for you to do so again. Now we have you this side of the herring pond, I hope we may keep you here for a very long time. Your days of exile are over, and North Star Lodge—"

"Please, uncle," Joy intervened quickly. "Please do not say anything against North Star. I think of it as my home. I was born there, you know, and I have not found these three years to be like years of exile—they have been full of happy days."

"Possibly," laughed the lawyer, "but there are many sorts of happiness, and after the pleasures of the wilderness you will be the better fitted to appreciate the delights of civilization, since all things, as you know, gain by contrast.... But where is Miss La Farge? I thought—"

"She is at the hotel. She was a little tired, but I think that was an excuse. She knew that I was coming here to do business—"

"Of course! Of course! Very considerate of her I am sure; but there was no need for her to be so punctilious. But business is really of a very simple nature, merely the signing of a few documents which can be completed in under half an hour." He waved a hand towards the desk. "I have anticipated your arrival, and everything is in order for your signature."

Joy glanced at the desk, and caught sight of the papers. "Perhaps you will explain what the situation is," she said. "I am not sure that I understand."

"Certainly," answered Sir Joseph with a suave smile. "It is not very complicated. Your father, as you know, left a very large fortune—something over a million pounds—in trust for you, and by his will made me your guardian and sole trustee. One of the conditions of the will was that for three years you were to live at North Star Lodge, and at the end of that time you were to be free to enter upon your inheritance. You have fulfilled the condition, and you now inherit. Indeed you ought to have done so some months ago, and as my trusteeship ended with the fulfilling of the conditions, there are certain actions of mine that ought to be regularized, and for which I shall require your signature."

"I do not quite follow," said the girl.

"It is very simple. You were not here to administer the estate,

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and though I had no authority from you, I was compelled to do so. Of course as your uncle and guardian there was really nothing else for me to do."

"Of course! Of course!" answered Joy hurriedly. "And you want my signature to—to put things right."

"Just that!" answered Sir Joseph smilingly.

"Then the sooner you have it the better," laughed Joy. "Shall I sign them at once?"

"If you like," answered the lawyer in casual tones, though there was a little flash of eagerness in his eyes.

"It will take but a few moments."

He moved towards the desk, and as Joy rose from her seat near the fire placed a chair in position for her. The girl seated herself, glanced carelessly at the first document he placed before her, and then asked, "Where do I sign?"

"Here!" answered the lawyer, indicating the place. Joy signed quickly. There were other papers that she did not even look at, but promptly signed each one in turn, as it was presented to her. When she had finished she laid down the pen with a little laugh.

"I feel quite a woman of business."

"But you are not yet out of the wood," laughed Sir Joseph. "There is another important matter to be settled, and that is the future management of the estate. It is now your own to do with as you like. You may wish to carry through all transactions relating to it yourself, in which case—"

"Oh no! no!" cried Joy protestingly. "I should be worried to death. You must manage it for me in the future as you have done in the past. I could not possibly undertake such a task."

The lawyer smiled. "I was hoping that you would think of that course, though, for obvious reasons I did not care to suggest it. It will be much simpler for you merely to have monies paid into your account instead of occupying perhaps several hours per week in worrying over investments." He laughed a little. "You would require an office and at least a couple of clerks, Joy."

"Oh dear!" laughed Joy, "that must never be."

"Then I will take the burden off your hands, and you will have to give me power of attorney."

"What is that?" inquired Joy, adding merrily, "I am discovering an abysmal ignorance in myself." Sir Joseph explained, and the girl nodded. "Of course. There is no difficulty about that. It only gives you the right to continue to exercise the powers you have had up to now, and it will save me a great deal of worry. I suppose there will be another document to sign?"

"Yes," answered the lawyer smilingly. "One more document to sign. Fortunately I anticipated what your wishes would be; and I had it prepared." He looked at his son. "We must have a witness, Adrian. Just ring for Benson, will you?"

The young lawyer touched a bell, and a moment later a clerk entered.

"Yes, Sir Joseph."

"In a moment, Benson. I want you to witness Miss Gargrave's signature."

He went to the safe, took from it yet another document which he gave to the girl.

"Read it, Joy."

"If I must," answered Joy, and ran through it carelessly.

Then she signed it, and the clerk having witnessed it and been dismissed, Sir Joseph gathered all the papers together, and locked them up. "Business is over for the day," he said. "I'm going to take a holiday. You will lunch with me at the Ritz, Joy, you and Adrian. I shall take no denial."

"But there is Babette—" began Joy.

"Oh, we will telephone to her, and pick her up on the way. We shall then be quite a complete little party, and tonight we will dine, and go on to a theatre afterwards. You will not have seen much acting, of late—"

"None at all," laughed Joy, "for three whole years."

"Then we must certainly go," answered her uncle. "Let me see—ah, yes! There is the 'Grizzly Cub,' a Klondyke play, pure American and very strenuous and exciting. I have seen it once, but I should

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like to see it again, with some one who knows the country of the play. To me it seems very real, and if it has illusions for you who know the life, I shall know that it is really good. We will go there. Adrian, just tell Benson to ring up the Mitre and engage a box for me, and have my car brought round from the garage."

It was a merry party that lunched at the Ritz. There was not a hint of the care that had betrayed itself in the lawyer's face in the solitude of his private room. He was the gay, debonair man of the world that all his acquaintances knew, and he exerted himself to make the lunch an agreeable one. But from time to time, he allowed his eyes to stray towards a table where a couple of young men were lunching with a lady. They seemed very interested in his own party, and presently he saw the lady rise from her seat and walk towards his table. At the same moment Joy Gargrave looked up, and as she caught the young lady's eyes, started impulsively from her seat.

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"You, Penelope!" she cried.

"You, Joy!" mimicked the other. "I thought you were dwelling in the forest primeval?"

"I arrived in London last night. I expect to stay a little time in England. The years of what my uncle calls my exile are over." She glanced at the lawyer. "Do you know my uncle? No! Then I must introduce you. Uncle, this is Miss Penelope Winter, an old—"

"You are wrong, Joy," laughed the lady. "This is no longer Miss Penelope Winter. This is Mrs. Will Grasmore of Grasmore Grange, Westmorland."

"You are married?" cried Joy.

Mrs. Will Grasmore waved a hand towards the table she had just left. "There sits the happy man, whose complete happiness began three months ago."

"Which—" began Joy, and then stopped suddenly, as a curious look came on her face. "Of course! I see! The other one is Geoffrey Bracknell, isn't it?"

"Yes," laughed her friend, "and he is dying to renew the acquaintance he began in Westmorland four years ago! May I bring him and Will over? I see that, like ourselves, you are almost at the end of lunch. We might take coffee together."

For the fraction of a minute Joy hesitated. Sir Joseph, who was watching her, noticed that hesitation, though he was the only one who did. Then Joy spoke.

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"Well, if you like, Penelope, and if my uncle doesn't mind. I am his guest, and—"

"Oh, Sir Joseph will not mind, I am sure," answered Mrs. Winter, flashing a smile at the lawyer and assuming his consent, hurried back to her own table.

"Did you say that the young man with Mr. Winter was named Bracknell?" asked Adrian Rayner suddenly.

There was just a splash of colour in Joy's cheeks as she replied shortly, "Yes!"

"I wonder if he is any relation of that Mounted policeman who came to North Star, when—"

"He is his cousin," answered Joy quickly. "His father is Sir James Bracknell of Harrow Fell. Geoffrey is the second son."

"Ah! I remember them," broke in Sir Joseph. "There was another son who disgraced himself and his family. He disappeared. I wonder what has become of him. The succession to that estate will offer a pretty tangle for somebody to unravel some day, Adrian."

His son nodded, but uttered no comment. His eyes were fixed on Joy, as if he found something particularly interesting in her demeanour at the moment. At his father's words the splash of colour had ebbed swiftly from her cheeks leaving them rather pale, but Joy's manner was perfectly self-possessed, and there was little to indicate that she was passing through a moment of stress. Her cousin still watched her when the others joined them, and at the moment of meeting flashed a quick searching glance at Geoffrey Bracknell. The young man's face was eager. There was a light in his eyes that told that Mrs. Winter's statement about his wish to renew acquaintance with Joy had not been over-coloured, and as he marked it, Adrian Rayner smiled enigmatically to himself.

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Sir Joseph also noticed it, and it troubled him a little. He was thoughtful during the remainder of the lunch, and even more thoughtful when, on the evening of that same day, they again

encountered young Bracknell in the foyer of the theatre. He was obviously waiting for them, and the lawyer was far from pleased to learn that he had taken the next box to his own. He was still less pleased when the young man made an excuse for visiting them between the acts, and it required all his skill to avoid an acceptance of the invitation to supper which he extended to Sir Joseph's party.

"My dear Bracknell, you are too late. Our supper is already ordered. On another occasion, perhaps, but tonight it is quite impossible."

"You did not tell me you had an admirer," he said to Joy, rallying her a little time later.

"An admirer!" Joy laughed. "Who—"

"Young Bracknell! He is most obviously in love with you."

"Oh no! no!" whispered Joy quickly, all the laughter dying suddenly from her face. "You are mistaken. It ... it would be too ... too...."

The sentence went unfinished, and Sir Joseph, noticing her face, did not press for the conclusion. He was silent for a little time, wondering what lay behind her sudden change of manner. Then he spoke again.

"Young Bracknell is not your only admirer," he said smilingly. "You have another."

"Indeed," said Joy, very obviously embarrassed.

"Yes! Adrian is very deeply in love. He confided the fact to me this morning.... I hope, my dear, that you will be able to listen to him, that you will be able to give a favourable—"

"Oh!" interrupted Joy nervously, "you must not ask me, uncle. I shall never marry. Never!"

"Never, my dear Joy! That, it is often remarked, is a very long time!" He smiled indulgently as he spoke, and then added, "I hope we may yet induce you to reconsider your very youthful decision."

Joy did not answer. Her face was very pale, and she sat staring at the stage with tragic eyes, not watching the actors, but visioning a body lying in the snow in the sombre woods at North Star.

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CHAPTER XII

A DASTARDLY DEED

“**H**OW!”

As Corporal Roger Bracknell opened his eyes, this characteristic Indian greeting broke on his ears, and he stirred uneasily. Slowly the full consciousness of things came back to him, and with it the sense of intolerable pain in one of his legs. He raised his head to look at the leg and stretched a hand towards it at the same time. Another hand intervened hastily.

“No. Not dat! You damage ze leg, if you touch. It vaire bad!”

The corporal turned his eyes. The two men were standing near the bale of skins on which he was lying, one of them of pure Indian blood, and the second, who had uttered the warning, manifestly a half-breed. Behind them in the darkness of the tepee was a third man, also an Indian. He addressed himself to the half-breed.

“How did I come here?”

“Lagoun and Canim dey find you on ze trail. A tree hav’ fallen an’ crack your leg like a shell of the egg. You not able to move, so dat eef dey not come soon, you dead mans along of ze cold which freeze ze blood. Dey bring you here an’ I set ze leg, so dat it grow together again. Dat is all!”

Coporal Bracknell looked towards the two Indians. “I am very grateful to you, Lagoun and Canim, and I shall not forget,” he said. “I shall report good of them at the Post. But where am I?”

“At ze winter encampment of my people!” was the reply.

“Of your people. Who are you then?”

“I am Chief Louis of ze Elkhorn tribe. You hear of me, maybe?”

“Yes,” answered the corporal quickly. “Who is there that has not?”

He looked with interest on the man, who was the son of a French-Canadian and an Indian mother, and who throwing in his lot with his mother’s people had risen to the headship of the tribe. And whilst he looked at him the Chief spoke again.

“It ees not good to walk alone in ze North without dogs an’ sled as Lagoun and Canim find you.”

“It is very bad,” laughed the policeman weakly. “But part of my dogs were stolen from me, and the others died.”

“Dat is vaire bad,” was the reply. “Lagoun and Canim dey find ze sled, and dead wolves—many of dem. Dey haf been poisoned. How befell it, so?”

The corporal explained, carefully avoiding any reference to his cousin and the latter’s Indian companion, and when he had finished, the Chief nodded approbation.

“Dat was clevaire to poison ze wolves, for dey hav’ ze hunger-madness at dis time, ze mooze being scarce in ze woods.”

For a little time Bracknell did not speak, then he glanced down towards his leg, and asked, “Is it very bad?”

“It veel knit together like ze ice on ze river!” was the reply. “An’ you veel not be lame mans. No! But two months veel pass before you take ze trail again.”

“Two months. The ice will be breaking up by then.”

“Oui! dat so! But what matter? Time it ees long in ze North, an’ we can talk together. Where did the trail lead for you, m’sieu?”

“I was making for North Star Lodge in the first instance. There, I hoped to get dogs to take me to the police post.”

Chief Louis did not speak for a little time. He lit an Indian pipe made of some soft stone with a hollowed twig for stem, pulled thoughtfully at it a few times, blowing out clouds of acrid smoke, then he said slowly, “You were going to North Star? You ever know Missi Gargrave’s father?”

“No!” answered the policeman. “He was dead before I came so far North. I understand that he was caught in the ice in the Yukon—and lost. The bottom dropped out of the trail or something.”

“Him die, oui,” was the brief reply.

Something in the other’s tone caught the policeman’s attention.

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He looked at him quickly. The half-breed's face was like that of a wooden image, but there was a glitter in the eyes that betrayed an excitement which the mask-like visage concealed.

"Ah!" he commented. "You know how Rolf Gargrave died!"

"I not say so! But I tink an' tink, an' I tink it was not good ze way Gargrave die. Non!"

Bracknell waited, but the half-breed did not continue, and after a little time he said quietly, "Tell me."

"Not now. It is ze hour of ze evening meal; an' ze tale will keep. I tell you anoder time."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe, nodded gravely at the officer and passed out of the tepee, leaving Bracknell the prey of a great curiosity. What on earth was the tale which the half-breed had to tell about Rolf Gargrave's death? He recalled the little that he had heard about the disappearance of the Northland millionaire and could remember nothing which indicated that his death had been due to anything but an accident. As he remembered the story the river-ice on which Mr. Gargrave and his party of four Indians had been travelling had suddenly turned rotten, in Northland phrase, "the bottom had dropped out of the trail," and the whole party had been drowned, with a single exception. The exception was one of the Indians who had managed to crawl out, and later in the day reached an Indian lodge there, after telling the story of the disaster, to die of cold and exhaustion. Mr. Gargrave's death had been a tragedy, but such tragedies were not uncommon in the North; and the police, hearing of the event months afterward, had seen no reason for investigation. Every spring brought similar stories with it; and would, so long as men persisted in keeping to the ice-trails when once the spring thaw had set in.

But Chief Louis's vague hints had perplexed Roger Bracknell, and awakened formless suspicions in his mind. Suppose that the death of Joy's father had not been an accident, suppose—

He broke off his conjectures. It was no use indulging in idle speculations when a short time would probably dispose of any need for them. He gave his mind to the consideration of his own position. As he recognized, his escape from death had been a very narrow one, and though he would have to remain where he was, probably for many weeks, he counted himself fortunate. Chief Louis held the Mounted Police in esteem, and would look after him well, and though the delay would probably mean that his Cousin Dick would escape, he could not find it in his heart to regret that over much. The Indian, Joe, was another matter. He was convinced that by poisoning his dog-food the Indian had deliberately planned his death, and as he thought of the means employed, a hot wrath burned within him. It was so cruel, so treacherous, and he vowed to himself that one day he would make the Indian pay for it.

His thoughts wandered further to Joy Gargrave! She would be in England or well on her way there, and wondering how his quest had sped. He was now in a position to fulfil his promise to her, but he doubted whether such news as he had to send her would be any comfort to her, for the news that Dick Bracknell was alive, and making for the fastnesses of the Northern wilderness, could hardly be good news for her, who had been so bitterly deceived.

It was the next day when Chief Louis unfolded the mystery of Rolf Gargrave's death. Seating himself by the corporal's side, he puffed slowly at his pipe for some time, and the officer watched him, wondering what was in his mind and when he would speak.

Suddenly the half-breed leaned forward and said abruptly—

"Ze bottom nevaire drop out of ze trail under Rolf Gargrave!"

"No?" The corporal's voice was eager and his manner alert.

"It was blown out!"

"Blown out! What on earth do you mean, Louis?"

"Listen and I veel the tale unfold. Tree winters back, no four! dere come to my tepee a white man who was not used to ze ways of ze North. With him vas another mans who had ze coughing-sickness, and who need the squaws to nurse him. He die vaire shortly—six days after he come, an' we give him tree-burial; and ze next day, ze other white mans he come to me. He want two men to go on trail with him to ze North, an' he pay with blankets, two rifles of ze best, mooch cartridges, and many sticks of tabac. He vaire anxious, and I ask him what for he go North before ze spring it have arrive. And he say he go to find a mans. What mans? I ask, and he say Rolf

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Gargrave, whom he would talk with on business of importance. Den I understand, I tink, Gargrave he is a man of many affairs, an' this man who know not ze ways of ze North hav' come so far to talk of gold and ze like, and I agree, and send two men of ze tribe with him to find Gargrave of North Star.

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"Dey be good men, who know ze ways of ze trail as none other, but dey are gone a vaire long time, an' ze wild geeze hav' gone to their breeding grounds in ze far North, an' ze river it is free from ice, when dey return. I question dem, and it is a strange tale dey tell. For many days dey travel with ze stranger mans whose name I know not, an' dey are on the trail of Gargrave all ze time. Dey hear word of him, now here, now dere, and it is a long trail dey follow, but at ze last dey come up with him. Dey hav' word dat he is but one camp ahead of dem, an' dey push the dogs, an' soon dey pass Gargrave's camp."

"Pass it?" cried the corporal in astonishment.

"Oui! Dey pass a camp which is Gargrave's an' with ze darkness falling, dey push on five, six mile, an' dere pitch camp, an' ze stranger mans say he wait for Gargrave dere. It begins to snow, an' dere is wind, an' dey crouch by ze fire, an' sleep, one hour, two hours, tree—I know not. Den Paslik an' Sibou dey wake suddenly, an' dere is the roll of thunder in their ears. Dey listen in wonder and again dey hear it, a crash like dat among ze hills when the sun scorches ze grass an' ze earth it shake an' tremble.

"Dey look about. Ze white-man's sleeping bag it is empty, and he is not dere. Dey wait a long time. Ze thunder sound no more, but ze snow still fall, an' presently, ze stranger mans he return. He hav' on ze snowshoes an' he hav' been on a journey. He tell Paslik an' Sibou dat he not sleep, dat he hav' been for little walk to help him. But he is vaire tired, an' dere is a strange look on his face, and Paslik he whisper to Sibou dat the stranger man hav' been a long journey.... Den ze snow still falling, dey all sleep till dawn....

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"All next day, in ze camp dere, dey wait for ze coming of Gargrave, but he come not, and Paslik he see dat after a time ze mans look not towards ze river-trail, an' dat dare is a pleased look on his face, a look as of one who has his desire given unto him. Ze next morning, they strike camp, an' ze stranger mans he say dey go back and look for Gargrave. To Paslik an' Sibou, ze way of the white man is foolishness, but dey go back, an' tree miles down ze trail dey find the ice hav' been broken in. It hav' frozen over again, but ze snow about have melt an' frozen in with ze ice, an' it is rotten. Also dere are great chunks of ice thrown far out over ze snow, which is a strange thing.... Dey cross the broken trail with care, an' at the far side, dey come on ze tracks of two sleds that hav' moved in ze direction of ze rotten ice.

"Ze stranger mans he look at dese an' den he looks back at ze broken trail, an' den he whistle cheerfully all to himself. Paslik he look, an' he read ze signs, an' he whisper dat ze sleds hav' gone in, ze sleds an' ze mans, an' den dey go forward till dey reach ze camp of Gargrave dat dey pass on ze way. He is not dere, ze camp is remove, an' ze ashes of ze fire are cold. Ze white mans he look, an' he laugh, but it was ze laugh of a man who is not disappointed, you understand.

"'We hav' missed him,' he say. 'We return to Dawson.'

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"So Paslik an' Sibou, dey go to Dawson with him, an' dere dey hear that Gargrave is lost, because of ze bottom dropping from ze trail an' casting him in ze river. One mans he have crawled out, he tell ze tale an' die. An' Paslik an' Sibou say nothing, an' ze stranger mans he give them his dogs an' sled an' stores and leave Dawson, and presently when ze river is open dey come back, and whisper to me the tale of their wanderings, and I say ze trail it not fall in, but it is blown out."

The half-breed broke off, and lighting his pipe, puffed at it stolidly, staring into the fire. For a full half-minute the corporal did not speak. The implications of the other's story were very clear to him, but they seemed incredible.

"But what makes you so sure?" he asked at last.

Chief Louis rose from his seat and without speaking passed from the tepee. After a few minutes he returned bringing with him a wooden box with a hinged lid. He opened it, and held it towards the corporal, who looked in curiously. Inside half-wrapped in cotton wool were four cakes of some reddish brown material, and when the corporal's eyes fell on them, he gave vent to a sudden exclamation.

"Ah!"

"You know what dat is? You hav' before it seen?"

"Yes!" answered Bracknell quickly. "It is dynamite. How did you come by it?"

"Ze stranger mans he leaves it in ze stores dat he give Paslik an' Sibou. He forget it, or he tink dey get meddling with it an' blow themselves to Hell. But dey bring it back, and I know it, and I keep it; and remembering ze winter thunder which Paslik an' Sibou dey hear in their sleep, I say ze trail it was blown up, an' not fall in, behold, Paslik an' Sibou wi' ze stranger mans go all ze way to Dawson, an' ze trail it is good."

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"Upon my word, Louis, I believe you are right."

"Dere is no question. It is so sure as ze rising of ze sun!"

A dark thought shot in the corporal's mind. Four winters ago this had happened, and in that year Dick Bracknell, who had trapped Joy Gargrave into marriage, had fled from England. Rolf Gargrave's death might be conceived to serve the interests of his son-in-law, and Rolf Gargrave had been murdered.

"Louis," he asked abruptly, "what sort of a man was he whom Paslik and Sibou served?"

"He was tall, with full beard and dark eyes. His voice was of ze English an' not of ze American, for he talked not through the nose."

The description was not very illuminating, and the policeman almost groaned.

"His hair? did you mark the colour?"

"It was like ze bear—what you call brown, ze brown of ze wood-nuts in autumn!"

Brown! Dick Bracknell's was brown, but then so was the hair of half the Anglo-Saxon race!

As his mind clutched at this fact seeking escape from the awful thought which was taking possession of it, he frowned.

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"You know ze mans?" asked the half-breed.

"No!" he cried violently. "No!"

"All ze same," said Chief Louis stolidly, "that mans he blow up ze trail."

And from that conclusion, at any rate, Roger Bracknell could find no escape.

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CHAPTER XIII

TWO PROPOSALS

THREE days after her visit to the theatre with Sir Joseph Rayner, Joy Gargrave went north to Westmorland, accompanied by Miss La Farge. She was staying with old friends a few miles from the home of Sir James Bracknell at Harrow Fell, and her hostess, remembering Dick Bracknell's devotion to her, gossiped freely.

"You remember Sir James' eldest son, the one whom we used to say ran on your heels, Joy?"

"Yes," answered Joy, in a voice that was not very encouraging.

"He went to the dogs—all the way. There was a bad scandal, and though it was hushed up for Sir James' sake, Dick Bracknell had to run the country. No one knows where he is now or whether he is alive or dead, but it is thought the latter; anyway, we are all beginning to look on Geoffrey as the heir of Harrow Fell. He is coming over here at the week-end for the final grouse-shoot of the season, and Adrian Rayner is coming also. Your uncle fished for an invitation for him, and my husband could not very well refuse, you know. I fancy," she added with a knowing little laugh, "it isn't merely grouse he is after."

Joy gave no sign of understanding, but when the week-end arrived, bringing with it Adrian Rayner, she was left in no uncertainty as to her cousin's intentions. He haunted her steps. He was always at hand with assistance which she did not want; and when Geoffrey Bracknell also arrived, there was something like open rivalry between them. Her friend and hostess laughed.

"You will have a brace of proposals before the shoot is over, Joy."

"Not if I can help it," answered Joy quickly.

"You will not be able to help it," was the reply. "They are both determined young men and their minds are made up."

"So is mine," replied Joy.

Yet it was as her hostess said. On the day of the shoot, Geoffrey Bracknell walked with her across the moor towards the "butts" built of turf and behind which they were to wait for the driven birds. They reached her own shelter first, and as she dropped to an improvised seat, Geoffrey Bracknell halted and looked down at her.

"Miss Gargrave, there is—er—something that I want to say, and to—a—ask you."

She looked up and met his honest eyes, eyes that to her mind recalled not his brother, her husband, but the eyes of his cousin Corporal Bracknell of the Mounted Police. What she read there brought a quick flush to her face, and she hastily put up a protesting hand.

"Please, Mr. Bracknell, don't! Don't spoil our friendship!"

"Ah!" said the young man, his face paling a little, "you understand what I want. Is it really quite impossible?"

"Yes," she answered with directness, "it is quite impossible."

Geoffrey Bracknell whistled softly to himself. He had suffered a blow, but he strove to behave like a gentleman. "Then I am sorry to have troubled you, Miss Gargrave. Of course I knew that I was not—er—worthy—"

"Oh, it is not that," she intervened in a distressed voice. "It is—something else, it has nothing to do with you at all!"

"But it knocks me out!" he said trying to smile. "Well, it is the fortune of war. I suppose that I shall have to persuade the governor to let me go on a big game trip, now. That is, the proper thing to do under the circumstances, isn't it?"

Again she met his eyes, he was still smiling, but she could see the effort it required. She held out a hand impulsively.

"Geoffrey," she said, "don't let this spoil your life, or our friendship. I cannot now explain what makes my refusal imperative. Some day I may be able to, and when I can I shall tell you, if you are still my friend."

"Then you'll have to tell me," he said frankly, "for I shall always be that. Couldn't be anything else, you know.... But there's the head-

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keeper signalling; I must move on to my own butt. Good hunting!"

He laughed with forced lightness and walked away. Joy watched him go with pain at her heart. How like his cousin he was, and how unlike his brother! She felt very sorry for the boy, and the incident had disturbed her so much that she shot very badly. Again and again as the birds came driving towards her she either didn't fire or fired too late, but from the butt where Geoffrey Bracknell waited, the shots came at regular intervals, and she saw the birds drop every time. Then a covey of grouse came driving with the wind straight towards her neighbour's shelter. She waited. There was a sharp report, and a sudden cry, and the birds drove on. She looked towards the shelter. It was almost in a line with her own, and she could see something lying on the ground behind it. Another flock of birds drove down the wind, but there was no shot from Geoffrey Bracknell's gun. A sudden fear assailed her. Leaving her own gun resting against the turf wall, she ran towards the next butt. Before she reached it, she knew that something dreadful had happened, for she could see that the young man was lying on his back in the heather. She reached the shelter and a cry broke from her.

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White faced and still, with a ghastly wound in his right temple, Geoffrey Bracknell lay there, quite dead. As she looked at him, she had no doubt whatever about the matter, and a great agony surged up in her heart.

Had he—? Her eyes fell on the gun close by, and before the thought which had assailed her was completed she knew that it was groundless. The lock of the gun was blown out, and the base of both barrels was fractured. It had been an accident.

"Thank God," she whispered to herself, delivered from the fear which had assailed her, "it was not—"

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She dropped on her knees by his side and took his hand. It was already cold, as she raised it to her lips.

"Poor boy! Poor boy!"

She was in tears as she rose from her knees, and began to walk towards the next butt. The news spread quickly and the shoot was stopped, and the body was taken first to the village, and later in the day to Harrow Fell. And that night Joy's hostess, discussing the tragedy, set a problem before her, which kept her awake far into the night.

"Poor Sir James," she said. "He is left without a child, for as I told you no one knows anything at all about Dick Bracknell, and it doesn't matter very much whether he is alive or dead, to any one but his cousin Roger, for he can never return to England."

"To his cousin Roger," echoed Joy, visioning the corporal, "why should it matter to him?"

"Because if Dick is out of the way, Harrow Fell will pass to him on Sir James' death. The estates are entailed, you know."

Instantly Joy saw the difficulties of the situation. Dick Bracknell might be dead, or he might be very much alive. In the former case, the way was quite clear for his cousin; but in the latter, there were possibilities that filled her with dread. The corporal had left North Star in an endeavour to solve the mystery of the disappearance of his cousin's body. If Dick Bracknell were yet alive and he overtook him, he would probably try to effect his arrest, and if Dick resisted there might be trouble, and possibly Corporal Bracknell might be driven to have recourse to arms. Suppose he shot his cousin, and so, in innocence, cleared his own way to the succession of Harrow Fell? Her face clouded, and an anxious look came into her eyes. She was recalled to herself by her hostess's voice.

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"A penny for your thoughts, Joy."

Joy prevaricated a little. "I was thinking what a strange coil life is!" she answered.

"In what way?"

"Well, the last person I spoke to, before I left North Star to come to England, was Roger Bracknell!"

"Roger Bracknell!" echoed her hostess in surprise.

"Yes, he is in the Mounted Police, and, in the way of duty, he came to North Star, three days or so before I left."

"That is an odd coincidence," was the comment. "What did you think of him, my dear?"

Joy answered with reserve. "He seemed to be very nice—a gentleman, you know."

Her hostess smiled. "Yes, Roger is that—the right sort, as my husband would say. He, at any rate, will never disgrace the Bracknell clan, for he is at the opposite pole from his cousin Dick. What did he look like?"

"Like a mounter!" answered Joy quickly.

"A mounter! Don't talk slang, Joy. Interpret, please."

"Well," answered Joy smilingly, "a mounter is a member of the Royal North West Mounted Police, who are as fine a body of men as you may find from one end of the Empire to the other."

"And therefore Roger Bracknell is a fine man, hey?"

"He struck me as being so!" answered Joy composedly. Her friend glanced at her with shrewd eyes. "Hum!" she said. "You are very discreet, my dear Joy. Now you know that the truth is that Roger Bracknell is a man who takes the eye, a handsome man in fact, and why you should be reluctant to own up—"

"Own up! What do you mean?" interrupted Joy, her face growing suddenly scarlet.

"Nothing," laughed her friend, "except that Roger Bracknell is a man to whom few women could be as indifferent as you pretend to be. But I must cut this conversation short. There's Adrian Rayner looking for you, and coming this way. I'll send him on to you."

"Please don't," cried Joy; but her hostess only laughed, and as she walked towards the young man Joy fled to her room.

Late into the night she considered the possibilities which had presented themselves to her mind at the mention of Roger Bracknell's possible succession to Harrow Fell, and in the morning she rode to the post office in the neighbouring country town, and there dispatched two cablegrams, one to Roger Bracknell, care of the Police Commissioner at Regina, explaining to him the circumstances, and one to the Commissioner himself asking for the whereabouts of Corporal Bracknell, prepaying a reply. Three days later the reply reached her in London.

"Corporal Bracknell reported as missing. Supposed lost."

When she received it, she was greatly distressed, and rather hurriedly made up her mind to return at once to North Star. Why she should do so, she did not make clear even to herself; and when Adrian Rayner pressed her for her reason, she was covered with confusion.

"Joy," he protested, "you must not do anything so foolish. You have fulfilled the terms of your father's will to the letter, and now your place is here in England. We all want you here! I want you more than any one else on earth. Do you understand?"

She gave him no reply to the question, but he explained further, leaving her no room for doubt. "I love you, Joy. I loved you when you were here in England three years ago. I loved you at North Star. I love you more madly than ever, now. Will you marry me?"

"I can't," she said. "Don't press me, Adrian."

"But why can't you?" he asked ruthlessly. "At least you owe me a reason for refusal. I wonder if that reason has anything to do with this foolishness of returning to North Star."

She was a little startled by the acuteness of his conjecture, and did not immediately reply. He smiled a trifle grimly, and then continued. "If it has, you can dismiss that reason from your mind for good. Dick Bracknell is dead."

"Dick Bracknell! What—"

Her voice faltered as she met his gaze. "Yes," he answered. "Dick Bracknell, *alias* Koona Dick. He was your husband, wasn't he? You married him down at Alcombe, didn't you?"

"How do you know?" she asked quiveringly.

"That is a private matter," he replied. "Just as your marriage was private; and just as the manner of your husband's death must be kept private for the good of us all."

"What ... what do you mean, Adrian?" she asked in a trembling voice, her face ghastly with sudden terror.

"I mean that I know who shot Koona Dick," he answered slowly.

"Oh!" she gasped, her hand over her heart in a wild endeavour to stay its fierce beating. "Oh! what—what—"

"There is no need for you to be other than frank with me. I saw the whole thing. I saw you get that message. I followed you into the woods. You took a gun with you, and you hid in the trees where you could see your husband arrive. I saw the flame of your shot, and

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that same second Dick Bracknell fell in the snow. Mark you, I do not blame you. Dick Bracknell was worthless and—”

“But oh!” sobbed Joy with horror in her face. “You are mistaken. It is not true. I never—”

“Why try to bluff me, Joy? I say I saw you and if you were not the person who killed Dick Bracknell, why did you make no mention of what had occurred when you returned to the Lodge? That is not the way of innocence.”

Joy did not reply. Her face was buried in her hands and she was sobbing convulsively. Rayner looked at her with shrewd eyes, then after a moment resumed in an altered tone—

“As I have said, Joy, my dear, I do not blame you; I even went out of my way to help you that night.”

“You ... you went—”

“Exactly, I saw that policeman find Dick’s body, and afterwards leave it, and go towards the Lodge. I knew that things might be awkward if the truth came out, so I disposed of the body.”

“You disposed of the body?” She lifted her head suddenly, and through her tears looked at him incredulously.

“Yes,” he answered airily. “It is difficult to prove a crime if there is no evidence of it, so I removed the material evidence, to the utter confusion of any theory that Corporal Bracknell might have formed.”

“But how? What—”

“I carried it away, and dropped it through an ice-hole in the river. It will never be found until the ice breaks up in the spring, and then it is not at all likely. I took a little risk, I know; but I did it for your sake, believe me, Joy, quite as much as for my own.”

“I do not understand how it affected you,” faltered the girl.

“Perhaps not,” answered Rayner suavely. “But you have heard the reason. I loved you. I wanted to marry you, even at that time I wanted you; for I recognized that you were distraught when you—”

“Oh please! Please! Do not say it!” she cried.

“Very well,” he answered. “I will not. But you understand the position, and I think you will agree that knowing what I know there are not a great number of men who would wish to marry you.”

“And why should you?” she asked quickly.

“Again because I love you.”

She sat there in silence, staring absently at a vase of chrysanthemums on the table, and seeing them not at all. In her mind she was again living through the horror of that night at North Star, searching for something that would give the lie to Adrian Rayner’s statement. And suddenly she remembered something. That sled which had halted in the wood. Who had been with it? Her gaze moved quickly from the vase to her cousin’s face, and on it she surprised a cynical, calculating look that stirred deep distrust in her.

“You say you dropped Dick Bracknell’s body through the ice? It was rather a long way to the river. How did you get it there?”

For one second Rayner hesitated. He was not sure of the bearing of the question, but after the brief hesitation he answered, “I carried it, of course.”

Joy had marked the hesitation, and to her came the swift realization that he was lying. She marked his slim form, and remembered Dick Bracknell’s height and bulk, and the sudden conviction deepened. But she gave no hint of it to Rayner, who stood watching her, sure that he could bend her to his will. She offered no comment on his reply, but thoughtfully twisted a ring upon her finger, while her mind sought for a way out of her immediate difficulty.

“Well, Joy,” he asked, “you will marry me?”

She rose abruptly from her chair. “No,” she said on a sudden impulse. “Not on the evidence of Dick’s death that you offer. I cannot consider—”

“You are not wise!” he interrupted. “You are in my hands, remember.”

“Oh, but you mistake me,” she cried. “I am not saying that I will never marry you. I am only saying that the evidence of Dick’s death is not sufficiently convincing.” She lifted a hand as he would have interrupted her. “No! Let me finish. When we left Corporal Bracknell at North Star, he knew that I was Dick’s wife, and he undertook to find out what had become of Dick’s body. There was

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some one else in the woods at North Star that night, some one who probably witnessed all that occurred. That person, I fancy, Roger Bracknell means to find. And when I have heard that man's story—"

"You shall certainly hear it, for I will find that man myself. I will drag him across the world to tell it to you."

He spoke vehemently, passionately, but in his bearing there was something besides vehemence and passion. His face had gone white, and in his eyes was a furtive look. Joy noticed these signs, but gave no indication of having done so.

"You!" she cried, "you will go? What will you be able to do?"

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"Yes," he answered sharply. "I will go. I will do what your bungling corporal has not been able to do. I will bring you proof of Dick Bracknell's death. I will find that man who was in the wood, if there was a man—"

"There is no question of that," she broke in. "I found his trail, and Corporal Bracknell found it too. I believe he followed it—"

"Ah!"

The expression on Rayner's face, as the interjection broke from him, was one of mingled chagrin and fear. Joy noticed it, and it set her wondering again. Then quite suddenly she remembered something. Roger Bracknell had asked her if Adrian Rayner knew of her marriage with her cousin. She had answered that he did not, but he had known all the time! The significance of the question had not made itself felt at the time, but now it broke on her with startling force, and Rayner saw that something had happened to which he had no clue.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

"Nothing!" she answered evasively. "But in view of all the circumstances I think I shall return to North Star myself before long."

He was about to reply when there came an interruption. Miss La Farge entered the room.

"The car is waiting, Joy, and we are behind time. We really must be going if Mr. Rayner can excuse you."

"Right, Babette. Cousin Adrian was just about to go, as we have finished our discussion, I believe."

Rayner nodded. "Yes," he said. "We have finished, and I am going. But I shall see you again, Joy, very shortly, certainly before I go to the North."

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Joy nodded and making his adieu Adrian Rayner passed out of the room.

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CHAPTER XIV

MISSING

“**M**R. RAYNER is going to the North?” questioned Miss La Farge.

“Yes, he is going to Canada—and so am I, as early as possible. You will not mind accompanying me, Babette.”

“Mind! I shall be more than glad to get back to the silent North. This noisy London gets on my nerves, and the smell of the streets is horrible. It is petrol everywhere. The place reeks of it, and after the aromatic spruce woods the air here is like poison. I shall rejoice to go, and to hear the bell of the moose again in place of hideous motor horns.”

She looked at Joy, as she spoke, and there was a question in her eyes. Joy nodded.

“Yes, I will tell you why we go. My cousin Adrian has just asked me to marry him—”

“Indeed! But I am not surprised. The signs of the weather have been unmistakable for a little time. And of course he does not know of Dick Bracknell!”

“But he does! He has known all the time. He even stooped to use his knowledge so as to bring pressure upon me.”

“How shameful!”

“Yes! But that is of small moment. Don’t you see the significance of the fact that he had knowledge of my marriage? He was aware of it all the time, and as you know he made love to me. Even at North Star—”

“Yes! Yes! But you do not think that he fired the shot which—”

“I do not know what to think! I am going to find out. Of one thing I am sure, and that is that cousin Adrian is afraid of what Corporal Bracknell may discover. And Corporal Bracknell has disappeared. He may have learned much that I want to know, and something may have befallen him. He may even be dead, but if he is alive we must find him before Cousin Adrian does. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I think I do! You have grown afraid of what Mr. Rayner may do.”

“I do not trust him. I cannot after—” She broke off. “I am my own mistress now. There is no need that I should consult any one as to my comings and goings. We will go down to the steamship offices at once. We will not waste even a moment.”

An hour later they entered the office of a famous shipping company in Cockspur Street, and there inquired for a boat sailing for the Dominion.

“There is the *Argonaut*. She sails from Liverpool in three days. I believe there are vacancies.” The clerk turned away and presently came back with a list in his hand.

“The accommodation is limited, I find. There are only a couple of cabins-de-luxe—”

“We will take them!” said Joy promptly.

“Thank you! What names, Miss?”

The names were given, and within ten minutes the transaction was completed, and Joy left the office with the tickets in her handbag. Just as her car started a taxi approached from the opposite direction, almost collided with it, and it was only by a decidedly dangerous swerve that an accident was averted. The taxi-driver glanced round at his passenger as if expecting a rebuke, but to his relief the man was leaning far back in the corner as if anxious to avoid observation. The vehicle drew up at the shipping offices, and the passenger left the taxi and entered the offices. He was Adrian Rayner.

The clerk who had completed Joy’s business attended to him and listened to his request.

“Sorry, sir! The last two cabins on the *Argonaut* have just been taken. There isn’t a vacant berth in the ship.”

Rayner considered. He had not the slightest doubt that Joy Gargrave and her foster-sister had taken those cabins, for he had

seen them leaving the offices. A dark frown came on his face, which the clerk misinterpreted for disappointment. An idea occurred to him.

"You are in a hurry, sir?" he inquired

"Yes," answered Rayner shortly.

"Well, sir, if I may venture to suggest it to you, the *Maple Leaf* sails at six o'clock from Southampton. She is not a full boat, and if there is a train you might yet catch her."

"Look at the time table, quick!" was the reply. The clerk obeyed. "There is a train in three quarters of an hour, sir. It is a slow train, but it is due in Southampton five and twenty minutes before sailing time. You should be able to do it easily, sir."

"Then I'll book a cabin, please. As quick as you can. I've some luggage to pack."

A few minutes later he left the office, and raced to his chambers, where he kept the taxi waiting whilst he packed a small portmanteau. Then he rang up Sir Joseph Rayner at the office. It was the head clerk's voice that replied.

"No, Mr. Adrian, Sir Joseph is out. He will not return today. Any message, sir?"

"Yes. Let him know somehow that I'm going to America this evening. Tell him I will write, and—er—Benson—remember that this piece of news is strictly private."

"Yes, Mr. Adrian."

He hung up the receiver, lit a cigar, and five minutes after was on his way to Waterloo.

"What are you going to do, Joy, when we land?" As she asked the question, Miss La Farge turned from contemplating the greyness of the winter seascape and looked at her foster-sister.

"I am going straight through to Regina to find out if anything has been heard of Roger Bracknell. If they have no news of him at the barracks, then we will go North and ourselves try and learn what has befallen him. He may have news for me, as I certainly have news for him."

"Do you mean that we shall set out to search for him?"

"Just that, Babette. We know that he was going up the river, and I have a fancy he was following a trail which I myself noticed. You and I know the country well, and with the Indian George, we could look for him. At least we may learn something about him."

"Yes," replied Babette thoughtfully. "And if we find him, as you say, he may have news. You may learn what really happened to your hus—"

"Please! Please, Babette. Don't call Dick Bracknell that. I can't bear to think that I am bound to him at all."

"No, and if he is dead, you are released! What do you really think, Joy?"

"I am in doubt. I have always been in doubt since that night. It was so strange that he should disappear. Sometimes I hope that —" She stopped, and after a pause continued, "It seems too dreadful a thing to say, but I cannot help feeling it. Dick Bracknell behaved shamefully to me. Apart from all that has happened since, I can never forgive the humiliation of my marriage. It is the simple truth that I should be glad to know that I was free, even if it were by Dick's death. But I cannot feel that he is dead. Something tells me that he is alive. That we shall yet meet—"

"I devoutly hope not," broke in Babette fervently, "for if we do I shall be tempted to—to—"

"To what?" asked Joy sharply.

"To shoot him myself," answered the other grimly.

"Babette!"

"Oh, you need not look so shocked," continued Babette. "You and I have lived in the North, and we know that justice does not always follow the forms of law. And what is it that man Kipling says, 'There's never a Law of God or man runs North of fifty-three.' We're North of fifty-three at North Star, and a law unto ourselves. If Dick Bracknell is still alive, and came worrying you, I think that I could —"

"Babette, you must not say it."

"Very well, I will not. But all the same I feel that I could, for the

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man is worthless, mere vermin like the wolves in the North. And that woman Lady Alcombe, of whom you told me—”

“She is dead! I learned that in England. She was killed in a motor accident.”

“It was too merciful an end for her!” said Babette quickly. “She ought to have lived to feel remorse gnawing at her heart day by day and hour by hour—”

“Lady Alcombe was not the kind of woman to suffer that way,” said Joy slowly. “She had no heart.... But here comes the rain. We shall have to go below.”

Nine days later Joy Gargrave walked across the snow to the headquarters of the Mounted Police at Regina, and asked, to see the Commissioner. He, as it appeared, was absent, and the only official immediately available was an inspector, a pleasant soldier-like man in the early thirties. To him she addressed her question.

“Can you tell me anything as to the whereabouts of Corporal Bracknell?”

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The inspector looked up from her card, and flashed a keen glance at her, then shook his head.

“I am sorry, Miss Gargrave. We should be glad of news of Bracknell ourselves. He went on a journey several weeks ago, and a patrol that has come through the district where he was likely to be has heard nothing of him, though a sled was found which was unquestionably his. There were the bones of dogs also, so that things look rather black. The timber-wolves may have got him. Reports from two or three districts state they have been very savage this winter.”

Joy’s face went white, but she kept herself in hand.

“Still I suppose there is a possibility that he may have escaped?”

“A bare possibility,” answered the inspector in a voice that betrayed he had little hope. Then he asked suddenly, “I wonder why you wish to find him, Miss Gargrave?”

Joy flushed at the question which to her seemed to border on impertinence.

“It is a private matter,” she answered shortly.

“Please do not be offended, Miss Gargrave. I had a reason for asking. You are the second person to make inquiry about Corporal Bracknell this week.”

“Indeed?” said Joy, growing suddenly alert.

“Yes, a gentleman came here with the same question four days ago.”

“Did you see him? Would you mind telling me what he was like?”

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The inspector laughed. “There is no reason why I should not, as it is not a police matter. I can do better than give you his description. I can give you his name, for I have his card somewhere.” He fumbled among some papers on the desk, and in a moment found what he sought. “Here it is! Adrian Rayner, Albany Chambers, London.”

“Adrian Rayner!”

As Joy echoed the name, the inspector glanced at her keenly. “You knew him?”

“Yes,” she replied slowly. “He is my cousin—”

“Indeed!” said the officer politely, and then added, “Mr. Rayner was anxious to learn where Corporal Bracknell was, but on learning that Bracknell was missing, he did not seem greatly perturbed. I gathered that Mr. Rayner was a lawyer and that it was on legal business that he wished to see Bracknell.”

To Joy it seemed as if the inspector was openly fishing for information, and for one brief moment she hesitated. Should she take him into her confidence, and tell him all? She was strongly tempted to do so, but in the end decided against it.

“Yes,” she said, rising from her chair, “he is a lawyer, and as Corporal Bracknell’s cousin has been killed in England, it is possible that legal business had brought him here. I am greatly obliged to you, Inspector Graham.” She paused, and then added, “I have a little request to make. If you receive any news of Corporal Bracknell will you send it to me at North Star?”

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“Yes,” answered the inspector. “But I am afraid you will be some time in receiving it.” He smiled. “As you know, it is something more than a crow’s flight from here to your home.”

"I was thinking of a special courier," said Joy quickly. "There will be men to be found, and the expense is nothing to me."

"Very well," answered the inspector, "I will see that you get whatever news reaches us at the earliest moment! We of the force are too much indebted to your late father and yourself to refuse a trifling request of that kind. There is nothing else that I can do for you, Miss Gargrave?"

Again Joy hesitated. Should she tell him what she thought was the real object of Adrian Rayner's journey? Sitting there in that quiet room, she suddenly felt that her suspicions would sound ridiculous if put into words. After all, she had so very little to go upon.

"Thank you! There is nothing."

A moment later, Inspector Graham stood at his window watching her cross the snow. He smiled a little to himself.

"Um!" he muttered, "if Bracknell is still alive he is in the way of being a lucky fellow."

Ten minutes later Joy found Miss La Farge in their room at the hotel.

"Babette," she said, "we shall have to hurry. Adrian Rayner is already here. He is four days ahead of us. We must leave Regina within an hour."

"Yes," answered her foster-sister, "as Mr. Rayner is evidently in a hurry, we must hurry also. Is there any news of Corporal Bracknell?"

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"None, except that his sled has been found."

"Ah! That is bad, very bad!"

"You must not think that, Babette," cried Joy a little wildly. "We must search. I will not give up hope. I will find him."

Her voice quivered and broke, and suddenly she buried her face in her hands. Miss La Farge looked at her for a moment with eyes brimming with sympathy. Then she took a step forward and placed her hand on her foster-sister's shoulder.

"Joy, my dear, what is the corporal to you?"

"To me," Joy looked up with confusion in her bearing. "How can he be anything to me? How can any man——"

"Yet if we do not find him, it will be very bitter?"

"As bitter as death!" answered Joy, hiding her face once more.

"Then we must certainly find him," answered Miss La Farge gravely. "And by way of a start, I will talk to the clerk about trains."

She turned and passed from the room, leaving her foster-sister in tears. After a little time Joy looked up. An absent gaze came in her tear-stained eyes.

"If I only knew!" she whispered to herself, "if I only knew!"

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CHAPTER XV

AN ENCOUNTER AT THE LODGE

IT WAS MID-DAY, and as they marched between the high banks on a hard trail, Joy Gargrave's heart grew light.

"Another hour, Babette, and we shall be home."

"Yes," was the reply, "home! That is what North Star is to us, and I wonder you ever left it, Joy."

"I was afraid," answered Joy. "Dick Bracknell's letter startled me. He plainly meant to assert himself and I was glad of Sir Joseph's summons to England, because it helped me to get away from the complications here."

"It does not matter much where one goes," answered Babette philosophically, "one carries one's real complications with her. Here or there—what matters? The heart is ever the same."

"Yes, that is true," answered Joy, thinking of the complications of her own life. "We are the victims of our emotions quite as much as of circumstances."

"Of our inexperience more than our emotions, I should say," answered Babette— "of our inexperience and the ruthlessness of those who are prepared to take advantage of them. But here, better than in most places, we can live our own life, untrammelled, and for the most part free from the worser cares. This lodge of ours is like a sanctuary in the wilderness, and the serenity, the woods, the snow and the silences have their own healing for the troubles of life."

"Yes, but there is something to be said for companionship with one's own kind. I notice we are always a little excited when we have callers at the Lodge. We——"

A rifle shot cracked in on her words, and before either of them could speak again, a moose broke suddenly from the woods, and plunged down the steep bank not five hundred yards ahead of them. The wolf-dogs in the sleds gave tongue, and notwithstanding the burden behind them, leaped forward. Joy laughed gaily.

"There's an end of philosophic reflection. The moose is hit. I wonder who——"

A man emerged from the woods, dropped on one knee, and sighted the wide-horned beast. Then his shot rang, and the moose toppled over in the snow. The hunter stood up and caught sight of the oncoming party. He scrutinized it carefully for a moment and then waved his hand.

"It is George," cried Babette, naming an Indian servant. "See, he recognizes us."

The hunter descended the bank, and instead of going to inspect his kill waited for them to come up. As they did so a smile crumpled his grave copper-coloured face.

"How!" he said. "Very glad to see you, Miss Joy and Miss Babette. My words are not as my heart, for my tongue is not easy of speech. But glad am I to behold you, glad as if your coming were the breath of the south spring wind upon the cheek."

Joy laughed with pleasure. "Not more glad than are we, George. And you must not belittle that tongue of yours. If you only knew it you talk poetry. But tell me, how are things at the Lodge? All right, I hope, and Nanette and the papoose, they are well?"

"They are well," answered the Indian. "But we dwell not alone. With us are Rayner and two men of the Kwikpak tribe. They are bad men."

"Rayner!" as she echoed the name Joy's eyes flashed fire.

"Yes, with two bad men of the Kwikpak tribe."

"When did they arrive?" asked Joy quickly.

"At nightfall five days ago. They were very weary, having followed the trail hard and long. Rayner brought word from you that he stay to look for some man, but he brought no word of your coming."

"No, I dare say not," answered Joy sharply. "He would not expect us so soon. We also have pushed the trail hard. What has Mr. Rayner been doing since he arrived, George?"

"The first day he rest and smoke and ask many questions."

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"Questions? About what?"

"He asked if Nanette or I have beheld two men, one of whom is Corporal Bracknell, who took the Northward trail when you went southward. He ask if we have seen him since that time, and I answer no, for it is the truth, and Rayner he smile to himself as is the way of a man with a hidden thought."

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"And the second man of whom he asked?"

"I know him not!" answered the Indian, "neither him nor the name of Dick which he bore."

"Dick!" Joy swung round to her companion. "You hear, Babette. He asks after Dick, whose body, as he told me, he had thrust into an ice-hole. I thought when he told me that he lied and now I know."

She turned to the Indian again. "And the other days?"

"The other days," answered the Indian gravely, "he drink much brandy and a little coffee, and the two bad men they go on a journey and return yesterday. They bring news I think, for at dawn tomorrow they depart with Rayner."

"No! Not tomorrow," cried Joy, "but this very day."

"That will be as you desire, mistress. When we return——"

"Where are they going? Do you know, George?"

"They take the Northward trail. Rayner tell me that when he have drunk much brandy. 'From North Star to the North Star we go,' he say, 'you old graven image, and when we come back the girl shall be ours!' I do not understand such words, for there is no girl there, but such are the words that Rayner speak."

Joy looked at Babette. "He knows something," she said.

"Yes," answered her foster-sister, "but there is one thing he does not know, and that is a woman's heart. He surely cannot hope——"

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"I do not know what he may hope. I know what I shall do. My cousin Adrian is intolerable in his pretensions."

"What will you do, Joy? I begin to fancy that away from the restraints of civilization Adrian Rayner is possibly a dangerous man. And we are 'North of fifty-three!'"

"I do not care. I am not afraid. There is, as you once hinted, the law of the wilderness, and at least I will be mistress in my own house." She turned to her servant. "We will leave you one of the sleds, George. You will then be able to bring some of the meat home. I will talk with you again when you arrive."

She gave orders for one team to push on and one to remain, then as she and her foster-sister recommenced their march she spoke again.

"I wonder why Adrian Rayner has lingered so long at North Star?"

"He has evidently been using the Lodge as his headquarters whilst he made the necessary inquiries. Also there is another possibility," answered Babette.

"And what is that?"

"I have a thought that he may be desirous of assuring himself that you have arrived here. It is only a possibility, but it is there."

"I do not see why——"

"Why do you suppose he wished to marry you?" asked Babette quickly. "Because he loved you? Possibly! But you are a rich woman, and I think that may have more to do with the question than you have yet thought. It may have more to do with his journey here than anything else. Have you made a will, Joy?"

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"No!" answered Joy quickly. "I have never thought of it. My uncle never suggested it to me."

"That is not surprising," was the answer. "After Dick Bracknell, your uncle is your next of kin. He and your cousin are your only blood relatives. Without a will, your marriage being unknown, your estate would fall to them if you were to die."

Joy's face showed a dawning horror. "Oh, but my uncle——"

"Your uncle is human, Joy, and what is more he has his difficulties. Whilst we were at Claridge's I overheard two men talking. I said nothing to you at the time, regarding it as mere gossip, but they were discussing Sir Joseph, and one of them said that he had gathered some confounded bad eggs during the last year or two, and that he must be very rich to stand it. Supposing he is not very rich. Supposing the bad eggs are more than he can stand. Then your money——"

"But I cannot think that of my uncle, Babette; it is monstrous."

"Of your uncle. No! Perhaps not! But your cousin is another matter. Let us suppose that he knows of Sir Joseph's losses. We know he is not scrupulous. Knowing of your marriage to Dick Bracknell, he paid you attention. He asked you to marry him. He even stooped to threats, as you told me. Why? Because he wanted to be able to control your fortune, to keep the money, some of which was badly needed. You may shake your head, Joy, but that is at least a possibility; and that is why I suggest that it is possible that Adrian Rayner may be desirous of assuring himself of your arrival here. You are beginning to know him; do you think that after his attempt to lure you into a bigamous marriage, and after his threats, that he will be at all chary of using any means that circumstances may offer of putting him in possession of your fortune? I do not! And he has been drinking, if what George says is true; and drink makes a tempted man dangerous. You must be careful, Joy, even diplomatic if necessary."

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"I shall order him to leave North Star the moment we arrive there!" answered Joy stubbornly. "If there is a shadow of truth in your surmises, there is all the more reason why I should do so."

"You will do as you please, Joy," replied her foster-sister, breaking into a smile, "and at any rate we have the big battalions on our side. With the drivers and George, and George's son, Jim, we shall be able to enforce your will."

"And I shall do so," answered Joy. "Here I am strong enough to disregard his threats."

As it happened, the first person they encountered when they left the river trail and swung into the clearing which led to the Lodge, was Adrian Rayner. He was walking towards the river, with a rifle in the crook of his arm, and as he saw them swinging towards him, he halted suddenly, and remained quite still, until Joy reached him. The look on his face betrayed his surprise, and to Joy it was clear that he had not expected to encounter her before his departure from the lodge. He stood there a little nonplussed and it was Joy who spoke first.

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"You have not wasted time, Cousin Adrian," she said, and there was an unmistakable edge to her tones.

"No," he answered with an awkward laugh. "I promised you I would find that man who was in the wood when you shot your husband—"

"No!" she interrupted sharply, "not when I did, but when you shot my husband!"

There was accusation in her eyes, her voice, and Rayner visibly quailed before it. Then he cried—

"What confounded nonsense is this?"

"It is not nonsense," she answered. "It is at least a possibility. You were in the wood that night, and you had a rifle with you. There were two shots, and one of them hit Dick Bracknell. One of those shots came from my rifle, but from whose rifle did the second come? Yours! I say."

"Mine!" he cried harshly. "You must be mad. You cannot have thought over what you are saying."

"No," she countered, "I am not mad, I am quite sane, and I have thought a great deal over the matter."

"But why should I shoot Dick Bracknell masquerading as Koon Dick? He was not my husband?"

"No," replied Joy coolly, "but he was mine, and you had somehow become aware of the fact. If I am not mistaken, you yourself aspired to marry me—"

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"Men *are* sometimes smitten with madness," he interposed sneeringly. "But there is another possibility that I can suggest to you, of which you do not seem to have thought. That precious corporal who was here; he had a gun! Also, I fancy that he would find the death of Dick Bracknell no heartbreaking business, as it would bring him within a step of the succession to Harrow Fell; and as Jeff Bracknell is now dead, it puts him absolutely on the doorstep. Have you thought of that?"

"There is no need that I should," answered Joy promptly. "Roger Bracknell had no knowledge that the man whom he knew as Koon Dick was his cousin, until he picked up a note which Dick had written to me, which was some time after the firing had taken place. I know that, and your suggestion is merely preposterous."

"You think so," he laughed. "I wonder why?" Something in his tones brought the blood flaming to Joy Gargrave's face. Her eyes flashed indignantly. Rayner laughed again brutally.

"Not that there is any need for wonder," he said maliciously. "You seem to be in great vogue with the Bracknells. It must be a family weakness for—"

"How dare you?" She took a step forward, and suddenly raised the dog whip in her hand. Rayner backed quickly, and instinctively raised his hand. But the long lash smote him on the face, and he gave vent to a savage oath.

"You—virago! Would you?"

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He had lost complete control of himself, and what would have happened is only to be conjectured, but at that moment the Indian George stepped quietly from behind some tall bushes. He still carried his rifle, and though there was an impassive look on his brown face, his eyes were blazing. The white man saw him, and as he met those eyes, the wrath in him was checked. The Indian spoke no word, but very deliberately opened the breech of his rifle, as if to assure himself that it was loaded. Then he closed it and looked at Rayner again, and at that second look the white man shivered, for in it he saw something threatening and ominous, which unsealed the springs of fear within him. Joy was the first to speak.

"George," she said, addressing her henchman, "Mr. Rayner takes the trail in an hour. Anything he needs for his journey he is to have; but he goes within the hour, and never again is he to visit North Star. Do you understand?"

The Indian nodded his head in grave assent, and without another look at Adrian Rayner, Joy turned and went up the road towards the house.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE CORPORAL HEARS NEWS

DURING the weeks of his convalescence in Chief Louis' smoking tepee, Roger Bracknell spent much of his time in reflecting on the news which the chief had given him. Reviewing the story calmly and dispassionately, he could find nothing to weaken the conclusion which the half-breed himself had reached. The dynamite and the winter thunder, with the description of the broken trail and the strange conduct of the unknown man in deliberately over-running Rolf Gargrave's camp, were almost conclusive evidence. Some one had planned that Rolf Gargrave should die; and his death had been as surely a murder as if the man who had planned it had taken a rifle with which to do the deed. Who was the man?

As often as he asked himself this question, the corporal found his thoughts reverting to his cousin. Had Dick Bracknell, having married Rolf Gargrave's daughter, deliberately planned the murder of the millionaire? His heart revolted at the thought, but he could not escape from it. Dick had been hard pressed. He was already a fugitive from justice when he had arrived in the North and, so far as the corporal knew, that arrival had been a secret one. He would be quite unknown—even to Rolf Gargrave. No one would suspect him, and the plan he had chosen was itself so novel, that but for the Indians noticing his absence from the camp, and carrying the sticks of dynamite back to Chief Louis, it must have escaped detection.

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The more the corporal thought of it, the more black seemed the case against his cousin. Rolf Gargrave was a clever man, and powerful, and he had had his own plans for his daughter. Dick Bracknell must have known that when he heard how Joy had been trapped into marriage, he would be very wrathful, and calculating on the father's intervention he must have decided to get rid of him, in the hope of sooner or later trading upon Joy's inexperience of the world. One day, whilst he was reflecting on the problem, unable to touch certainty anywhere, a thought occurred to him, and when Chief Louis entered the tepee he promptly asked a question—

"Louis, when was it that the stranger called at your camp for guides to help him to find Rolf Gargrave? I mean what time of the year was it?"

The chief considered for a moment. Then he answered gravely. "It was two moons before ze ice break up."

"You are sure?" asked the corporal.

"Certain!"

"That would be March or a little later," said the corporal thoughtfully. "And Dick fled from England about Christmas. If he came straight through he might do it comfortably."

"Dick! Who ees dat?" asked the chief quickly.

"He is the one man I know who may have been interested in Rolf Gargrave's death. You may have heard of him? He is known in the North as Koona Dick!"

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"I hav' not him seen, unless he vas ze stranger mans who come to my camp dat day. But of him I hav' heard. He is bad mans, he want shooting. He sell whiskey—mooch whiskey, to ze Porcupine Sticks, an' dey fight till seven be dead in ze snow. Also he take their catch of fur for ze whiskey, an' when ze winter it come, dey freeze, an' ze babes die. Yes, of him, I have heard, an' he is very bad mans. So he is ze mans dat come to my lodges dat day, an' dat blow up ze trail for Rolf Gargrave so dat he die."

"I have not said so yet," answered the corporal thoughtfully, "but I am afraid that there can be little question of it. Some day when I meet him I shall put the question to him plainly, and learn the truth."

"You know dis mans, Koona Dick?"

"Yes! He is my cousin."

As he received the information the half-breed flashed a quick glance of sympathy.

"Le diable!" he said. "Dat is strange. But so it does befall. One pup of ze litter he ees a good dog, and he grows to ze collar-work

naturally; but anoder he is bad, he snarl like ze wolf, he is a thief, he will not do ze work. So is it with ze sled-dogs and with men! It is passing strange, but I hev' often beheld it, and it is so!"

The corporal nodded his assent. He had often wondered at the crooked strain which had sent his cousin on wild courses to dishonour, but could find no consolation in the thought that given certain circumstances the way of dishonour was almost inevitable. He rose from the couch of skins, and moving stiffly towards the fire, thrust in a spruce twig, and with it lit his pipe. Then he turned to the chief.

"I wonder how soon I shall be able to take the trail, Louis?"

The half-breed shook his head. "Not yet. Ze leg dat hav' been broken, it is not good for snow-shoe work. No! It ache like le diable! You must wait—wait till ze ice break up, then you go down ze river in a canoe. Dat will be ze easy way. Yes."

A mutinous look came on Roger Bracknell's face. Having so long lived an active life, he was growing tired of the monotony of the encampment, and as he felt the strength returning to his leg was more and more inclined to make the attempt to reach civilization as represented by the police-post. There was news to send to Joy Gargrave, news that might profoundly affect her life, and it was desirable that she should receive it at the earliest possible moment.

"I do not think that I shall wait until then, Louis. They will give me up for lost, at the post, and besides I have news for a certain person—"

"Is the news good?" interrupted the chief. For a moment the corporal did not reply. Was the news he had to send Joy Gargrave good? In one way, yes! It would suffice to remove any lingering doubt as to the effect of the shot that she had fired when she had gone to meet Dick Bracknell in the wood. He would be able to assure her, on the evidence of Dick himself, that she was not responsible for the mischief that had been done. That assurance, as he knew, would mean the lifting of a weight of apprehension from Joy's heart. In another way, however, the news was bad. Dick Bracknell was still alive, and that meant that she was still bound to him, and that on the first favourable opportunity he might assert himself. His mind was still balancing the good and evil of the case, when Louis, who had been watching his face, spoke again.

"There is no need to speak. Ze news it is not good! Therefore there is not any cause for haste. Ill news does not grow worse for keeping, and the trail it is bad these days, for there is mooch snow."

"Nevertheless, I shall make the endeavour, Louis! I will borrow a man and a dog team and meat from you, and in one week I will take the trail. If I find it too much for me, I can return."

The chief nodded. "As you please. Ze dogs are yours, also ze meat an ze mans, though ze hunters are from ze camp just now. But if you mus' go, you mus'. It is le diable in ze race that drives you forth, corp'ral."

"The devil in the race?" laughed Bracknell. "I do not understand, Louis. What do you mean?"

"I mean ze unrest that dwells in ze men of your tribe. It drives them forth, for good or ill, to ze conquest of ze lands. It makes them seek ze stick which runs through ze earth—"

"The pole, you mean, Louis."

"Ze pole, yes! And when got, what good? It makes them dat they cannot sit by ze fires in warm tepees, but must go hunt ze bald-faced bear, or dig ze frozen earth for gold dat somewhere white squaw may fling it from ze window."

"Yes!" laughed the corporal. "You put the truth—rather brutally. We are rather given that way. But it isn't the devil, Louis, it is the genius and instinct of our race for conquest that drives us—that and the dream of the home-woman, I suppose."

Chief Louis nodded. "Oui! maybe; and you haf' ze dream corp'ral."

Corporal Bracknell stopped his perambulation of the hut, and stared at his companion.

"Now how the dickens do you know that, Louis?"

"I have seen it in your eyes. You speak of Rolf Gargrave, an' twice, only twice you hav' speak of Gargrave's daughter, but there were dreams in ze eyes then, and a soft note in ze voice, and I know dat she is what you call ze home-woman. Oui! I know dat is so."

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The corporal's face flushed, and he did not deny it. For one moment as he stood there, he had a vision of Joy Gargrave, young and beautiful and a fit mate for any man, and in that moment there were dreams in his eyes. Three seconds later realities asserted themselves, and the soft light died from his eyes. He gave a little bitter laugh, and without speaking resumed his perambulations. Chief Louis watched him for a moment then he said tentatively, "There be difficulties ahead, corp'ral."

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"Yes," nodded Bracknell, "grave difficulties! What would you do, Louis, if you wanted a maid to wife?"

"I should offer a large price—blankets, guns, tobac!"

Roger Bracknell laughed at the notion of offering a large price for Joy Gargrave, and then mooted the real difficulty.

"But if it was not a matter of price, Louis, rather of another man! What then?"

"Then I would him fight. Always maidens are caught with strength. They love a man. Dat is ze law of life and of mating. Ze strong wolf in ze pack he hav' ze pick an' ze strong bull-moose he hav' ze herd; an' ze strong man he take ze maid. I have looked on ze world and so is it! Yes! Love like all dings else is ze spoil of ze strong!"

Bracknell did not reply for a moment. In that hour the law of the primeval wilds appealed to him strongly, but he knew that it was not the way for him.

"Yes," he said, "it is the law of the wilds, but not of my race. I carry a law that is the law of man, and he who kills whether for love or hate dies therefor. The thing is impossible!"

Chief Louis grunted disapprobation. "Ze law of ze wild is better. For dat reason I dwell in ze lodges of my mother's people, where ze strong rule."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe, and without adding more passed out of the tepee. Roger Bracknell still continued his perambulations, exercising his injured leg, and as he walked his mind was busy with what he felt was to become the problem of his life. He loved Joy Gargrave. He confessed it frankly to himself. He had loved her since that day when in the woods at North Star she had offered him her hand as a token that she counted him among her friends! But what good was it? The whole thing was so hopeless so long as Dick Bracknell lived. And if he died, would the outlook be any the less hopeless? He could not tell, but he was afraid not; for friendship was not love, and Joy Gargrave, as he was sure, was not a woman to give her affection easily.

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As he thought despair gripped him, and the tepee's skin walls seemed too narrow a prison-house. He threw on his fur coat and mittens and went outside. Driven by his thoughts, he left the encampment, and, walking stiffly, moved down the river trail. He had walked perhaps a mile and a half, when out of the woods broke a couple of laden sledges, and two men of the tribe. They were from the hunters, and as they passed they saluted him gravely, according to the manner of their race.

"How! How!"

He responded in kind, and continued to walk on. He had proceeded but a little way however when a thought occurred to him. These men had been away on the main river. They might have news of the outer world. Instantly as the thought came to him, he turned in his tracks and began to return to the encampment. When he reached there the two hunters were not to be seen, but when he entered his own tepee he found Chief Louis sitting by the fire, smoking. There was an impassive look on his face, but in his eyes was a light that could not be hidden, and the white man knew that the chief was excited. The corporal did not remark upon the fact, however, but deliberately filled his pipe, and seating himself, smoked on as if he had noticed nothing. After a little time Louis spoke.

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"Ze hunters they hav' sent meat, mooch meat!"

"Yes," answered Bracknell. "I met two men of the tribe just now."

"There is meat for a potlach (feast), but dat is not ze way of my people. We are not as ze wolves which eat all, even ze bones, an' then run hungry until a new kill is made."

"There is much wisdom in such prudence," answered Bracknell, wondering when the half-breed would unfold his news.

"It is ze way of ze white mans, and it is ze way of ze wise,

therefore do we eat and leave meat that we may eat again."

The corporal nodded, but said nothing, and after a pause Chief Louis spoke again. "Of ze two men you met, one was Sibou."

"Ah! Sibou, who with Paslik went as guide with the stranger who wished to overtake Rolf Gargrave?"

"Oui! Sibou, who went with ze stranger mans who blow ze bottom out of ze trail that Rolf Gargrave die!"

Roger Bracknell waited. He felt that he was on the verge of some revelation, but he concealed his impatience and maintained an unperturbed demeanour, knowing that such would commend him to his host. The half-breed puffed stolidly at his pipe for a full minute, then he spoke again.

"Sibou brings not meat alone, he brings news."

"News."

"Oui! Of ze stranger mans who dynamite ze trail!"

"Is that so?"

"Dat is ze news which Sibou bring to me. He say dat six days ago, ze stranger mans come to ze hunting camp to buy meat. He have with him fine dogs and two bad Indians. He offer for meat one good rifle and many cartridges, an' Sibou sell him meat. Also he know him for ze stranger mans; but ze stranger he does not know Sibou, whose face was last winter mauled by a bald-faced grizzly to whom he did not give ze trail. The stranger mans he camp with the hunters for ze night, and ze two Indians they smoke with Sibou and ask questions, many questions."

"Yes," said Bracknell, as the chief paused. "What about?"

"hey ask about a white mans of ze name of Koon Dick!"

"Great Scott!"

"Also they ask if anything be known of anoder white mans a policemans who is lost, an' Sibou, whose tongue is a silent one, ask ze name of ze policemans."

"Did he get it?" asked the corporal quickly.

"Oui! Ze name was Corporal Bracknell, which is you."

"By Jove, yes! But who——"

The half-breed checked him by raising his hand, and continued, "Sibou hav' in mind dat ze trail was blown up for Rolf Gargrave, and he is cautious. He told of your sled which was found, and of ze dead wolves, but he say nodings dat we find you an' dat you are with me; and presently the two bad Indians go back to the stranger mans who is in a tepee which Sibou has set for him. Sibou he follow, and he lie in ze snow outside ze tepee, and with his knife he cut a hole in the tepee dat he may see and hear. Ze stranger mans is by ze fire, and Sibou see ze face of him, whilst his men talk. When they tell of ze sled and ze dead wolves, ze white mans he smile as a man well pleased; an' dat is everything, except dat next morning he go north with ze meat he hav' bartered for. Such is ze tale of Sibou. What tink you, corporal?"

"Think! It is no time for thinking, it is the time for action. There's some infernal work afoot, and I start on that man's trail tomorrow. Whatever his game may be now—and it's a mystery that passes my comprehension—he's the murderer of Rolf Gargrave, and I'll get him if I follow him to the Pole! But the story puzzles me! Those Indians asked about Koon Dick. Why should they do that?"

The chief shook his head. "Dat I cannot tell."

"It's odd, very odd! Koon Dick is the one man who may reasonably be suspected of a motive for getting rid of Rolf Gargrave. That I know, but——"

He broke off as a thought occurred to him, and then remarked thoughtfully, "The question may have been a mere bluff of Dick's. He may after all have recognized Sibou and set his men to ask the question in order to discover whether your man had any knowledge of his name! Yes, that may be it! But I will find him, and I will learn the truth. Louis, can I have a team and stores for the morning? And Sibou also? He knows the man and I do not. Of course the service will be paid for from Regina."

The chief nodded his head. "Ze dogs are yours, with the stores, also Sibou goes with you. But you will find ze trail hard, for dat leg he is not yet strong."

"It will grow stronger every day, and with Sibou to pack the trail I shall do well. I start at dawn in the morning."

"Then," said Louis, rising, "I will go, and ze teams select for you."

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Ze dogs shall be of ze best.”

He went out leaving Roger Bracknell in a whirl of conflicting thoughts.

CHAPTER XVII

A LONELY CABIN

CORPORAL BRACKNELL and Sibou had left the hunting camp of the tribe two days and were following the trail of the white man and the two Indians who had visited it more than a week before. The trail, though it was old, was well defined, for there had been no fall of snow in the interval, and the frozen surface of the wilderness kept the trail fresh, and made it easy to follow. It was evident to both of them that their quarry travelled fast, for the distances between the camping places were greater than was usual, and it was clear that those whom they followed had some need for haste. What it could be the corporal could only guess, and guessing under the circumstances was not a very profitable occupation. And there were other signs which gave room for speculation. Now and again the party ahead of them had halted for a little time, and two of the men had left the dogs and the sled, as their tracks showed. These halting places, as the corporal was quick to observe, always occurred when some small stream fell into the main river, or when some accessible gully or creek opened from the banks.

"What do you make of it, Sibou?" he asked when they had reached the fifth halting place of this sort.

The Indian who had followed the tracks of two of the gullies to the point where they reversed glanced at those which now lay before them. Then he waved a mittened hand.

"These men be looking for something."

"Or some one!" commented the corporal thoughtfully.

The Indian gave a grave inclination of his head. "It is not good to follow every trail," he said in his own tongue. "Sometime perhaps we shall find a trail that does not return on itself, then we know they find what they seek and we follow."

"Yes," answered the corporal, "that is the best way, I think. We will push on and not waste time on these excursions."

They pressed forward and passed two more of these deviations from the main track without troubling to follow them. Just before daylight faded, when they were hugging the bank looking for a suitable camping place, the Indian called the corporal's attention to a small creek the entrance to which was masked by low-boughed spruce trees.

"Yes," said the corporal, "that should do. Those banks and trees should break this wind."

They turned the dogs towards it, and negotiating a snow wreath which the wind was piling up, they entered the sheltering creek. Sibou was leading, packing the trail, and the corporal clinging to the gee-pole of the sled, saw him come to a most unexpected halt. Bracknell moved forward.

"What is the matter, Sibou?"

The Indian did not speak, but pointed silently at the snow, and looking down the corporal saw the unmistakable trail of snowshoes. The tracks were quite fresh, and were so unexpected that Bracknell was himself astonished. He stared at them as Crusoe must have stared when he found the footprints on the shore of his island. Who had left that tell-tale trail? Perhaps a wandering Indian. Maybe some solitary prospector caught by winter, or possibly the man whom he was seeking, the murderer of Rolf Gargrave. His heart beat quickly at the thought and, still staring at the trail which came down the bank of the creek and then turned away from the river, he considered the matter carefully, and then gave instructions.

"Follow it, Sibou, and find out where it goes and who made it. I will pitch camp and wait here for you."

The Indian nodded gravely and departed and Bracknell busied himself with pitching camp. He had already lit the fire and fed the dogs, and was busy with the beans and bacon when Sibou returned.

"Well?" asked the corporal expectantly. "Did you find him?"

"Yes," was the reply. "There is one Indian and one white man. They are in a cabin at the head of the creek."

Bracknell was conscious of a sudden excitement.

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"Did you see the white man? Is it——"

Sibou shook his head. "I saw him, but it is not the man we follow; and he is very sick with the coughing sickness!"

The corporal's excitement died as quickly as it had risen.

"Did you speak with him, Sibou?"

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"No," replied the Indian. "There was no need. I saw his face as he came to the cabin door. It is not the man."

Corporal Bracknell bent over the fire. He was disappointed, but he did not show it. He turned the bacon in the pan then he looked up.

"We will have supper first, then I will walk up the creek as far as the cabin, and have a talk with this white man. He may know something of the man we follow."

Sibou made no reply, and when the meal was ready they ate it in silence, and smoked whilst they drank the coffee. Then Bracknell arose.

"I go now, Sibou. I shall return before sleeping time."

The Indian offered no objection to this, and knocking the ashes from his pipe the policeman left the camp. Even in the darkness he had no difficulty in following the trail up the creek, and presently the smell of burning wood informed him that he was in the neighbourhood of the cabin. He looked round carefully and descried it in the shadow of the trees on the right bank, and began to ascend towards it. When he reached it there was no clamour of dogs such as might have been expected had there been a team there, and as he rapped upon the door, he reflected that his conjecture about the gold prospector overtaken by the winter was probably the correct one.

The door was flung open, and a tall man whose face he could not discern stood revealed. Inside in front of a makeshift stove was another man, who was taken suddenly by a paroxysm of coughing. For half a minute the corporal stood there, and the man at the door did not move or speak; but at the end of that time, between two spasms of coughing, the other man cried querulously, "Oh, come in and shut that confounded door!"

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The man at the door moved aside, and as Bracknell entered, he closed the door behind him, and stood with his back to it, staring at the new-comer with eyes that had in them a savage gleam of hate. The man by the fire was still coughing, and at the end of some three minutes, as the cough left him, he sat there, gasping and wheezing and utterly exhausted. Roger Bracknell watched him, with compassionate eyes. As he recognized, the man was in sore straits, and that cough probably meant that the coming of the Spring was for him the coming of death. As his breath came back the sick man half turned.

"Sit down, can't——" The remark was broken off half way, and the man started from his seat. "Great Christopher! A Daniel come to judgment! How do you do, Cousin Roger?"

As the voice quivering with excitement rang through the cabin, a startled look came on Roger Bracknell's face, and he bent forward, and stared at the wasted features of the unkempt man before him. The other laughed harshly.

"Oh, you needn't stare so hard, Roger; it is I right enough."

It was Dick Bracknell, and as the corporal realized the fact, the compassion he had felt for a stranger was trebled when he found that the sick man was of his own blood. For a moment he did not reply, but with a shocked look on his face gazed at the ravaged features before him. The "coughing sickness" which Sibou had mentioned had plainly gripped Dick Bracknell and marked him for death. Some of his teeth were gone and the colour of his gums appeared like yellow ochre in the firelight. As he noted these signs of scurvy, the corporal was moved to speak his pity.

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"Dick, old man, I am mortal sorry——"

"Then keep your infernal pity for yourself!" cried the other savagely. "You'll need it all in a minute, for Joe has the drop on you, you—— murderer."

The corporal started, and swung round. The Indian, Joe, was standing with his back to the door, and the glow of the fire was reflected from the pistol in his hand. He noted the fact quite calmly, and turned to his cousin again.

"Murderer?" he said slowly. "I do not understand. What do you

mean?"

"No?" snarled his cousin. "Well, look at me! Would you say that I was a good case for a Life Insurance Society?"

The corporal looked at him, and out of pity was silent.

"Oh, you needn't be so particular," continued the other sneeringly. "I've seen other fellows whose lungs have been chilled, and I know I am booked, unless I can get to a sanatorium in double quick time. And I know you have a soft heart, but you should have let it speak sooner—before you put this upon me."

"Before I put— I do not know what you mean?"

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"No! But you know that you poisoned that dog food that we took from you, don't you? And you can guess—"

"Good God!" ejaculated the corporal, and the astonishment in his face and voice did more than any protests could have done to convince his cousin that the charge was groundless.

"You didn't know? No, I see you didn't!" cried the sick man.

"Of course I didn't!" replied the policeman quickly. "The dogs you left me died of poison at my first camp, after they had been fed. I blamed your man, because you had told me that he was reluctant to let me go. Now it seems that I was wrong, as you are wrong. Tell me what happened?"

"I will," said his cousin, "sit down!" As the corporal seated himself on a log, Dick Bracknell turned to the Indian. "You can put down that pistol for the present, Joe. There's a mystery to be cleared up before there's any shooting to be done. Put it down, I tell you!"

The Indian obeyed reluctantly, but still stood against the door, and Dick Bracknell explained. "Joe there has it saved up against you. He was sure that you had deliberately poisoned the dog food, so that we should get stranded, and you, with a new outfit, would be able to find us at your leisure. I couldn't believe it of you at first. It was such a low-down game that I'd have sworn that nobody but a Siwash half-breed would have played it. But the logic of facts seemed convincing, and I'd come to believe it."

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"Tell me what happened."

"That's easy enough. When I parted from you, I had an idea of working across to the Behring, where I'd have been off the beat of your confounded patrols. We travelled a week and made a good pace, then one night Joe there fed the dogs with the salmon-roe we took off your sled. They were all dead within two hours; and there we were, stranded in the shadow of the Arctic circle and nearly a thousand miles from civilization." The sick man broke off, shaken by a fit of coughing, and then as the spasm passed and his breath returned, he said meditatively, "If you'd walked into our camp then we'd have fed you with that roe, and watched you twist as those dogs were twisted, for Joe looked at the food and found strychnine, which he'd used when he was trapping for the H. B. C.... Lucky thing for you that you didn't! Did you say your dogs died of the same thing?"

"Yes," answered the corporal slowly, "and now I'm wondering who was responsible."

"Somebody who was getting at you, and not at us," answered Dick Bracknell quickly, "for he couldn't have known that we should collar the food. Had you been using the same stuff all along?"

"No." The word dropped from the corporal reluctantly. "No. I had laid in a new stock at North Star."

"Then it was there the thing was done," replied the sick man with conviction. "The question is, who did it? Joy wouldn't even dream of such a thing!"

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"That at any rate is quite certain!" answered the corporal with conviction.

"But somebody did it; somebody who owed you one, and meant to get rid of you. That's shown by the fact that your dogs did all right on the food at the beginning. That which you used first wasn't tampered with, or the dogs would have died at the first camp you made. But they didn't, for you camped with us, and I remember that more than once, whilst we were waiting for my convalescence, you fed your dogs with the roe. That is positive proof that the top portion of the dog-food was all right, it was only lower down that it had been tampered with."

"But why—"

"It's as plain as a barn-door. You were meant to get well away on the trail, and one night you would unknowingly feed the dogs with poisoned roe. They would die, and unless you had wonderful luck you would die too, long before you got back to civilization. That is the amiable plan that somebody thought out for you; and as things turned out he nearly bagged me and Joe instead of you."

"But he almost got me too," said the corporal thoughtfully, and gave his cousin a brief account of his adventures.

"You were lucky," commented the sick man. "A broken leg can be spliced, but who is going to splice a set of frozen lungs?" His face grew suddenly convulsed with passion, and he broke into terrible oaths. "If I had the murderer here—but who was he anyway?"

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"There is only one man of whom I can think, and before I tell you his name there are two questions I should like to ask."

"Fire them off!"

"The first is this, do you know anything of Rolf Gargrave's death?"

"I know that the bottom dropped out of the trail and that he was drowned—nothing more. What's that got to do with it anyway?"

The corporal looked at his cousin. The haggard face was clear of guilt, and in that moment he knew that his earliest suspicions when Chief Louis had told him the story of Rolf Gargrave's death had been utterly wrong. Whatever crimes Dick Bracknell had to his account this was not one of them.

"I'll explain why I asked you in a moment," he answered. "There is the second question—yet; and it is this, did you ever inform any one of your marriage with Joy?"

"Yes, one man! When I heard that Rolf Gargrave was dead, I wrote to England and informed his legal adviser, Sir Joseph Rayner, that Joy and I were husband and wife. I never had any answer to the let— But what's the matter, man? You look as if you had seen a ghost! What is it?"

There was a look of startled amazement on the corporal's face. He was staring at his cousin as if what the latter had said was a revelation to him, as indeed it was. A dark suspicion had leapt in his mind, a suspicion that seemed almost incredible, but which persisted and would not be thrust aside. If Sir Joseph Rayner knew, then in all probability his son also knew, and yet having that knowledge he had suggested that the relation between himself and Joy was such as justified his confessed aspiration of making her his wife. Had he been responsible for that second shot at North Star? Or—

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Dick Bracknell's voice broke in again querulously.

"What's got you, Roger! Spit it out!"

"I can't at present," replied the corporal slowly. "You've given me news that I must think over before I talk. But there is one thing that I can tell you, and that is that Rolf Gargrave did not die by a mere accident. The trail he was following was sound enough, but the ice was blown up by dynamite. It froze over again in the night, and as I gather there was a little snow, he went on to the thin ice without suspicion, and went through. That's the story as I've recently heard it; and I'm on the trail of the man who plotted the infernal thing, now."

The sick man pursed his lips to whistle, but no sound came from them. Then he remarked, with a little laugh of bitterness, "So that's why you asked if I knew anything of my father-in-law's death, is it?"

"It was just a suspicion that occurred to me," explained the corporal apologetically. "When I heard the story I wondered who would benefit by Gargrave's death, and as you had just married Joy, and had fled here from England, it was a natural suspicion—"

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"I must have got pretty low down for it to be natural to suspect me of an infernal crime of that sort," was the other's bitter comment. "But who do you suspect now?"

"I don't know! As I told you, I'm after the man. The trail's a week old, but I'll find him even if I follow him to the rim of the Polar sea."

"I hope to heaven you'll get him, and that he'll swing at Regina for that job. I wonder if the same man had anything to do with poisoning the dog food."

"I am wondering that also!" replied the corporal thoughtfully.

"Any idea of the fellow?"

"Just a suspicion, nothing more. Not enough to presume upon—"

yet!"

"He must have a mind that is diabolic."

"So it would seem!" replied the corporal, and after a little time his cousin spoke again.

"Many a time while I have sat here wheezing and coughing, I have cursed you from my heart, but now I could pray that you come up with that man, and make him pay for it all. If I were sure you'd get him I could go cheerfully to my appointed place in the pit."

"I shall get him," answered the corporal with conviction. "The Indian who is with me was with him when he arranged for Gargrave's death, and if my suspicions have any bottom in them, then I know him myself."

"You'll push on in the morning, of course."

"Before daylight! And I shall come up with the man, never fear. He's travelling fast, but he's looking for some thing or some one, the latter, I think, and——"

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"Who do you suppose he's looking for?"

"Well, if he's the man I suspect, I shouldn't wonder if he were looking for you."

"For me! What in thunder for?"

"To finish what he began that night when you were shot at North Star!"

"Great Scott! Do you mean that he was the man who——"

"It seems to me to be more than likely. He is the man round whom all these mysteries seem to centre."

"What is the blighter?" asked the other quickly.

"That I must keep to myself for a little time. I may be mistaken, you know. But if I am not——"

"You'll let me know? You'll give me the satisfaction of knowing that the fellow will pay for these lungs of mine?" cried the sick man eagerly.

"Yes," answered the corporal pityingly. "I will let you know."

Half an hour later as he left the cabin his face wore a set look that boded ill for the man on whose trail he followed.

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CHAPTER XVIII

ADRIAN RAYNER'S STORY

“JOE, I thought I heard the yelping of dogs. Did you hear anything?”

The Indian shook his head and Dick Bracknell sank back on his improvised couch of spruce, with a sigh.

“Of course,” he muttered, “I’m dreaming. No, by Jove! I’m not. There it is again. Don’t you hear it, Joe?” This time the Indian nodded and going to the door of the cabin looked down the creek. Three men and a dog sled were coming up the trail. He turned and informed Bracknell of the fact. A thoughtful frown came on the sick man’s face.

“Who can they be? Not Roger, certainly, for it is but two days since he was here, and he had but one man with him. Perhaps——” Then as a thought struck him he broke off and cried excitedly, “I say, Joe, does one of the men look at all like a prisoner?”

The Indian shook his head.

“That’s a pity,” commented his master. “I had a wild hope that Roger might have overtaken the man. Anyway we shall know who they are in a few minutes, and patience is a virtue that I’ve plenty of opportunity for practising just now.”

Laboriously he rose from his couch and seated himself near the fire. The effort brought on a fit of coughing, which was still shaking him, when a whipstock rapped upon the door. His servant opened it, and a white man entered, and stood for a moment watching Bracknell as he coughed and groaned. Then suddenly an alert look came in his face and for one instant into his eyes there came a flicker of recognition. He waited until the paroxysm had passed, then in a voice that had in it a note of sympathy he spoke—

“You seem in a bad way, friend.”

The voice of a cultured man, as Bracknell instantly noted, and as he wiped his eyes the sick man looked sharply at the new-comer.

“Yes,” he replied, “and so would you be if you’d had your lungs frozen.”

“Is it as bad as that?” asked the other in a voice that was still sympathetic.

“It is, and worse! I’ve got scurvy too. I suppose you haven’t such a thing as a potato with you?”

The stranger smiled. “As it happens I have. I never travel without in winter, because, as you seem to know, a raw potato is better than lime juice for scurvy, and a sight handier to carry. I shall be happy to oblige you.”

He went to the door of the cabin and called an order to the men outside. A few moments later an Indian entered bringing with him seven or eight potatoes. Bracknell instantly seized one, and taking out a clasp knife began to cut thin slices of the tuber, and to eat regardless of everything but the one fact that here was salvation from one of the diseases which afflicted him. He chewed methodically, without speaking, and Adrian Rayner, for he was the arrival, watched him with curious eyes, reflecting on the irony of the situation which made the heir of an ancient estate glad to eat raw potato; for though he himself remained incognito, he had already recognized Dick Bracknell.

“I’d go slow if I were you,” he said warningly, as having finished one tuber, the sick man stretched his hand for another. “You had better not overdo it. A little every day is better than a glut; and, of course, my stock is limited.”

Dick Bracknell laughed weakly. “You’re right, of course. But if you knew what I suffer you’d understand the impulse to stuff oneself! I’ll go slow, as you advise, and perhaps I shall get quit of one disease at any rate, though the other will get rid of me as sure as a gun.”

“You think so?” asked Rayner, with an eager interest which Bracknell failed to note.

“Sure of it! I’ve seen other men this way—and there was always a funeral at the end of it; though not always a burial service. Parsons

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are scarce up here!"

"Have you been long in the country?" asked Rayner carelessly.

Bracknell looked at him sharply, as if suspicious of so simple a question, and then gave a short laugh. "I've been here a year or two. And you? You're pretty new to the North, aren't you?"

Rayner laughed. "A regular tenderfoot. I've been here before, but only for a short spell, and this time I'm straight from England." [202]

"Is that so?" asked Bracknell, and appraised the stranger anew. "In the mining line, I suppose?"

"Nothing half so profitable," answered Rayner smilingly. "I am merely representing a legal firm, and have come out on a rather curious mission, one with little profit in it in fact, and with even a possibility of loss."

"That's poor business for a lawyer," said Bracknell encouragingly.

"It is," agreed Rayner, "and it's not only that, but it is about the queerest business that I ever struck." He turned and addressed a remark to one of his men who had entered the cabin, and then resumed, "It is quite a romance in high life, and very interesting. Would you like to hear the story?"

"I was always fond of romance," answered Bracknell with a laugh, "and as up here we've no penny dreadfuls, I shall be glad to have a slice of the real thing."

"Oh, it's real enough," answered Rayner, "and it's interesting, because it has a rich and young and beautiful girl for the heroine."

"Romance always must have!" commented Bracknell. "Your story, I can see, is going on the penny plain and twopenny coloured line!"

"Not quite. It has deviations and some original features. This girl's father was immensely rich, and whilst he remained in this country looking after his mining properties, he sent his daughter to England to be educated. There she ran against the heir of an old Westmorland family, and married him secretly—" [203]

He broke off as his host rose unexpectedly to his feet. "What is the matter?" he asked innocently. "Are you not feeling well?"

"Just a spasm," growled Bracknell. "It will pass in a minute. Get on with your tale."

The other smiled a little to himself, and resumed his narrative. "As I was saying, she married this young gentleman secretly, and immediately after the marriage separated from him for some reason, and at the same time something else happened, which compelled her husband to leave England and to reside abroad.... Did you say something?"

"No! It's only this confounded wheeze of mine!"

"About the same time news reached England that the girl's father had died in an accident out here, and as by the terms of his will the daughter was to reside for three years in the home he had built in the woods here, she returned to the Dominion without having said anything about the marriage to her uncle and guardian, the well-known solicitor Sir Joseph Rayner, of whom you perhaps have heard?"

"Yes, I've heard of him! Go on, man. Your story is very interesting."

"Fortunately Sir Joseph was not left in ignorance of the marriage, for the girl's husband wrote and informed him of it. Sir Joseph was astonished; but he kept the news to himself, because the husband, though of good family, had done something that was—er—scarcely creditable. He did not even inform the girl of the information which had reached him, hoping that time would solve what appeared to be a difficult situation." [204]

"And hasn't it?"

"No, sir. Time may solve many things, but the policy of *laissez-faire*, whilst sometimes a good one, is not without its dangers! This happens to be one of the cases where the dangers predominate, and time has but brought a new complication."

"What is that?" asked Bracknell sharply.

"Well, the girl is thinking of marrying again."

"God in heaven!" Dick Bracknell had staggered to his feet. His eyes were burning and there was a ghastly pallor on his haggard face. He glared at the narrator as if he could slay him. "Man, do you know what you are saying?"

"Yes," answered Rayner, with well-affected surprise. "I am saying that in her inexperience this girl-wife is thinking of contracting a flesh marriage, one in which her heart is engaged, as it appears not to have been in the first. Of course she may not understand the law as it relates to bigamy, or she may believe that her husband is dead——"

"Who is the man?" asked Bracknell, in a strangled voice.

"The man? I do not understand. Do you mean the husband?"

"No, the man whom she is thinking of marrying?"

"Oh, I see. Well, that's the curious part of the whole business, for this new lover is the cousin of her husband, one time a barrister, but now out here in the Mounted Police. What did you say? A strange story. Yes, it is that; but there is one piquant detail that you have not yet heard, sir!"

"What is that?"

"Well, it is this, the husband, as I informed you, is the heir to an old estate in Westmorland. He had a younger brother who since the elder's disappearance had slipped into the position of heir—at least people had come to look upon him as such, it being fairly well known that the elder could not return to claim the succession. This younger son is dead——"

"Dead!" The word came in a gasp from Dick Bracknell's lips, and immediately after he was taken with a fit of coughing which lasted for some little time, and left him exhausted with his face hidden in his hands.

"Your cough is very bad, sir," said Rayner with affected sympathy. "Are you sure that you wish me to continue the narrative?"

Bracknell lifted a tortured face, and in his deep-sunk eyes there was a moisture that was more than suspicious. "Yes," he said hoarsely. "Go on!"

"As you wish," replied Rayner with affected solicitude, and then continued, "As I was saying, this younger son is dead——"

"How did he die?" interrupted Bracknell.

"Something went wrong with his gun when he was out grouse shooting. It burst, I believe, anyhow it killed him, and by his death, failing the succession of the older son, the cousin becomes the heir, and you have the rather unique situation of the cousin stepping into the shoes of the heir and the husband at one and the same time. Quite a little drama in its way, is it not?"

Dick Bracknell's reply to the question was an inarticulate one, and afterwards for a little time he stared into the fire with eyes that looked almost ferocious. Then he asked abruptly, "How do you know all this?"

"As I explained, I am the representative of the firm of Sir Joseph Rayner and Son, and I have been sent out to find the girl wife——"

"To find J—er—the girl?"

"Yes! she left England very suddenly a few weeks ago without informing Sir Joseph. She, as we have ascertained, came to the Dominion, and my principal suspecting that she was going to marry the man I have mentioned, sent me to intervene. Two courses are open for me to follow, either to find the young lady, and explain to the former that in the absence of proof of her husband's death such a marriage is of more than doubtful legality; or to find the policeman and point out that the young lady is already a wife."

"But he—but what if he already knows?"

"Then in that case I shall be called upon to explain the law to him also! But so far I have accomplished none of these things. The policeman, as I learned at Regina, is missing; and when I arrived there the young lady had already left her home up here for an unknown destination.... I do not know, of course, but I have my suspicions as to who may be awaiting her at that destination."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, sir, you appear to be a man of education, and you will remember that the great Antony thought the world well lost for love, and what Cleopatra thought, her actions proved. Human nature does not change, and love is the strongest passion it knows, and I suspect that her lover being missing, the young lady has gone to look for him, or if not that to meet him at some appointed rendezvous. The two are young, between them they will be fabulously rich and they will not be the first pair of lovers to set the

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world and the world's conventions at defiance. At least they will be able to afford it!"

"Never! by— never!"

The words came from the sick man's lips explosively. He rose from his seat, and gripped Rayner's shoulder in a way that made him grimace with pain.

"Man," he cried, "are you telling me the truth?"

"Certainly, sir! Why—"

"Do you know who I am?"

Bracknell's eyes, full of wild light, glared down into Rayner's but the latter, as he lied, met them unflinchingly.

"I do not, sir! We have not exchanged—"

"My name is Bracknell—Dick Bracknell; and I can guess it is my wife and my cousin of whom you have been talking. By— if I had him here. And to think that two days ago he was here, and that I let him go."

"He was here two days ago?"

"Two days ago—and I let him go because he pitched a cock and bull story which I believed! And I might have known all the time that it was so much bunkum, just a yarn to get out of my hands. I ought to have killed him as he tried to kill me by poisoning my dogs. I remember now that once before when we met, he showed a tenderness for Joy that was more than natural in a mere cousin by marriage. He suggested to me that I should make reparations to my wife by allowing her to divorce me!"

"That was a very crafty suggestion on his part!" broke in Rayner suavely. "It would have cleared his own way to your wife!"

The sick man was stung to madness at the thought. His eyes burned and his face grew convulsed. "Reparation!" he cried hoarsely in jealous rage. "Reparation! The viper! If ever I put eyes on him again, I will—" he broke off as a fit of coughing took him, and when it was over he dropped to his seat utterly exhausted, gasping painfully for breath.

The man whose lying story had brought on this attack, watched him unmoved, and calculated cynically whether Bracknell's own estimate of the span of life remaining to him was correct; then he said, "I am very sorry for you, Mr. Bracknell, but I cannot allow private wrongs to interfere with my own mission. You say that your cousin was here two days ago; perhaps you can tell me which way he was travelling?"

"He was going up the river—to meet Joy as like as not!"

"Then I shall follow! Perhaps I shall meet the lady; if so, I shall be able to assure her that the marriage she is contemplating is quite out of the question."

"Say nothing to the man about my threats, if you find him," said Bracknell, rousing himself. "Say I've news for him, that I want to see him; as by— I do! Tell him what you like, but get him to come back here."

"I will do my best, sir!"

"If I'd dogs, sick though I am, I'd follow him myself. But that's out of the question. I shall rely on you to—"

"You may, sir," broke in Rayner obsequiously. "If I find him, I will certainly induce him to come back to you, if I can. But I hope you will not be violent—"

"Violent! Bring him here," Bracknell laughed almost deliriously, "and you will see."

In the morning when Adrian Rayner took the trail, he looked back at the haggard man standing by the cabin door. Bracknell had been delirious in the night, and now as he stood there swaying, the other looked at him without pity.

"Booked!" he muttered to himself, "and knows it. If Roger Bracknell should happen to return here, Harrow Fell will require a new heir, and I shall be saved from a disagreeable necessity. But that chance is not to be depended on. I must find him if I can."

And as he followed the Northward trail there was the index of grim purpose in his face.

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HUSBAND AND WIFE

IT WAS THE end of the day, and Joy Gargrave, kneeling down on a litter of young spruce boughs, in the shadow of a wind screen, stretched her mittened hands towards the fire. Then she removed her face mask and looked at her foster-sister, who having changed her moccasins was placing the pair she had worn through the day near the fire where they would dry slowly.

"Tired, Babette?"

"Not more than ordinary," was the reply, "though I will own to having found those last two miles against the wind a little trying."

They had been travelling for a week, and were growing used to the evil of the trail. Body stiffness no longer troubled them, and having been inured to the task from childhood, the agony of cramp brought on by snow-shoe work was unknown to them, the hard exercise of the trail inducing no more than a healthy tiredness at the end of the day. Joy stretched herself luxuriously on the spruce, and looked round. The darkness of the woods was behind them, and in front the waste of snow showed dimly. In the circle of firelight the Indian George was preparing the evening meal, whilst his son Jim was feeding the dogs. The girl watched them meditatively for a moment or two, then she spoke to Miss La Farge—

"A little different to the Ritz, Babette!"

Babette looked up from the steaming moccasins.

"What do you mean, Joy?"

Joy waved her hand in a half circle. "Why, everything—the trees, the snow, the darkness, the dogs, the camp-fire, George and Jim, and you and I like a couple of Dianas."

Babette laughed and looked round appreciatively. "It makes me think of a picture which I saw when we were in London. It had a fancy name—'When the World was Young,' or something like that—and whoever painted it knew the wilderness well. It is, as you say, a little different to the Ritz—and ever so much better. I wonder how long we shall be on trail, not that I'm tired of it. Even hard work has its pleasures and compensations."

"I do not know how long we shall be. I am content that we are on the right trail. The strange Indian with whom George talked today told a story of a white man, an officer of police, who had been taken to the winter camp of his tribe with a broken leg. The leg had healed, and the officer had departed ten days ago on the trail of a bad white man, and he went Northward. From the description given the officer was almost certainly Corporal Bracknell, and I have an idea that he may have news of Dick Bracknell and be following his trail, in which case I pray that we may come up with him soon; for if there was trouble between them, and the Corporal killed his cousin, it would be a very terrible thing, in view of the situation as regards the succession to Harrow Fell."

"Yes," answered Miss La Farge slowly, "but it is no use shutting one's eyes to facts. The death of Dick Bracknell would be a relief to many people—yourself included!"

"It would be no relief to me if Dick Bracknell died by his cousin's hand," answered Joy in a low voice. "It would be quite terrible; it is more than I dare contemplate."

"Why?" As Babette La Farge shot the question at her foster-sister she looked at her keenly, and saw a wave of warm blood surge over the beautiful face, and as she saw it her own grew suddenly tender. "No," she added hurriedly, "don't answer the question, Joy. There is no need. I can guess the answer, which I am sure you would not give me. I think you are right—for everybody's sake nothing must happen between those two men. At all costs that must be prevented."

She dropped the moccasins, took a couple of steps forward, and stopping, kissed Joy's warm cheek. "My dear," she said, "you must not worry. Time will unravel this dreadful tangle, and after all you are young yet."

Joy looked up at her trying bravely to smile, but there was the gleam of unshed tears in her eyes. She was about to speak, when

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the servant George announced that supper was ready, and she contented herself with a glance that was full of love and gratitude.

The next morning, just before they broke camp the younger Indian, who had been out inspecting the trail, returned with news. He had been a little way up the river and had encountered a strange Indian in the act of taking a marten from a trap. He had talked with this man, and when the latter had heard who his mistress was he had betrayed considerable excitement, and had asked him to wait for him a little time, as he might have a message for his mistress. He had gone away, and a little later had returned and had then told Jim that his master—a white man—was lying sick in a cabin on a creek a little way up the river, and that he earnestly desired that Miss Gargrave would go and speak with him.

“Did he give his master’s name?” asked Joy, as a quick hope awoke within her.

“No, Miss, but he hav’ yours; he say you know him. And I wonder if he is the man we seek.”

Joy also wondered, wondered and hoped, and after consideration she nodded her head. “Yes, I will go and see this man. He may be Corporal Bracknell, or he may have seen him recently. In any case it is a Christian charity to visit any stricken white man in this desolate bush, and it will mean only a short delay. Where is the creek, Jim?”

“Up the river a little way, miss. The man he waits at the point where it joins the river.”

“Then Miss La Farge and I will go on ahead, and you can come on behind, and if you do not overtake us, you can await us at the mouth of the creek.”

The two girls started off, and presently reached the creek, where stamping his feet in the snow, Dick Bracknell’s man, Joe, awaited them. Both of them glanced at him keenly, but he was a stranger to them, and then Joy addressed him.

“Your master, where is he?”

The Indian pointed up the creek. “Him sick man, I take you to him!”

Without waiting for further words the man turned in his tracks and swung up the creek at such a pace that the two girls had hard work to keep up with him. Joy questioned the man as to his master’s name, but the man either did not or would not understand, for he merely shook his head, and pressed forward. In a few minutes they reached the little cabin at the edge of the trees, and maintaining a wooden face, the Indian swung the door open and motioned them to enter.

Joy pressed forward eagerly with her foster-sister at her heels. The Indian softly closed the door behind them, an evil smile wrinkling his scarred face, then going to the rear of the hut, a moment later he appeared with a bow and some arrows in his hand, and entering the shadow of the trees, he began to walk towards the mouth of the creek.

... As she entered the cabin Joy Gargrave looked quickly about her. The only light came through a parchment window and from the improvised stove, and in the semi-darkness, at first, she could see nothing. But after a moment she discerned a tall figure standing but a little way from her. The face was in shadow, and she could not make out the features, but as her eyes fell on him, the man gave vent to a thin, choking laugh.

“Good morning, my dear Joy! This is an unexpected pleasure!”

At the sound of the voice Joy started, and with a dawning fear in her eyes leaned forward and stared into the haggard face before her. As she did so, her fear increased, and she asked suddenly, “Who are you, that you should address me in that way?”

“Then you do not recognize me?” asked the voice mockingly. “I am not surprised. Time has wrought inevitable changes—but of course, it does not change the constant heart. Look again, my dear, and you will see—”

Overwhelming fear surged in the girl’s heart. She knew who this haggard man was; indeed, she had known from the first word that he had spoken, and now she turned abruptly towards the door as if to flee. The door was closed, and as she stretched a hand towards the wooden latch, the thin cackling laugh broke out again.

“The door is fastened, my dear Joy—on the outside. I remember how you ran from me at Alcombe, and when I arranged this joyous meeting, I foresaw that you might be startled, that you might try to

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repeat that old folly; therefore I took steps—and my man Joe keeps the door outside. But I am glad to see you, dear wife, most unfeignedly glad to see you, and there is no need that you should hurry away; indeed, I am afraid that until I give permission for you to go, you will have to remain here.”

“What do you want?” asked Joy, striving in vain to keep her voice steady.

“What do I want?” there was an accent of mock surprise in Dick Bracknell’s voice as he echoed the question, and then he laughed again in a way that made the girl shiver. “What a question to ask a husband who has not seen his wife since his marriage morning! Really, my dear, such a question ought to be quite unnecessary.”

He broke off as his cough took him, and for perhaps half a minute he was shaken by it, and could not speak. When he resumed it was in a different tone.

“Sit down,” he said, “I want to talk to you, and there is no need that you stand on ceremony in your husband’s house. I regret the scarcity of chairs, but there is a log by the fire there—and if you will accept the advice of an expert you will throw off your furs.... You won’t? Well, self-will is one of the characteristics of your sex, and no doubt you will please yourself. But all the same allow me to express my gratitude to you that you should have left your home in mid-winter to come and look for me. Such solicitude is beyond what I had ex—”

“I was not looking for you,” Joy broke in. “You are the last person I was expecting to meet!”

“Is that so?” The mockery had gone out of Bracknell’s voice now, and there was a dangerous ring in it. The eyes in the haggard face were blazing, and to both the girls it was clear that he had much ado to keep himself in hand. “You dare to tell me that—me, your lawful husband? Perhaps you will tell me for whom you did leave your home then? Whom you were following and seeking on a winter trail?”

Joy felt her face flush suddenly. Could she tell him? she asked herself, and immediately her mind answered “No!” In the wild mood that was on him Dick Bracknell would be sure to put a false interpretation on any explanation that she might offer him. Realizing this she was silent, and a moment later he broke out again, wrathfully—

“You won’t tell me? You’re ashamed to tell me, I suppose. But accept my assurances that there is no need. I already know. My cousin Roger is the favoured man, is he not? You start at that! Then it is all true what I have heard, that not only is he to supplant me at Harrow Fell, but in my wife’s affections also? Well, that is not going to happen. I will have Harrow Fell and you also—and you first, my Joy, for there shall be no cuckoo in my nest.... Yes, I will have Harrow Fell. I can face five years at Portland or at Parkhurst for that. But first, I will have you. You are here, in your husband’s house, where you have come of your own accord, and here you remain. Take off your furs!”

To Joy it was clear that Dick Bracknell was almost insanely jealous, and her face blanched as the possibilities of the situation flashed themselves upon her. The man took a step forward as if to enforce his order, and she shrank back against the rough logs of the shack. Bracknell laughed savagely, but the next moment there came an intervention.

“Stand back, Mr. Bracknell!”

The speaker was Miss La Farge, and as she stepped resolutely forward, holding a small but serviceable looking machine pistol in her hand, Dick Bracknell came to a standstill.

“What—”

“Do as I tell you. Lay a finger on Joy, and I will shoot you. She may be your wife, but she is my more-than-sister, and I will brook no violence from you.”

Bracknell looked at her irresolutely. It was very clear to him that she would keep her word, and after a moment he stepped back and laughed to cover his discomfiture.

“A she-lynx—and with claws! Well, time is on my side. You will grow tired of standing there, and Joe will be back in a minute or two, then I shall know how to deal with you.”

Babette did not even reply to him. She glanced at the door and addressed herself to Joy.

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"Try and open the door, Joy."

Joy sprang to the door, and lifting the wooden latch tugged hard at the door. Dick Bracknell watched her with amused eyes, and when all her efforts failed, he spoke again.

"It is no use, my dear Joy. The door is fastened on the outside. We are all prisoners until Joe returns."

"No!" replied Miss La Farge stubbornly. "Not until then. Our men will be here in a few minutes if we do not meet them at the mouth of the creek. Then——"

A sharp cry of agony sounded somewhere outside, and as it reached them, the girl's speech suddenly froze.

"What was that?" asked Joy, looking at Bracknell.

A deep frown had come upon his face, and there was apprehension in his voice as he replied, "I—I do not know. Some one may have been hurt. I——"

He was still speaking, haltingly, when the crash of a rifle broke on his words, followed by a shout, and that in turn by a great stillness. The three people in the shack looked at one another helplessly.

The girls' faces were white, and Bracknell's features showed wrathful. In silence they waited and nothing further happened. Half an hour passed, during which the girls whispered to each other, and still the silence outside was maintained, and to those in the cabin it seemed to hold a menace of mysterious things. Another half hour crept by, and then Bracknell spoke hoarsely—

"Something must have happened, or the Indian would have been back before this. And your men—you said they were to meet you at the mouth of the creek!"

"Yes," answered Joy composedly. "And no doubt they are waiting there now."

"I am afraid not," answered her husband. "Something has occurred—what, we must find out!" He glanced at the window of skin parchment, then added, "That is the only way. We must cut that out. One of us must climb through and open the door——"

"Joy shall go!" said Miss La Farge firmly.

"It doesn't matter who goes! This is a business of life and death. There is an axe in the corner there. If one of you will use it, I shall be obliged. I am afraid that the state of my lungs does not permit much exertion on my part."

Babette looked at Joy, who, finding the ax, attacked the window, and a moment later the freezing air drove into the cabin. When the rough frame was quite clear the man nodded at her. His manner was now very quiet and betrayed nothing of the jealous rage which had possessed him an hour ago.

"Go through, Joy. Take the axe with you. You may need it to knock out the staple. Have no fear," he said as she visibly hesitated. "I give you my word that this is no trap. Believe me, I am very anxious for the safety of all of us."

Joy glanced once at him. It was plain to her that he was sincere, and two seconds later she climbed to the window and dropped down into the snow. A minute later the door swung open, and she was joined by Babette and Dick Bracknell. All three stood there looking down the creek. No sound reached them. Everywhere was the appalling inscrutable silence of the Northern wilderness.

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CHAPTER XX

DICK BRACKNELL LEARNS THE TRUTH

“WE MUST find out what has happened!” said Joy, looking at Bracknell.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “but you must not go alone. If you will wait a moment I will accompany you.”

“But your cough——” Joy began, a tone of solicitude in her voice.

“My cough!” Dick Bracknell laughed bitterly. “That is nothing to what may lie before us, and in any case it is not safe for you to go alone.”

Something in his voice and manner convinced her that he was not speaking idly, and that he had his own reasons for apprehension.

“Very well,” she said, “we will wait for you. We will go down the creek together.”

He turned back into the hut, and the two girls looked at each other. They were used to the stillness of the forest, but somehow the silence that prevailed seemed ominous of fateful things. Both of them were conscious of vague forebodings, and as Babette looked at her foster-sister, and saw the light of apprehension in her eyes, she whispered, “What do you think, Joy? What do you think has happened?”

“I do not know, but I feel that it is something dreadful and I am afraid.” She looked towards the cabin, and added, “He is afraid also. You can see that!”

“Yes! That is very clear.”

They stood waiting until Dick Bracknell appeared, and then without speaking all three started down the creek. A few minutes walking brought them in sight of the main trail, and suddenly Joy gave a cry, and pointed ahead. The figure of a man was lying prone in the snow, and as he caught sight of it, Dick Bracknell broke into a feeble run. For a moment the two girls stood quite still, looking each at the blanched face of the other, then they followed, slowly, the premonition of tragedy mounting in their hearts.

When they reached Bracknell they found him stooping over the figure, with a look of consternation in his eyes.

“Do you know him? Is it your——”

“Oh!” cried Babette. “It is George!”

“George! Who is——”

“He was my father’s man, and he is mine!” said Joy, staring at the fallen Indian with stricken eyes.

“No,” said Dick Bracknell quietly, “he is yours no longer! He has gone to the happy hunting grounds.”

“Dead?” cried Joy, as the truth broke upon her. “George dead! But how? What——”

Bracknell looked up at her, moved by the anguish in her tones, then he pointed to what she had not seen, a feathered arrow head, half hidden by the crook of the arm.

“Oh!” she sobbed. “He has been killed. He——”

“But where is Jim? Where are the dogs?” cried her foster-sister. “Both have been here! See, here are the tracks, and there goes the trail northward!”

It was as she said, and as Dick Bracknell looked down and read the signs a dark look came on his face. Babette looked from her foster-sister, sobbing in the snow, to the man who was her husband.

“What do you think has happened?” she asked.

He looked from her to Joy commiseratingly. “I can only guess,” he said in a troubled voice. “I think the Indian who was with me is responsible for this, the man who brought you to my shack—you know. When you came to the cabin he had instructions to look out for your men at the mouth of the creek. I—I am afraid he exceeded my instructions. I think that he must have attacked your men——”

“But why should he do that, if you did not tell him?”

As Joy flung this question at him, a troubled look came upon his face.

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"I think he wanted your dogs and outfit, that we might get away from here!"

"Our dogs and outfit?"

"Yes. He is devoted to me, but twice lately I have had trouble on that point. Once when my cousin Roger Bracknell came——"

He broke off suddenly as Joy sprang to her feet. "Your cousin Roger has been here?" she cried. "He is alive then?"

As she flung her questions at him eagerly, impetuously, the man's face clouded, and again a jealous light came in his eyes. It was a moment before he answered the questions, and to Babette, watching him it appeared that he was struggling hard for self-mastery.

"Yes," he replied, at last, in a hoarse voice. "He is alive! He came to my cabin by accident. He had broken his leg, and had lain in an Indian encampment for weeks. There he had heard news which had sent him hot foot on the trail of a man who was responsible for your father's death!"

"For my father's death?" as she cried the words Joy's face was white as the snow about her. "But—but——"

Her voice faltered, and guessing what she would have said, Bracknell explained. "I am afraid it will come as a shock to you even after these three or four years, but it appears to be the fact that your father's death was not altogether accidental.

"My cousin had a very circumstantial story of the affair, and he was on the trail of the man who was responsible for the crime, the same man, as he believes, who shot me on the night when I had arranged that meeting with you at North Star."

"But who is the man?" asked Joy quickly.

"My cousin gave me no name, indeed he declined to do so. But he had his theory, and he went so far as to tell me that not only did the Indian who was with him know the man, but that he himself believed that he knew him."

"Ah!" cried Joy.

Her husband looked at her. "You also guess?"

"Yes!" she answered. "I guess—but no more than guess!"

"Who is the man?" asked Bracknell quickly.

"His name is Adrian Rayner!"

"Rayner!" cried Bracknell excitedly. "The son of old Rayner, your guardian?"

"Yes! He is in the North now. I believe that he is looking for Roger Bracknell."

"God in heaven!"

"What is the matter?" asked Joy. "You look as if something had occurred to you!"

"Yes!" he said simply. "Something has—something very significant. Two or three days after Roger left the shack a stranger arrived——"

"Mr. Bracknell," interrupted Miss La Farge, "don't you think we had better postpone explanations for a little time? If we remain talking here we shall freeze. And there are things to be done. There is Jim to find—and there is the team and the outfit. Then we must bury George. We can't possibly leave him lying here for the wolves!"

"Yes," answered Bracknell. "I was forgetting." He considered a moment and then spoke again. "The sled tracks run up the river. If you two were to follow a little way, till you get to that spur there, you will have a long view of the trail, and possibly you will be able to see something of the team and your man. But don't go too far. It won't be safe. Whilst you are away, I will arrange tree-burial for this poor fellow. And when you return we can discuss the situation. Do you agree?"

"Yes," answered Joy.

"Then I will waste no time, nor, I hope, will you."

He turned and began to walk up the creek in a way that revealed what an effort it was for him, and for a second or two Joy watched him with pitying eyes, then as her foster-sister spoke, she turned, and without answering began to follow the sled tracks.

After they had trudged a little way, Babette spoke.

"Dick Bracknell is a strange man. Two hours ago he was within an ace of violence towards you, and now I believe he is really solicitous for your welfare."

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"Yes," answered Joy. "He is full of contradictions. There are many men like him, I suppose. When he is good he is very good, and when he is bad he is almost satanic. When I first met him he was a gentleman, an attractive one; and but for unfortunate influences he might have continued—but now——"

"Now he is a wreck, physical and moral," answered Babette, and then asked sharply, "Suppose we do not find Jim and the dogs, Joy?"

"We must find them!"

"But suppose we do not? What then?"

"Then we shall have to take refuge in the cabin."

She said no more, and Babette asked no more questions. In half an hour they reached the wooded spur round which the river turned, and as they reached the further side, both came to a standstill and looked at the frozen waste.

For two or three miles the course of the river was visible between low, wooded banks. Snow was everywhere, and nowhere was the white surface broken by any moving figure. It was a land of death—death white and cold. Babette shivered as she looked on it.

"They are not here, Joy," she whispered. "Neither Jim nor the dogs."

"No," answered Joy stonily.

"We shall have to go back to the cabin to—to—your husband."

"Yes, there is no other way!" A sob broke from her, then she bit her lip, and added, "It is a strange irony that now my safety should depend on him."

"Dare you trust him—Joy?"

"Yes," answered Joy thoughtfully. "I can trust him—now. As you have seen he is a very sick man, and in spite of the way in which he raved in the cabin, I believe that now he is greatly concerned for my safety, and yours. Did you notice the sudden change in his attitude after I had mentioned Adrian Rayner's name?"

"Yes, he was startled. His manner completely altered. Something struck him with your mention of the name. I wonder what it was?"

"I do not know. I cannot even guess, but no doubt we shall hear presently. There is nothing for us to do but to return to the cabin."

Her foster-sister nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, we shall have to do that. We can do nothing else." She paused a moment and then asked, "You don't think George's son has deserted us, Joy?"

"No!" answered Joy emphatically. "Something has driven him away. But he will return—if he can. I am sure of that!"

They turned in their tracks and slowly retraced their way to the cabin. Dick Bracknell was standing at the door, evidently waiting for them, and as they approached he flashed a look of inquiry at Joy. She shook her head.

"No," she said quietly. "There is nothing to be seen anywhere."

"I am sorry," answered Bracknell simply. "You must wait here. Perhaps your other man will return, or if he does not my man may."

He opened the door and held it for them to pass in.

"You can take off your furs," he said, as they entered. "I have blocked the window with snow, and stretched a blanket over it. I am afraid that it will be rather dark, but that is unavoidable."

The two girls followed his suggestion and seated themselves by the stove. For a little time no one spoke, and the red glow of the fire shining on their faces showed them very thoughtful. At last, Joy broke the silence.

"You were saying that two or three days after your cousin left here a stranger arrived. Who was it? Do you know?"

Dick Bracknell laughed mirthlessly. "I do not know for certain. I can only guess."

"And you guess——"

"That it was old Rayner's son—Adrian, I think you called him. Of course he didn't tell me who he was, but he let out that he was looking for my Cousin Roger, and posed as a lawyer's clerk. I'm morally certain, however, that he was young Rayner!"

Joy remembered his sudden change of manner when she had said that Adrian Rayner was in the North, looking, as she believed for Roger Bracknell, and after a moment, urged by something deeper than curiosity, she spoke, "You hinted that something very significant had occurred to you. What was it?"

Dick Bracknell hesitated, and it was evident that he was

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wondering whether to tell her or not. Then he laughed bitterly. "You may as well know all the kinds of fool I am. This stranger pitched a yarn about you and Roger, and I was fool enough to believe him."

He broke off and looked at Joy, whose face was flaming. Even in the red glow of the firelight the flush revealed itself to him, but though he frowned a little, he continued in an even voice. "He told me that my brother Geoffrey was dead, and that as I was either dead or as good as dead, Roger quite naturally was reckoned as the heir to Harrow Fell. He said further that you knew of this and that you were looking for Roger with the news and with the intention of marrying him."

"Oh!"

As the exclamation broke from her, Joy abruptly hid her face in her hands, Bracknell coughed a little and then resumed—

"He claimed to be the agent of old Rayner, and declared he was looking for Roger Bracknell in order to warn him of your previous marriage, and to give him warning that I was alive, in case you—a—should not regard that marriage as binding."

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He looked at Joy again. Her face was still hidden in her hands.

"As I said, I was fool enough to believe him, and that accounts for my amiable reception of you just now. It even accounts for your presence here, for when my man Joe brought news that you were out in the Northward trail, the trail that Roger was following, I was morally certain that you were out upon his track, and I set out to trap you. You must own that your unexpected presence did give colour to Rayner's story, and that I had some excuse for—"

"I was looking for your cousin Roger," interrupted Joy, suddenly lifting her face, and meeting his questioning gaze.

He looked at her but did not immediately reply. And in the silence that followed Miss La Farge rose from her seat and began to put on her furs.

"I am going outside," she said. "It is better that I should. You two have things to say to each other that should only be said between you."

She passed out, shutting the door behind her, and after a little time, Dick Bracknell spoke again.

"You say you were looking for my Cousin Roger? That is a very damaging admission, is it not? It would seem that, after all, that fellow Rayner was not far off the mark."

"You do not believe that?" answered Joy, meeting his gaze with steady eyes.

He laughed shortly. "No," he admitted. "I do not believe it—now, but I will own that I am a little curious as to the reason why you should follow on my cousin's trail. It is—er—a little unusual."

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"I was following him, as I believed, to save him. Adrian Rayner wanted to marry me, and I had accused him of trying to kill you at North Star. He knew all about my marriage to you, though how he got the knowledge I cannot tell—"

"That is simple enough!" broke in her husband. "I wrote to old Rayner and told him—"

"But my uncle did not know, I am sure he did not know. He himself wanted me to marry Adrian, and I can't believe he knew."

"Perhaps not," admitted Bracknell thoughtfully. "It is possible that young Rayner got hold of my letter to his father and that the old man never saw it at all. But what has this to do with my cousin!"

"This! Adrian Rayner told me that he was coming here in order to prove that you were dead but I was morally certain that he was coming here to find your cousin Roger and to—to—"

"To shoot him, hey? Why should he want to do that?"

"Because he knew that your cousin suspected him of that attempt on your life at North Star!"

"Wanted to get rid of a witness, I suppose. And you were following Roger to warn him."

"Yes! That was one reason."

"Um! It's a nice coil, for sure. I entertain the man who tried to murder me, and I set him on the trail of my cousin who was trying to bring him to justice. That is about as pretty a kettle of fish as—"

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"But you did not tell Adrian Rayner where Roger had gone?" cried Joy, springing to her feet. "Surely you did not tell him?"

"At that time," answered Bracknell slowly, "it seemed to me that

I had little cause to love my Cousin Roger. You are to remember that I was in ignorance of much that I have learned this morning."

"You told him?" cried Joy.

"I certainly put him on the track," answered the man.

"Then God forgive you! God forgive you!" cried Joy in anguished tones.

Dick Bracknell's face set hard, and only by an effort was he able to control himself. But after a moment he replied quietly, "As I have said, I did not know Rayner. I had no inkling of his game."

"No!" said Joy stonily. "I understand that."

"You hinted that there was another reason," said Bracknell, watching her closely. "I wonder if you would mind telling me——"

"Oh, I don't mind at all," broke in Joy impulsively. "Your brother Geoffrey was killed whilst I was in England. Indeed, I was the one to find him dead. No one knew whether you were alive or dead, even I did not know, and Roger was regarded as the heir. But I knew that when he left North Star that he was going to try and learn what had really happened to you, and I was afraid that if there was a collision between you, and anything dreadful happened, people might say that he—that he——"

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She broke off, and hesitated.

"I understand," said her husband. "You need not say it. I dare say you are quite right. This world is full of Christian charity."

"I cabled him and tried to get in touch with him. I learned that he was missing. I came out, and at Regina I discovered that nothing whatever had been heard about him, but I discovered also that Adrian Rayner had been making inquiries, that he was on his trail. Then I was certain of his evil purpose, and when I reached North Star and found Adrian there, I accused him, for I was very sure of his intentions. As soon as I could I started to look for your cousin myself——"

"You seem very anxious about my cousin," broke in her husband quietly.

"Oh, how can I help being?" cried Joy.

Dick Bracknell took a step forward, and put a hand on her shoulder. She did not shrink, and as his eyes searched her face, she met his gaze steadily. They stood there silent for what seemed a long time, then Bracknell dropped his hand.

"I think I understand," he said wearily, "and I do not blame you. And I am sure that both Roger and you have played the game! Well, I'm crooked, and——"

He broke off and laughed harshly. Then his haggard face grew suddenly convulsed with rage. "That—Rayner! If only I could meet him again I think I could die happily!"

Joy looked at him, her heart wrung with pity for him. She stretched a hand impulsively, and was about to speak when the door was flung open violently, and Miss La Farge rushed in, hastily barring the door behind her.

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CHAPTER XXI

UNDER COVER OF NIGHT

SHE STOOD there gasping for breath, and unable to speak; and to both the others in the cabin it was evident that something startling had occurred. Dick Bracknell found his tongue first.

"What is the matter, Miss La Farge? What has happened?"

Babette found her breath and cried pantingly,

"Some one tried to kill me?"

"To kill you!" her listeners cried together incredulously.

"Yes. I was walking down the creek, wondering where Jim and our dogs were gone to, when I heard a sharp sound, just like the twang of a bowstring and looked round. I could see nothing, and the woods on the banks were quite still and silent, nothing moving anywhere. I was still looking, and convincing myself that I had imagined the sound when it occurred again, and a second later an arrow struck a tree close by me, and remained there, quivering. I did not remain to see any more, or to try and learn who had sent it. I turned in my tracks and ran back here, and once as I ran an arrow passed clean through my parka, and buried itself in the snow beyond."

Dick Bracknell broke out, suddenly, "Confound it," he cried, "this is intolerable. That Indian Joe must have gone mad!"

"You think it is your man?" asked Joy quickly.

"I am sure of it! Who else can it be in this God-forsaken wilderness? It must be he, but I will soon find out!"

He moved towards the door and throwing down the bar, opened it. There was nothing visible but the snow, and the dark woods. He took a step forward, and as he did so something came swishing through the air and struck the door post. He knew what it was before he saw it, and cried out.

"Joe, you confounded fool, what——"

The sharp crack of a rifle broke in on the words, and a bullet cut the fur off his coat at the top of the shoulder. He turned quickly round, and tumbled backward into the cabin, kicking the door to behind him. Joy ran forward, and dropped the bar in place, then looked at him.

"You are hurt?" she cried anxiously.

"No," he answered, as he picked himself up.

"Only knocked over with surprise."

"But that was a rifle, wasn't it? Some one fired at you?"

"Yes, some one certainly did!" He gave a wheezy laugh as he lifted a hand to his shoulder.

"And he almost got me. He made the fur fly, and if it had struck an inch or two lower down I should have been out of action for a while at any rate. He must be a rotten shot, for out there on the snow I must have been a perfect mark!"

"But what on earth can your man be——"

"It is not Joe," broke in Bracknell with conviction. "Even if he has gone clean into lunacy he'd never do a thing like that to me. Besides, Joe had no gun with him. Our guns are there in the corner, and as we've run out of ammunition they are no use. It simply can't be Joe."

"Then who can it be? And why should he want to do a thing like that?"

"It may be your other man—Jim, didn't you call him? He may have returned, and thinking you were prisoners here, may have tried to get me in the hope of releasing you."

"But you forget the attack on Babette! Some one shot arrows at her and——"

"By Jove! I had forgotten something! Stand away from the door. I'm going to open it. There's something I want to get."

"Oh, be careful!" cried Joy.

He swung around and looked at her whimsically, then he said quietly, "I'll be careful for your sake, not my own. I've got to get you safely out of this. That much I owe you at any rate."

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He turned again to the door and cautiously opening it a little way, peeped out. There was nothing visible, and quickly he opened the door wider and thrusting out an arm, gripped the arrow which was sticking in the post, and hastily flung the door in place once more. Even as he did so, something crashed into the wood, and the sound of a shot reverberated through the stillness outside.

The two girls looked at him, their faces were white and they were much alarmed. Bracknell looked at the door and laughed shortly.

"It seems that we are to stand a regular siege," he said. "That man of yours is of the persevering sort."

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Neither Joy nor her foster-sister replied, and moving towards the stove Bracknell threw on a spruce log, and as it caught and flamed up he stopped, and by its light he examined the arrow in his hand. Quarter of a minute later he stood up.

"This settles it," he said. "This arrow is not Joe's. It is too finely made, with an ivory barb on which somebody has spent time. Joe's bow and arrows were makeshifts, and his barbs were of moose bone!"

"Then who can it be?" asked Joy. "Jim would have no arrows at all, and he certainly would not have fired them at Babette if he had."

Dick Bracknell shook his head. "I cannot think. It may be a roving band of Indians from the far North. This arrow tells its own story. It is like those made by the Indian Esquimaux in the North Behring. I've been up there and I've seen arrows like it before."

"But at least one of our attackers has a rifle," said Miss La Farge.

"Yes," answered Bracknell thoughtfully.

"And why should they attack us at all?" asked Joy.

"They may be out for plunder. Most of these fellows have a weakness for the possessions of white men. I've seen one of them risk his life for a woodman's axe, and they'll give their heads for a sheath knife. They will have seen the cabin and may think that there are things worth having here, but in any case they will find out the mistake in a very few days."

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"Why?"

"Because we haven't more than two or three days' stock of food," replied Bracknell grimly. "There's only a small stock of coffee, a few beans and some frozen moose meat. That's why I suspected Joe of trying to get your outfit. But I've changed my mind now. I think that those fellows outside may have killed your man—and Joe also, if we only knew!"

"Then our position is rather desperate?"

Bracknell nodded. "If those beggars really mean business, we're in a pretty tight corner. They may rush the cabin or they may wait. In either case they will get us!"

"There is one possibility that you have not thought of yet," said Babette slowly.

"What is that?"

"It is that this attack may not have been made by any roving tribe at all."

"But who——"

"Adrian Rayner!"

"God in heaven!" as the exclamation broke from his lips Dick Bracknell looked at her in amazed conviction. "Of course, I never thought of him!"

"He is the one man who has cause to do such a thing. He knows that Joy and I suspect him of shooting you at North Star. He wanted to marry her, and he knows that that is now out of the question altogether. But he is Joy's cousin, and Joy, as you know, is immensely wealthy. If she died up here——"

"Heavens! yes! And I would stake my life that he's the man Roger is after, the man who caused your father's death. He——"

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"You did not tell me!" cried Joy. "How did my father die?"

"Some one blew up the ice on the river, the ice which he was bound to pass over in the morning. Of course the river froze over again in the night, but it was not strong enough to carry a man, let alone a man and a heavy sled team. He went through—and died, but if Roger is right he was diabolically murdered."

Joy did not move. She looked at him with horror in her eyes. Then her face grew hard. "I believe, your cousin Roger is right. Adrian Rayner was abroad about the time when my father must have died."

And he wanted to marry me after you had been shot at North Star, though he could not have been sure of your death.... It was my money he was after, and——”

“He’s after it yet!” cried Bracknell with conviction, “Miss La Farge is right. If you died up here—but have you made a will?”

Joy shook her head. “It was never suggested to me!”

“No—for a very good reason. As your next of kin Rayner and his father would step in if you died. The fellow has been working to that end all the time—he’s working now! And he’s cunning—most damnably cunning. The way he arranged your father’s death proves that, and if Miss La Farge here is right, and Adrian Rayner is the man behind the gun, then we’re in a hole. The fellow will show us no mercy. He——”

“S-s-s-h-h!”

As she gave the warning, Miss La Farge lifted a hand, in signal for silence, and bent forward in a listening attitude. The other two listened also, but heard nothing save the splutter and hiss of the logs on the fire.

“What is it?” whispered Bracknell.

“Some one walked round the cabin. I heard him quite plainly. Ah—again.”

They listened. Crunch! crunch! came the sound of footsteps in the frozen snow outside. All round the cabin the steps passed, slowly, as if some one were making an inspection, and whilst they still sat listening, the steps receded and passed out of earshot. They looked at one another and Bracknell was the first to break the silence.

“A pretty cool customer, whoever he is! He was spying out the land.”

“Yes!” answered Miss La Farge in a half whisper.

“I wonder what he will do?” said Joy.

“Nothing, if he is wise,” answered Bracknell slowly. “Having walked round he’ll have made the discovery that we keep our wood at the rear of the cabin, and he’ll easily guess that we have no great stock inside. He has only to wait until the necessity for replenishing the stock arrives, and then he can get one of us at any rate.... He’ll know we have no dogs, and that we are tied to the cabin——”

“But are we?” interjected Joy.

“Well, the open trail without dogs is a risk that few men would care to undertake. I’ve been at it on one or two occasions, carrying my own stores, and it’s not a course to be recommended. The trail ——”

“But we’ve very few stores to pack!” said Joy obstinately, “and if we stay here we shall be driven out by hunger. Do you know of any tribe of Indians in the neighborhood?”

Bracknell nodded. “There’s an encampment thirty or forty miles to the North on the Wolverine. Joe was talking to me about them the other day, and we considered once over whether we’d pay them a call or not. In the end we decided against it.”

“Why?”

“Well,” was the reply, “they’re rather a pagan lot, and not over scrupulous. Joe was telling me that in times of scarcity they sometimes offer sacrifices——”

“Sacrifices! What kind of sacrifices?”

“Well, the most barbaric sort—human. There are some queer things done North of the Barrens, I can tell you. The world up here is still a primitive world, and the police patrol up the Mackenzie to Herschell Island can’t possibly take note of anything that doesn’t come right under its nose.”

“But the Indians cannot possibly be worse than Adrian Rayner!”

“No!” Bracknell laughed hoarsely. “He’s a tiger, for certain. Though I will own he didn’t look it when he was here the other day.” He was silent for a moment, then he said slowly, “Of course if we decide to leave the cabin and if we go North, we may stumble on my Cousin Roger. It’s only a chance, but——” He broke off again, and looked at Joy as if wondering how she would take the suggestion, then added, “Well, we might take it, if we can manage to get away from here. What do you think?”

Joy hesitated. Her face flushed a little, then she said quietly, “I put myself in your hands.”

“Thank you. I am——”

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A fit of coughing broke in on his speech, and when it had passed he did not attempt to complete his sentence, but as his eyes from time to time fell on her there was a soft glow in them, which revealed an unspoken gratitude.

They sat for a long time discussing the desperate situation, and late in the afternoon prepared for departure. Such food as the cabin held was made up in three packs, and when that was done, and all was ready, they rested, waiting for the hour of departure, Joy reflecting on the strange irony of circumstances which now made her dependent for help on the man who had so wronged her, and of whom she had lived in fear.

All was quiet outside and Babette was offering a tentative suggestion that perhaps after all the enemy outside had withdrawn, then again they caught the crunch! crunch! of cautious feet on the frozen snow, and as all three grew alert, they heard the steps pause by the door, and the next moment there was a rustling sound on the rough woodwork.

"Somebody feeling for the latch-string," whispered Bracknell, then he hailed the intruder, as the latter having found the string thrust a heavy shoulder against the barred door. "Hallo! Who goes there?"

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To this challenge there was no reply, but a second or two later they again heard the steps receding across the snow.

"Came to make sure we were still here," commented Bracknell in a low voice, "and whoever he was he has made a bee line from the door. That means that the camp they're sitting in is somewhere in front; and in all probability they've forgotten the window at the back, or as it's blocked with snow haven't noticed it. We shall be able to quit that way."

They waited a little time longer, and then removed the moose hide from the window and very cautiously began to cut away the snow with which it had been blocked. That done they listened. No sound whatever was to be heard. Bracknell put out his head and peered into the darkness. There was nothing visible save the foreground of snow and the shadowy background of the forest. He climbed out, and very cautiously crept to the corner of the cabin to reconnoitre. In the shadow of the trees on the other side of the creek he caught the glow of a fire and discerned three men sitting round it. At that sight he crept back, and, whispering to the two girls to be very careful, assisted them out of the narrow window. Then without pausing they stole quietly across to the shadow of the sheltering woods.

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CHAPTER XXII

TO THE RESCUE

“SIBOU there is some one coming up the trail!” As he spoke to his native companion, Corporal Bracknell pointed down the river. The Indian paused in the very midst of what he was doing, and looked in the direction indicated, then he nodded, and in his own speech replied—

“Yes, one man and a dog-team.”

“I wonder if by any chance it can be the man we are looking for, the man who was with you when the trail was destroyed before Rolf Gargrave.”

“Who can say?” answered the Indian. “He has been long on the trail. He marches wearily.”

“It will be as well to take no chances. If he sees our fire he is almost certain to make for it, and if we go back in the trees a little way we shall be able to inspect him before he sees us. Then if he is our man—”

“We shall get him? Yes! And we will take him down to the Great White Chief at Regina, who will hang him. It is good. See, he has seen the fire, he is turning inward to this bank.”

“Then we will withdraw.”

Corporal Bracknell stretched a hand for his rifle, and together they retreated to the undergrowth behind their camp, where, crouching low, they watched the advent of the stranger. As the new-comer's dogs moved shorewards they began to yelp, and their own dogs, leaping up, gave tongue menacingly. The driver of the team, however, moved in front, and as one of the huskies flung itself upon the harnessed dogs, brought the stock of his whip down so smartly on it, that, yelping agony, it retreated. The rest of the corporal's dogs, undeterred, sprang forward, and for a moment the new-comer was the centre of a huddled tangle of snarling and yelping dogs. He laid about him valiantly with his clubbed whip, but the brutes were too much for him, and at last he cried aloud for help. At the cry Sibou rose suddenly to his feet.

“That not white man,” he said. “He Indian!”

Thus assured Bracknell and he ran to the help of the new-comer, and within two minutes the tangle of dogs was separated, and the three men found time to look at each other. As the stranger's eyes fell on the corporal, he gave a sudden cry of joy and relief, and ran to him.

“You know me! I come from North Star. I Jim, Miss Gargrave's man!”

The corporal looked at him and then recognized him.

“Yes,” he said, “I know you. You are Indian George's son. What —”

He was interrupted by a stream of words, half incoherent, half intelligible, which, as it flowed on, made his face go very white. He listened carefully, trying to get a clear idea of the story which the lad was telling him, and as it ended he nodded.

“I think I understand what you are trying to tell me, Jim. Some one has killed your father. Some one fired a gun at you, and you are afraid for your mistress and Miss La Farge and you want me to help. That is so? Very good! We are just about to have supper and you will join us. We will eat first, and afterwards talk. I have no doubt you are very impatient, but your dogs are fagged and so are mine. It is impossible to travel until they have rested. Feed your dogs and come along.”

Himself the prey of consuming anxiety, he helped to prepare the evening meal, forced himself to eat, and not until he had lit his pipe did he refer to the story which the Indian lad had told him so incoherently.

“Now, Jim,” he said, “let us get at the facts if we can. You say that your mistress and Miss La Farge are here in the North, and that they are on trail?”

“Yes, sir!”

“But I thought they were in England?”

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"They returned suddenly, fourteen days ago!"

"But what were they doing on trail, so far from home, with the spring coming?"

"I do not know clearly. But they were looking for you. They had news for you. More than that was not told my father."

"And you say that yester morning a strange Indian came to your camp with a message from a white man?"

"Yes. The white man was sick. He desired to talk with Miss Gargrave; so whilst we—my father and I struck camp, Miss La Farge and my mistress went to the cabin which was on a creek——"

"Ah!" interrupted the corporal. "Was it on the left bank?"

"Yes! The left bank. The word was that we should pack and bring the dogs and the sled to the mouth of the creek there to wait for Miss Gargrave. We did so, and were standing, stamping our feet for warmth, when my father gave a cry like that of a man whom death strikes and fell into the snow. I was a little way from him, and ran towards him. As I reached him his spirit passed, and looking down I saw that he had been struck with an arrow."

"Indians!" ejaculated the corporal.

"I cannot tell. I looked about and I saw three men in the shadow of the wood. Their faces were hidden from me, and I could not see them clearly. One carried a rifle which he fired at me. Our rifles, mine and that of my father, were lashed on the sled and I was helpless."

"What did you do?" asked the corporal.

"I lashed the dogs and fled, clinging to the gee-pole. The trail was good and I made speed. It was in my mind that the man with the rifle would fire again, but he did not do so, though twice or thrice arrows fell near me, and I knew that I was followed. It was in my mind that when the pursuit was over I would go back, and I made for the woods on the further side of the river, and when darkness came I crept down the trail, and leaving my dogs crossed the river to the creek."

"Yes? Yes? What did you find?"

"I found my father's body gone, and at the head of the creek opposite a cabin a camp was pitched and a fire lighted, and whilst I watched a man left the camp and went towards the cabin. I could not see what he did, but it is in my mind that the men in the camp keep watch on the cabin."

"And your mistress? Did you see anything of her?"

"Nothing, but my mind says she is in the cabin, for it was thither she went to see the sick white man. I thought once to attack the camp, but the men there are three, and I am but a stripling and unused to battle. Then I bethought me of Indians who live up the river. They are not good Indians, but my father was known to them and I thought that maybe they might give help. I was on my way there, when I caught the light of your fire, and came here, hoping to find a white man, and I find you. It is very good. You will go back? You will help?"

"Yes—I shall go back. I shall help. We must save your mistress. I know the cabin on the creek and I know the sick man whom she went to see; and I do not think she will come to any harm in that quarter. But the men in the camp, who, as you think, watch the cabin, are different. There is something there that I do not understand. But we will find out ... we will rest now, and in four hours we start. I will feed the dogs again now, for there is a hard journey before us. The wind has changed and the trail will soften in the morning."

"Yes. It is from the south. The spring is knocking at the door, and in a week the ice will grow rotten, but before then we will find my mistress!"

"Yes," answered the corporal simply. "We will find her."

The Indian had disposed his blankets near the fire and within five minutes was sound asleep. A little time later Sibou also slept, but Corporal Bracknell made no attempt to close his eyes, since he knew that for him sleep was impossible. He lit his pipe, and sat staring into the fire, the prey of gnawing anxiety. The mystery of the men in the camp who watched Dick Bracknell's cabin, utterly founded him. Were they men whom his cousin had wronged during his none too scrupulous career in the North? That was just possible. Daily, men in those wild latitudes took the law into their own hands, enforcing verdicts that not infrequently were more just

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than those of the law itself. Were these men of that type? Then his mind dismissed the suggestion. In that case why had they killed George, and attacked his son, the lad who, overborne by his labours, was now sleeping there on the other side of the fire?

They might be roving Indians. The use of arrows suggested that, but one had a rifle—— Suddenly he sat bolt upright, his eyes staring widely, as another possibility flashed through his mind.

“Adrian Rayner!”

He was appalled at the thought, but the more he dwelt upon it, the stronger his suspicion grew. Adrian Rayner was in the North and he had two Indians with him, “bad men,” as Chief Louis had said. The corporal was morally certain that Rayner was the man who had made the attempt on Dick Bracknell at North Star; and if he knew that he were still alive, what more likely than that he should make a second attempt? There was nothing surprising about that, but the attack on Joy Gargrave’s party was something that passed his comprehension altogether. Try as he would he could find no sufficient explanation for that, the one possibility that presented itself to his mind being that Adrian Rayner was for some reason anxious to make Joy dependent upon himself, and so had deliberately set out to destroy her escort. Then the thought suggested itself to him that after all he might be building on a false assumption. The man responsible for the death of George, and for the attack on the cabin, might not be Rayner at all.

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Restlessly his mind groped among the possibilities which the mystery suggested, and not once during the four hours that he had decreed for rest did his eyes shut. At the end of that time he wakened Sibou, and, impatient to get away himself, helped in the preparation for making a start, allowing the boy Jim to sleep until the last available moment, and when at last they took the trail he was conscious of relief. It was at least something to feel that he was on his way to the help of Joy.

They travelled six hours and then made a halt for a brief rest and a meal, afterwards resuming their way. As noon approached they found the hard crust of the snow softening, and the going becoming harder, but there was no slackening of effort, and late in the afternoon they arrived at a point opposite the creek on the far side of the river. There in the shadow of the woods they waited till darkness fell, and then leaving the boy in charge of the dogs, the corporal and Sibou crossed the river, and made a detour which would bring them out at the head of the creek where the cabin was located.

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They reached the neighbourhood of their objective in about an hour’s time, and then moved forward with extreme caution, looking for the camp which the boy had described as being opposite the cabin. But no glow of blazing logs met their gaze, and the edge of the forest presented a front of unbroken shadow. Sibou sniffed the air thoughtfully.

“There is no smell of fire,” he whispered.

“No!” answered the corporal, his anxiety suddenly trebled by the thought that he had arrived too late.

They still crept forward, and then unexpectedly Sibou stopped, and pointed to the ground. Roger Bracknell looked down and saw a blackened circle in the snow where a fire had been lit.

“Here was the camp,” said the Indian, and then stopped and put his hand on the ashes. “The fire is cold,” he said, as he stood upright again. “It has been out for some time.”

For a moment they stood looking at each other, and then instinctively both turned to look for the cabin. It stood like a shadow against the deeper shadow of the woods behind it, silent, and with no sign of occupation about it.

“Perhaps the men we seek are in the cabin,” whispered the corporal.

Again the Indian sniffed the air and then shook his head.

“No! They are not there. There is no fire. But we will go and find out.”

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Carelessly, in his assurance, Sibou led the way across the creek, and to the front of the cabin. The door was closed, and he hammered on it with his rifle butt. There was no answer, and, feeling for the latch string, he thrust a shoulder against the door. It did not yield.

“The door is barred,” he said aloud. “But there is no one within,

or if there is they be dead."

"The window!" ejaculated the corporal, and began to run round the cabin.

Reaching the window, and observing the empty framework he felt for his matches, and then hoisting himself up, with head and shoulders inside the cabin, he struck a light and looked hastily round. The cabin was empty. With something like a groan of despair he slipped back to the ground, and looked at Sibou.

"There is no one here," he said. "They are gone!"

The Indian nodded and stared at the empty frame thoughtfully, then after a little time he spoke.

"The men of the camp are gone; and those who were in the hut are gone—whither we know not; but those who were in the hut went out not by the door, for the door is barred within. How did they leave the cabin, then?" he jerked a hand upwards towards the window. "This way! And wherefore? Because the men in the camp were watching the door, and had left the window unguarded."

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"By Jove, yes," cried the corporal, seized by new hope. "That does seem more than likely."

"Then the men in the camp discover that those whom they watch have flown, and the cabin is empty. They want them badly, and they follow, therefore we find the camp empty like the cabin."

"Yes! Yes! But where have they gone? Which way in this God-forsaken wilderness?"

"That we shall know when daylight comes. The snow will carry their trail, and we can follow. Till then it were better to rest, for the night withholds the knowledge."

Corporal Bracknell recognized the wisdom of the Indian's words, and condemned to inaction until daylight, decided to make the best of it.

"Then there is nothing for it but to camp. And we may as well use the cabin. Slip through the window, Sibou, and unbar the door, whilst I go across for Jim and the dogs."

Half an hour later a fire was roaring in the improvised stove, and by its light Roger Bracknell wandered round the cabin, searching for anything that would give him a clue to the mystery. He found nothing. The hut, save for a couple of rifles reposing in the corner, and some odds and ends of no importance, was quite empty. He looked at the rifles and addressed himself to Sibou.

"Evidently the ammunition was exhausted."

"Yes! Therefore the rifles were left. But the food was taken. Behold!"

The Indian pointed to a roughly made shelf, which corresponded to the ordinary larder of a Klondyke cabin. There was nothing there but a coffee-sack and an empty syrup-tin.

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"They run from the men in the camp, and leave the rifles because they are useless, but they take the food, and they have a start—one hour—two hours—who can tell? But we follow in the morning and we find both. That so?"

"Please God, yes!" answered the corporal earnestly.

Tired out with the labours of the day, Roger Bracknell slept long and well, and woke a little after dawn with the smell of frying bacon in his nostrils. The boy Jim was preparing breakfast, but Sibou was nowhere to be seen. Questioning Jim, he learned that the Indian had gone outside an hour before and had not yet returned. Hastily throwing on his furs, the corporal passed outside, and as he did so, Sibou appeared at the edge of the woods at the back of the cabin. There was an impassive look on his mask-like face, but his eyes gleamed with satisfaction.

"Well?" asked the corporal eagerly.

The Indian swept a hand towards the woods.

"That way have they gone. The double trail is there. Also there is a dead man there!"

"A dead man?" cried the white man in sudden fear.

"An Indian! I know him not!"

"Take me to him," said the corporal imperatively. Without a word Sibou turned and led the way into the wood, and after a few minutes' walk Roger Bracknell found himself near the mouth of the creek, looking down into the face of a dead man. He recognized him instantly.

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"He is known to you?" asked Sibou.

"Yes, he is known to me. He was the servant of the white man who lived in the cabin."

"He was shot in the back with an arrow," explained Sibou. "He must have been looking down at the trail when he died."

Roger Bracknell looked at the dead Indian for a little time without speaking, then fear for what was to come shook him.

"Sibou," he said, "we must make haste. There is not a moment to waste. Those men in the camp are very desperate men. Two men already have died at their hands, and they are now on the trail of the man who was in the hut and of the ladies whom we seek. We must follow hard!"

"Yes, hard!" answered Sibou simply. "It is a trail of death!"

Half an hour later they were on the way once more. A south wind was blowing, and they travelled with furs opened, for the day was comparatively warm, and there were many signs that spring was at hand. The trail they followed led through the forest for most of the time, but towards the end of the day followed a tributary river, and here it suddenly gathered itself together in a space of trampled snow, which spoke of many pairs of feet. The corporal looked at it in perplexity and watched Sibou, who circled round and round, seeking a solution of the enigma the trampled snow presented.

"What do you make of it, Sibou?"

"I am not sure," answered the Indian slowly. "Something strange has happened. There has been a meeting here, for there are many footmarks, and there is a trail which goes up the river, and the trail of the ladies is not part of it."

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"But where are they? They certainly came here!"

"So!" answered Sibou. "And they went from here, since they are not to be found in this place. It is in my mind that they were carried—for there were dogs here as well as men."

"But who—"

"Indians! The trail is not that of white men's feet."

"Then we must follow," cried the corporal.

"Yes," answered Sibou gravely. "We must follow. But I shall go first, whilst you remain here. If I find nothing, then I shall be back in one hour or two. It is in my mind that there is an encampment not far away, and it is better that we do not take the dogs till we know. If they are bad Indians—"

"In God's name, hurry!" cried Roger Bracknell, his courage shaken by the thought of the new danger into which Joy Gargrave appeared to have fallen.

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CHAPTER XXIII

PRISONERS

WHEN Dick Bracknell had led the way from the cabin he knew that he was leading a forlorn hope. It was possible that many hours would pass before the men in the camp discovered their flight; whilst on the other hand the discovery might be made immediately and, in that case, as the ruthlessness of the attackers had shown, there was little hope of escape. But there were dangers before as well as behind, and the wilderness of the North was itself the greatest danger. They had little food, he himself was a very sick man, ill-fitted for the strenuous toil which the situation called for, and in the woods wild beasts and wild men might lurk, against whom, armed merely with pistols and hunting knives, they would be almost helpless. All this he knew, but braced himself for the task before him, determined at all costs to save the two girls and to win Joy's respect if that was at all possible.

When they won to the darkness of the forest without discovery, he breathed more freely, and pushed on along an ill-defined track, which he seemed to know well. As the night wore on, he grew unutterably tired, and once when he was overtaken by a fit of coughing, which left him terribly exhausted, Joy suggested that they should rest for a little while.

"Are you too tired to continue?" he asked.

"Oh no," she answered quickly.

"Then we will keep on."

"But you are not fit to do so," she protested. "Your cough——"

"What do I matter?" he replied with a mirthless laugh. "I am done for in any case, and we must be a long way from here before morning. This is the only service I shall ever be able to render you, and you are not going to deny me the chance of atonement which it gives, are you?"

"I was not thinking of that!" answered Joy gently. "I was thinking only of you."

"And I am thinking only of you!" he retorted quickly. "I have thought of myself too long. I am very glad to have this opportunity of service, however I may regret the circumstances."

"I am very grateful to you," was Joy's reply, and without further words they started anew upon their way.

Once they stopped, and ate a little food which had been prepared before leaving the cabin, and then pushed on until dawn, when a fire was lit, and a halt for a couple of hours was made. At the end of that time they resumed their desperate journey, and an hour later struck the river for which Dick Bracknell had been making. A look of relief came on his haggard face as he saw it.

"It will be easier now," he said, "and unless the Indians have removed we shall reach the encampment all right now."

"Unless those men overtake us!"

"Yes! In that case we are up a tree."

"And of course if the Indians are hospitable we— Ah! Look there?"

She indicated a point a little way up the river. A man had emerged from the trees. He stood there regarding them for a moment, then without a sign he withdrew.

"An Indian," said Joy quickly. "I am sure of it!"

"Yes," answered Dick Bracknell slowly, "an Indian. But he may be one of these men who are following us. The question is, what are we to do? Our way lies up river."

"Perhaps it will be better if we take to the woods again," suggested Miss La Farge.

"There is little to be gained by doing that," replied Bracknell. "The man has seen us, and if he is hostile he will follow. The only course, I think, is to keep straight on."

They were still discussing when Joy broke in.

"The question is solved for us," she said quickly. "There are men in the wood behind us. See!"

She had scarcely spoken when an Indian stepped from the wood, and another followed, and another until seven men stood on the trail.

"How!" said the leader, approaching them.

Bracknell replied to the salutation, and the man spoke to his companions who drew nearer, apparently quite friendly disposed to them. Then came a change. One of the men stepped forward, looked at the white man, and gave a sudden exclamation. Then he turned towards his companions and addressed them volubly. Joy strove to catch what he was saying, but the dialect in which he spoke was strange to her, and she could make nothing of his words. It was clear to her, however, that the man was excited, and as he spoke the excitement communicated itself to his companions. Joy looked at Dick Bracknell for an explanation, and found that his face was very white.

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"What is it?" she asked quickly. "Something has gone wrong?"

"Yes, terribly wrong. These men will be merciless. I have done you my last dis-service."

"What do you mean?" she questioned, as she looked at the gesticulating natives.

"I did this tribe a grave wrong, two years ago. One of the men has recognized me, and I think there is little hope for us. We might put up a fight, but it would probably be little use, and would certainly jeopardize your life as well as mine. If they get me, they may let you go. It is worth trying. I will explain and perhaps—" He broke off and took a step forward.

"What are you going to do?" inquired Joy sharply.

"Just going to try what a little explanation will do," he answered, "a little explanation coupled with persuasion."

"No!" she replied quickly. "You are going to make a bargain with those men. I know you are, and I shall not agree. We stand or fall together."

"Do you think you are wise?" he asked.

"I do not know whether I am wise or not," she answered firmly. "But I keep the faith of the trail, and I shall not leave you in the lurch. Neither will Babette, I am sure."

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As he regarded her, a strange look came into his eyes, a look of mingled pride and pain.

"Joy," he said brokenly, "you are a great woman and I was never worthy of you!... You can take your chances with me if you like. When I come to think upon it they are perhaps as good as those that wandering in the wilderness, short of stores, offers. They may spare you; who knows? And it is coming spring. You can feel it in the air. A few days and the river will begin to break up, and then will come white men, prospectors and what not. You may have a chance."

"It is by that chance I shall abide," Joy replied, "and not by any that leaves you to the mercy of savages."

The Indians finished their confabulation and the leader stepped forward again, and with lowering looks addressed himself to Dick Bracknell, who nodded and then handed over his pistol and hunting knife, and with his back to Joy addressed her in warning.

"Keep your pistol out of sight, Joy. These brutes will not suspect you are carrying one, and we may yet find it very useful. They demand that we accompany them to their encampment up the river. I have agreed, since there is nothing else that I can do. I do not think they will hurt you or Miss La Farge—yet."

A few minutes later they started and presently arrived at an encampment consisting of perhaps a score of tepees. Dogs greeted their coming noisily, children and women came out of the skin tents to look at them, and a few men joined their captors as they moved towards the centre of the camp. Just as they halted, a tall Indian came out of one of the tents, and by his side tottered a man who seemed incredibly old, but though his step was feeble, his eyes were keen, and as they fell on Dick Bracknell they lighted with sudden ferocity, and as she caught the glare he directed towards them, Joy felt the clutch of fear at her heart.

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"Who is that old man?" she asked. "He knows you. I saw the recognition leap in his eyes."

"He is the Shaman—the tribal witch-doctor, you know. I am afraid his recognition of me is not a propitious one. He is a ferocious old beast, and he owes me one."

"What have you done to the tribe," asked Joy curiously, "that all of them should be against you?"

Bracknell laughed shortly. "I am afraid I cannot unfold the record of that particular sin for your gaze. It was a wild, mad thing, but it seemed all right at the time. Now I think I shall have to pay for it—and you too. I seem to be your evil genius," he added penitently.

Joy did not reply. She was watching the proceedings of the Shaman, who after listening to their captors, tottered up to Bracknell and surveyed him with eyes that were gloating and cruel. Joy shuddered as she read the evil triumph in the old savage's face, and looked at her husband. Apparently he was altogether composed, and there was a contemptuous look on his haggard face. Joy was conscious of a certain thrill of pride as she looked at him. Dick Bracknell might have many weaknesses, but cowardice was not one of them. Then the Shaman spoke, mumbling through toothless gums, and though she did not understand a single word of what he was saying, Joy caught the rasping menace in his voice and shuddered again. The Shaman laughed as he broke off, a throaty, croaking laugh, which seemed unutterably evil; and a moment later they were hurried to one of the tepees and the skin door was thrown together and lashed outside. In the darkness, Joy spoke.

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"What was that old savage saying to you, Dick?"

Bracknell laughed shortly. "Oh, he was promising himself pleasure and me pain, indeed my pain was to be his pleasure."

"Ah! You mean they are going to torture you?"

"I shouldn't wonder!"

"Will they be long before——?"

"Tonight, I fancy! It seems the tribe is in luck. A couple of moose were killed this morning, and a potlatch—sort of tribal bean-feast, you know—is arranged for tonight and most of them will gorge. The Shaman will no doubt arrange some form of entertainment in which I shall take a star part!"

"Oh, it is dreadful!" cried Joy.

In the darkness she heard Dick Bracknell draw his breath sharply, and a second later a hand touched hers. She did not shrink, but remained quite still, and then heard him speak in a broken, stammering whisper—

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"My dear ... I'm infernally sorry ... to have brought you into this mess, I ... I——"

"We shall have to get away before," broke in Joy's voice. "We can't remain here and wait for a thing like that to happen."

"What will it matter?" he asked lightly. "It will be the end—for me. But if it will save you, I do not care."

Joy did not answer, she knew that he was sincere, but she did not know what to say, and presently he spoke again—

"I do not know what we can do. If we try to get away they will follow, and they will travel faster than we shall. And besides, with the food gone the attempt would be hopeless. One cannot go into the wilderness without grub."

They sat discussing the situation quietly, and outside, the clamour of the camp grew. Once Joy, finding a small hole in the tent, peeped out. On the edge of the encampment a great fire had been lit, and around it a number of women and men were engaged in trampling the snow hard. She guessed that it was there that the potlatch was to be held, and wondered what would happen when the Indians had feasted. The uncouth figures moving to and fro, and cut out from the deepening darkness by the glow of the fire, seemed inconceivably wild and grotesque, and once, when the strange form of the Shaman shuffled into view, and stood gesticulating and pointing to the tepee, she shuddered.

She knew that these men were as the men of the Stone Age, that pity was a quality to which they were strangers, and that they would do things which, merely to think of, made her shake with terror.

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"Oh," she cried sharply, "is there nothing that we——"

"Hush!" broke in Dick Bracknell's voice peremptorily. "Listen!"

All three listened. Some one was fumbling at the back of the tent, then presently there came a ripping noise, and a voice whispered, "Are you there?"

Even at that moment Joy Gargrave's heart leaped as she recognized it.

"Yes, Corporal Bracknell. Your cousin, Babette and myself are

here.”

“Can you move? Are you free?”

“Quite free.”

“Wait a moment, then.” The sound of slitting hide was heard once more, then came the corporal’s voice again, “You must slip out through the hole I have cut. Quickly! There is not a moment to lose.”

Joy felt herself propelled forward and thrust through the opening which the corporal had cut, and whilst another pair of hands guided her, caught Dick Bracknell’s whisper, “Now—Miss La Farge!”

Babette slipped out, and two seconds later Dick Bracknell followed.

“This way,” said the corporal quickly. “As silently as you can.”

He led the way through the darkness to the river bank, and as they began to descend he whispered to Joy—

“Your boy Jim, and my man Sibou, are waiting for us with the dogs, a little way off.”

“Then Jim is safe?”

“Yes, he found me, and told me what had happened to— By George, listen!”

An ear-splitting yell sounded from the direction of the encampment. It was followed by another, and that by a great clamour.

“They have discovered our escape,” said Dick Bracknell grimly. “Hurry! where are you taking us, Roger? Have you a rifle?”

“Yes! I have a rifle——”

“Then give it me. Listen to that! The hunt is up. Give me the gun. I’ll hold the pass.”

As he spoke he laughed a laugh that sounded harshly in the night, then broke off. “Great Scott! They’re in front of us already! Look there!”

The dark figures had appeared on the snow in front, but the corporal quickly dispelled the fears their appearance had awakened.

“My man, and the boy Jim! Hurry! Those beggars behind are following fast.”

Dick Bracknell looked round. Against the red glare of the great camp fire half a score of dark figures showed plainly. They were running towards the fugitives. An exultant yell told the latter that they had been seen.

“For God’s sake, give me the rifle, and get the girls away, Roger, old man. I’m crooked, and can’t travel fast, but I can hold those devils back.”

“But—but——”

“Can’t you see this is my chance of doing the decent thing? For God’s sake don’t deny me, man!”

Roger Bracknell looked into his cousin’s haggard face, and understood. Silently he put his rifle into his cousin’s hand, and unbuckling his bandolier, threw it on him.

“Thanks, old man! Thanks, awfully!”

“I’ll send my man to back you, and when I’ve started the girls I’ll return myself.”

“No!” replied Dick Bracknell. “You go with them. You must! It’s necessary.” He lifted the rifle as he spoke and sighting at the foremost of the pursuers pulled the trigger.

“One!” he said exultantly, as one of the running shadows toppled into the snow. “The beggars aren’t thinking of the light behind them.... Go!” he said again. “Go with the girls and send your man. Let me play the hero for once.... Man!” he blazed suddenly, “can’t you see it is all that is left to me.”

“Yes,” replied his cousin, “I can see it, and I’ll go. But you must promise me that you won’t stay longer than——”

The rifle cracked again, and then Dick Bracknell replied. “I’ll promise anything you like if you’ll only go and get Joy away.”

Then, very reluctantly, Corporal Bracknell went.

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CHAPTER XXIV

THE PRODIGAL MAKES GOOD

“DICK INSISTED,” explained Corporal Bracknell, as with Joy and her foster-sister and the boy Jim he fled down the river. “I could see he wanted the post of danger—and I could not refuse. Sibou is with him, and I think they will hold the pursuit.”

For a moment Joy did not speak. She was thinking of the consideration Dick Bracknell had shown to her during the last two days, and understood quite well that now he was endeavouring to atone for the wrong he had once done her. Pity surged in her heart as she thought of him weak and ill, holding back a horde of savage men, pity and gratitude, but no warmer emotion, for Dick Bracknell had killed all possibility of that in that moment at Alcombe, when, on her marriage morning she had made that startling discovery of his perfidy.

“Do you think that—that Dick will get away also?” she asked at last.

“I hope so,” the corporal answered evasively. “I made him promise not to stay too long. But he is a sick man and in the mood for anything. I believed he rejoiced at the prospect of a fight against odds. It is not surprising and— Listen! There they go again. They were both together that time.”

From time to time as they raced hot-foot down the trail the reports of rifles reached them, and they knew that the fight was still proceeding, and that the two defenders were holding their own. Once when the interval between the shots was especially long, Corporal Bracknell’s face grew very thoughtful, and so absorbed and intent was he that Joy addressed a question to him twice before he heard her.

“Corporal Bracknell, do you think that Dick can recover from his sickness?”

“I am afraid not,” replied the corporal slowly, then gave an ejaculation as the distant report of a rifle broke the silence behind them. “Good! They’re still keeping it up.”

“Why do you think that?” she asked.

“Because I have seen other men like it. I have never known one to recover.”

“Do ... do you think Dick knows?”

“Yes,” he answered quietly. “I am sure of it!”

“It is very pitiful,” she said. “He is not all bad—”

“He is very far from being that,” interrupted the corporal.

“He might have made good, even yet, if he were not so sick.”

“Perhaps he is making good,” replied the corporal gently.

“Yes,” she answered simply. “I think he is trying. In spite of the past I shall be in his debt. Ah! What is that?”

There had been a sudden increase of clamour behind them. Distant yells were sounding, and the two rifles were firing in rapid succession. For perhaps a minute and a half this went on, then came silence, followed by a single shot, and that again by a silence which remained unbroken. Corporal Bracknell stopped irresolutely.

“What do you think?” Joy whispered.

“I think it is the end one way or the other,” was the reply. “The last yell sounded as if the Indians were charging. In that case, unless the rush was stopped—”

“Dick and your man are dead?”

“Something of that kind. I think I must go back, and try and learn what has happened. There is nothing else for it. I simply can’t desert them without knowing what has befallen. You keep right on until you reach the main river—I will not be longer than necessary.”

“We shall wait at the fork,” she answered quickly.

“But—”

“We shall wait,” she repeated resolutely, and taking a rifle from one of the sleds, she handed it to him.

“You may need it,” she said quietly. “And we have one left yet.”

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He did not speak, but nodding his thanks, turned in the tracks, and proceeded up river once more. He went swiftly but cautiously; and after travelling half an hour, caught sight of a lumpy shadow coming down the river. Hastily he took refuge against the bank, and waited with his rifle ready. The shadow drew nearer, and then he perceived that it was made up of two men, one riding on the back of the other. At the same time he caught the sound of a protesting voice—

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“It’s not worth while, old horse. Put me down and quit. They say —”

A moment later Roger Bracknell was running towards them.

“Dick! Dick!” he cried gladly.

“Where ... where ... are the girls ... Joy?” asked his cousin in a voice that sounded harsh.

“They are all right. They are well in front!”

“Good!” There was a note of relief in Dick Bracknell’s voice, as he spoke, then he gave a little laugh. “Behold the victors! Roger, my son, it was topping. We stood a charge and ... and cleared the board. It was gorgeous.”

He laughed weakly, and his cousin looked at him anxiously.

“But you are hurt, Dick, old man?”

“Plugged ... with an arrow ... in the ribs. Sibou’s all right, though. And I tried to make him ... leave me ... on the field of glory. B—but he’s a mutinous beggar.”

Weak though he was, there was a reckless gaiety in his manner, which almost moved the corporal to tears.

“Dick, don’t you think you had better not talk? It’s bound to try you, as you are. When we get to the sleds I will look to your wound, and——”

“Not a bit of use, Roger, my boy! I know it, you know it! This finishes me. It was a matter of weeks, before; now it’s a matter of hours.... All the same ... I’d like to ... to see Joy, b-before——”

“You shall, if it’s to be done,” said his cousin as the other’s voice broke. “I’ll take turns with Sibou. Between us we’ll do it, somehow. And I might as well take part of my share now. Sibou must be fagged.”

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They stopped and the transfer was effected, then as they resumed their way, the wounded man leaned over his cousin’s shoulder, and whispered—

“Roger you’re a good sort!”

The corporal made no response, and Dick Bracknell continued, “You know that Joy was up here looking for you?”

“The boy, Jim, told me so. Though why she should——”

“She ... she came to tell you that ... Geoff was dead ... that you are the heir of Harrow Fell——”

“No! No!” broke out his cousin in sharp protest.

“Yes! Yes! It is so. I’ve been out of it since—oh, for years! And in any case ... I shall be out of it ... altogether very soon. But it wasn’t for that only ... Joy came. She came up here to stop you from killing me ... knowing the relation between us, she was afraid that if that happened, people would say that you ... that you.... You understand?”

“Yes, I think I understand.”

“Such a possibility was rather rot, of course, but Joy didn’t know that, and she knew that you were after me. So—she’s pure gold, Joy is.”

“Yes,” agreed the corporal simply.

“You’ll marry her, of course, and go to ... to the Fell?”

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Roger Bracknell hesitated. The conversation was inexpressibly painful to him, and to this question he did not know what answer to make. His cousin did not seem to notice the hesitation, and he did not wait for an answer, but continued in a broken way, “There have been Bracknells at the Fell these five hundred years.... And Geoff’s gone, and I’m going, but you’ll ... keep up the line. When you’ve a boy, Roger, call him ... call him Dick. I’d like to think there’ll be one of my name who’ll be as clean and straight as I’ve been crooked. Lord! What a mess a man can make of life! And what a difference it would have made ... if only I’d gone straight at the fences. But would it?... Joy would never have married me ... she never loved me, but you have her heart! Oh, it is so ... I’m not blind, and, Roger, old

man, I'm glad it will be you."

After that he was silent for a long time, to Roger's unutterable relief, and he spoke only jestingly on the occasions when Sibou and the corporal took him over from the other, and at last, after a weary march, they reached the point where the stream joined the main river, and as they did so a figure broke from the bank and ran towards them. It was Joy.

"You are all here?" she cried. "Safe?"

"Safe! Yes," laughed Dick weakly. "But a little damaged."

"What is it?" she asked, turning towards the corporal.

"Dick is wounded," he answered gravely. "I am afraid it is serious. And as I think we have little to fear from the Indians now, it will perhaps be best if we cross the main river and camp. We can put him upon one of the sleds——"

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"Yes! Yes!" she cried, and a moment later she had turned to the wounded man, and was talking to him in a low voice.

Roger moved away. He did not know what she was saying and he had no wish to know, but half an hour later as his cousin lay by a fire which had been lit, he saw that his eyes were shining with a quiet happiness.

"Better, Dick?" he inquired.

"In soul, yes!" was the answer.

"I'm glad of that," replied the corporal simply.

"It's like a cleansing to have a good woman's approval. You can't know, Roger, old boy. You haven't been deep in the mire—but there it is."

He allowed his cousin and Joy to examine his wound, and they found the arrow broken off in his side. The corporal looked at the girl and shook his head. There was little to be done, except draw out the arrow, and bandage the wound as well as they could, and when that was done the injured man was visibly weaker.

Corporal Bracknell busied himself with the preparation of a meal, leaving Joy and his cousin together, and not till after the meal when Dick was dozing had he any opportunity of further speech with Joy. Then walking in the shadow of the trees he talked with her.

"Dick has told me why you came," he said, going straight to his point. "I am very grateful."

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"I was afraid that there might be trouble between you," she answered frankly.

"We had already met twice, before you came," he explained quietly. "On the first occasion Dick spared my life; and on the second, though the meeting began stormily enough, we parted complete friends."

"I am glad of that, more glad than I can tell."

"Not more than I am. But there are things I want to ask you, very badly. I know how you came to go to Dick's cabin, but I do not know who those men were who kept both Dick and you there in a state of siege. Have you any idea?"

As he asked the question Joy Gargrave's face grew very thoughtful.

"It was Dick's man who fastened the door on us. That was part of a plan for kidnapping me, which Dick had arranged, and at first I thought that he——"

"It was not Joe. We found him shot," interrupted the corporal.

"I do not think it was he now. At first Dick was inclined to that idea, and then he thought it might be my boy, Jim; but I pointed out that the latter would scarcely attack Babette, and she was attacked whilst walking outside the hut, you know."

He looked at her and saw that her eyes were full of trouble. She was keeping something back, and after a moment he pressed her for the truth.

"You have suspicions, Miss Gargrave. Tell me exactly what you think."

"I scarcely like to," was the reply. "What I have is no more than a suspicion, and it is almost too horrible for words."

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"Tell me," he urged again.

"I will," she broke out impulsively, "and God forgive me if I do him wrong! I think my cousin Adrian was responsible—Mr. Rayner, you know, whom you met at North Star."

"I thought so."

"You thought so?" she cried. "Then you know he was up here?"

"I did not know, but I guessed. I was on his trail when I met your boy Jim."

"And he was on yours, I am sure," said Joy quickly. "He followed you when you left Dick's cabin. I think he meant to kill you. He knew that you suspected him of that attack on Dick at North Star——"

"I suspected him of worse things than that."

"Yes, I know. Dick told me. Oh, how terrible it is!"

She hid her face in her hands for a moment, and then as she lifted it, he asked, "Have you any idea why he should do a thing like that, or why he should make an attempt upon you?"

"Yes," she replied in a shaking voice. "Babette, who is very frank, says he wants my money. He would have married me, knowing all the time that I was married to Dick. He even threatened me when I would not accept him, and events have compelled me to the belief that Babette is right, and that he will allow nothing to stand in his way, not even my life."

Roger Bracknell nodded his head thoughtfully.

"I think you are right," he answered slowly. "We must be very careful. If there is real warrant for our suspicions, then Adrian Rayner will be a very desperate man——"

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"I am sure of that," she interjected impulsively. "I felt it, when he left North Star on our arrival. Did I tell you that he was there when we came back? No! Well, he was, and I ordered him away, and as soon as I could I came to look for you——"

"It was good of you to be so anxious for my welfare," he broke in quickly.

They had turned and were walking back to the fire, and in the light it shed he saw her face grow suddenly crimson. She looked towards the recumbent figure of Dick Bracknell, lying towards the fire, then back again to himself.

"That was but natural," she said quietly. "You were working for me, and when I knew that a danger unknown to you threatened you, I felt that I must make you aware of it. You understand?"

"Yes," he answered quietly. "And if we can only meet Adrian Rayner we shall be able to prove or disprove all that we suspect. You and Babette and myself know him and Sibou knows the man who was responsible for your father's death. If Adrian Rayner and he should prove to be the same, then the matter will be beyond dispute."

"Yes," she agreed slowly. "Yes. But it will be very terrible."

They approached the fire, just as Dick Bracknell moved and opened his eyes. He looked at Joy, and she, reading the unspoken request in his eyes, went and seated herself by his side.

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CHAPTER XXV

A SNOW-BLIND MAN

WHEN the next day dawned, a soft warm day, holding in it all the promise of the Northland spring, Dick Bracknell was in no condition to travel. He was clearly much weaker, and at times he lapsed into delirium during which the hearts of two of those with him were wrung. The feverish babble was of nothing relating to his life in the North, but about his boyhood at Harrow Fell, and of his first meeting with Joy. More than once Joy was unable to restrain her tears, and as the day wore on, it was evident that the strain was telling upon her.

Several times Roger Bracknell begged her to leave the sick man and rest, but she shook her head.

"No," she whispered on the last occasion. "No! Look at him. It will not be very long. I think I should like to be with him, when—when— It will help him, you know," she concluded hastily.

"Yes," he admitted, "you are quite right. He told me in that lucid interval that these moments with you by his side were among the happiest in his life."

She looked down at the drawn face, her eyes flooding with sudden tears. She did not love him, but there was a great pity in her heart for the wayward man whose life had taken the wrong turn, and whose nature as she now knew was as full of generous good as of desperate evil. She prayed for him silently, and leaving her with bowed head, Roger Bracknell walked slowly away.

At the outer edge of the camp he met Sibou. The latter waved a hand towards the river, on the frozen surface of which tiny streams of water were beginning to run.

"It is the spring," he said. "If we do not leave today the ice may not hold."

"We cannot leave today, Sibou."

"No," replied the Indian. "We wait for death. Is it not so?"

"It is so!" agreed the corporal.

"And tomorrow comes the spring and new life," said the Indian thoughtfully. "That is the way, always death on the heels of life, and life on the heels of death." He jerked his head towards the camp. "The woman nurses the man who dies, what is she to him?"

"She is his wife."

"But she loves him not. I have watched her, I have seen the light in her eyes." He broke off abruptly, and again waved his hand towards the river. "But the spring comes, and with the spring comes life and the kindling of the heart."

Roger Bracknell looked towards the river. He knew that the Indian's words were true, but he offered no comment on them. Instead he watched the water running on the ice, and after a minute he asked abruptly, "How long will the ice hold, Sibou?"

The Indian shook his head.

"That is not to be told." He pointed across the river to where a tributary stream flowed into the main river. "The water comes down there and adds to the strength of this. It may break the ice here, and spread over the surface. Listen."

The corporal listened. The air was full of an indescribable sound, a moaning and growling, quite different to the sound of the soft wind in the trees.

"Already the water fights for the mastery," said Sibou, "and tomorrow it may have won."

"No—today!" cried the corporal quickly, as there came a sudden crash far out in front, and the next moment a gaping fissure showed in the ice.

"Yes, today!" assented the Indian as he watched. "That is the first, and there will be others. The break up has come. The spring has arrived."

A cry from the camp startled them, and divining what had happened, the white man began to run. When he reached the fire he found Joy standing by his cousin. Her eyes were burning with tears. He looked at her, and as their eyes met, she answered the question

in his.

"Yes," she said, "a moment ago. He knew me again at the last."

Roger Bracknell took a step forward, and looked into the still face of his cousin. To him it seemed extraordinarily peaceful, and the half-smile on the lips caught and held by death told its own story.

"He was happy in his death," he said, "happier than in life. Poor old Dick!"

He turned away, leaving Joy alone with the dead for a little while. He knew that his cousin's death meant release for her, and for himself also, since it would remove the bands of silence from him. But in that moment he refused to think of that aspect of the matter, and as with the help of Sibou he bent a couple of young spruces, that his cousin's body might have the aerial sepulchre practised by the Northern tribes, he reflected how much of good there was in Dick, and how many such there are who having taken the wrong turn miss the full purpose of life.

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Half an hour later the dead man was lashed to the young trees which were released, carrying the body high in the air. Such portions of the burial service as Roger could remember were recited, and then with Joy, he turned towards the camp.

"We will start in an hour, if you like," he said. "The ice is not very good, but it will be worse tomorrow, and we can get some way towards Chief Louis' camp. Once there, ice or no ice will not matter. We shall be able to get canoes."

"Yes," she said, "Yes, in an hour. There is no reason why we should linger here now."

They started before the hour was out; and travelled hard until the edge of dark, avoiding fissures which were ever increasing, and pitched camp several miles away from their last resting-place. In the night the corporal was awakened by a crash somewhere on the river in front, and in the morning he knew that sled-travelling was over till the Northland winter should once more bind the rivers. A stream of water was flowing on the surface of the ice. There were fissures everywhere, and a distant rumble told him that somewhere the ice was breaking up, Sibou came and joined him, and together they looked across the river. Something caught the Indian's keener eyes, something moving. He pointed it out to Bracknell.

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"There is a man there. He is coming this way!" The corporal looked intently for a moment, then he agreed. "Yes, it is a man. He is alone. He has no dogs."

"Maybe they are lost," said the Indian.

"He will never get across," commented Bracknell, "and we cannot warn him. He will have to return."

The Indian shaded his eyes against the rising sun and watched, then he said, "He walks strangely."

Bracknell himself thought so. The man, whoever he was, seemed to be making an erratic course, and more than once just skirted a fissure. Twenty minutes passed and then the two were joined by Joy and her foster-sister. "What are you watching?" asked Joy.

The corporal pointed to the man, now little more than a hundred yards away. Joy looked and cried out, and just at that moment Sibou started.

"The man is blind," he said. "See how he walks, hands in front groping for the way. Behold! He did not see the ice."

The stranger, whoever he was, had stumbled over a cake of ice thrown out on the surface, and as he picked himself up, he took his next step into a stream running fast over the yielding surface. He withdrew the foot instantly and half turned to try another course.

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"It is the snow-blindness," said Sibou. "He cannot see. He only feels, and there is danger everywhere for him."

"Oh," cried Joy, "can nothing be done?"

"Something can be tried," answered the corporal, beginning to get down the bank.

Sibou followed him, and they moved towards the blinded man in imminent risk of their lives. The ice seemed to be in movement everywhere, and the noise out on the river was increasing. Even as they stepped on the ice, it broke loose from the bank, and the rescuers felt it shake beneath their feet. Cracks appeared through which the water spurted, but they moved forward, for both were aware that the ice beneath them might be thrown into the air as by

some living monster and themselves thrown into the swirling water.

A providence seemed to watch over the blind man. He had turned again and now was running towards them. With a luck that was almost uncanny he passed a couple of yawning cavities from which the water welled, and once, he put his foot on emptiness, he leaped from the other foot, and crossed the danger before him at a bound. They were but fifteen yards apart, when suddenly Sibou stood still and gripped his companion's arm.

"Behold!" he said quickly. "The man who was with me when the trail was blown up before Mr. Gargrave."

Roger Bracknell also stood still, and looked at the figure shambling towards them. There was a distraught look on the man's face, a madness of fear that convulsed it, but in spite of that Roger Bracknell recognized it. It was the face of Adrian Rayner. [285]

Whilst he stood there, stunned, and held inactive by the recognition, there was a sound of splintering at the corporal's feet, and instinctively both he and Sibou leaped backward. The ice parted, and a little lane of turgid water appeared between them and the snow-blind man. The latter still came on. Roger Bracknell watched him like a man hypnotized; but when Rayner had almost reached the place where the fracture had occurred, he cried out suddenly, in agonized warning—

"Look out, Rayner! For God's sake, look out!"

His cry must have been heard by Rayner, for the latter halted suddenly, and threw up his arm as if to ward off a blow. Then he gave a great cry of fear, and turning suddenly began to run away from the bank. He ran fast, helped by some great impulse of fear, but he ran only a little way. A stretch of open water appeared in the line he followed, and unconscious of its existence, he ran straight into it. They saw the plunge, and watched painfully. A moment later his head appeared above the water, and disappeared again, as the rush of water hurled him forward. There was no further sign of him, and as delay was dangerous both of them turned and raced for the bank.

As they gained it, the corporal saw a look of horror on Joy Gargrave's face.

"Who was the man?" she asked. "I seemed to recognize something about him." [286]

"It was Adrian Rayner."

"Ah, I guessed it! I knew it! You recognized him when you stopped?"

"Sibou recognized him first," replied the corporal meaningly.

"Sibou! I did not know that he— Oh, I remember. He was with the man who was responsible for my father's death."

"Yes, and Adrian Rayner was the man."

Joy was silent for a moment, her eyes fixed on the place where her cousin had met his death. There was an enigmatic look in them which made Roger Bracknell wonder. Then she spoke again.

"You halted when you recognized him? You would not help him?"

"It was not that," he answered quickly. "It was just amazement that held me for a minute, amazement and a feeling of horror that my suspicions were proved right, though for weeks I have been sure that Adrian Rayner was the guilty man. He would have stepped into open water if I had not suddenly cried out. I think he heard me, I think he may have recognized my voice. He may have been startled, though I think he was afraid at hearing his name called out when he was without knowledge that any one was near. As you saw he turned and ran, but I saw his face as he stopped at my hail, and it was stark with fear."

After a few seconds the girl spoke again, her eyes still on the tumult of the river.

"He was alone," she said, "Snow-blind! I wonder how that came about. He had two Indians with him when he started." [287]

"He may have lost them, have wandered from the camp or something of that sort. Or they may have deserted him, carrying away the outfit. In any case what has happened, terrible as it is, is probably for the best. Rayner's death saves him a trial for murder, and the past need not be raked up."

Joy nodded, and looked once more to where the broken floes were grinding each other in the waters which had engulfed the guilty man.

"It is the judgment of God."

* * * * *

It was five and a half months later when Roger Bracknell, fresh from England, walked up the road from the river leading to North Star Lodge. There was a touch of frost in the air, and already the wild geese were moving southward, and he heard their honk! honk! as they flew over his head for the warmer lands of the South, but he never so much as lifted his eyes to look at them. His gaze was fixed on the place where the road turned, eagerly expectant, and from behind came the voyageurs' song as his men unpacked the boat.

"What is there like to the laughing star,
Far up from the lilac tree?
A face that's brighter and finer far,
It laughs and it shines, ci, ci!—"

The honk of the geese overhead for a moment drowned the words, but they reached him again a moment later.

"—Till I go forth and bring it home,
And house if within my door—
Row along, row along home, ci, ci!"

[288]

Then he turned the corner of the road. A girl was hurrying between the long lines of trees. It was Joy Gargrave. There was no laughter on her face, but the blood was warm in it, and her eyes were shining.

"Oh, my dear!" she said, half sobbing with gladness as he took her in his arms.

"At last," he whispered, then together they turned and walked towards the lodge.

"Babette?" he inquired.

"She is well!" Then Joy laughed gaily. "She had the good sense to remain indoors. You know she is going to be married."

"No?"

"It has been arranged a long time, before ever you came to North Star, but the little minx only told me the other day, when she knew that you were really coming back."

"Who is the man?"

"An American engineer, James Sherlock. He came here once or twice in the old days when my father was alive. He is a very fine man."

"I hope she will be happy."

"There is no doubt of that," answered Joy, "but she will not be as happy as we shall. But what news is there from England? My uncle?"

Roger Bracknell's face grew a little graver as he looked at her, then he said quietly, "I think I had better tell you at once, and dismiss the unpleasantness once and for all.... I told him of his son's death, without telling him all that lay behind it. It was a great shock to him—and for a little time he broke down completely. He seemed to regard it as in some way a judgment on himself, and he made a confession to me."

[289]

"A confession!" Joy stopped and looked at him with eyes that were wide with fear. "You do not mean that he knew that Adrian intended—"

"He knew nothing, not even of your marriage with Dick, and even now he does not know that your father's death was anything but accidental. He was, I could tell, in complete ignorance of the real object of his son's journey here, and thought it had to do with his confessed infatuation for you. The confession he made had to do with his financial affairs. It appears that he has speculated rashly, that his affairs have become very much involved, and that absolute control of your money was needed to save him."

"I gave it," cried Joy.

"Yes! and it did save him. Some of his ventures turned out very well after all, but that matters nothing now. Adrian was the apple of his eye, and his loss, as I said, he regarded as a personal judgment on himself as he had first sent Adrian to North Star in the hope that the match he desired would come to pass."

"But he did not know of Dick. He was not party to my cousin's schemes—"

"I am sure he was in absolute ignorance."

"Thank God! He was always kind to me, and I could not bear to think that he was in my cousin's confidence. He wanted me to marry Adrian, but he thought that I was free."

"He is going out of business, and I have arranged with him to transfer your affairs to a firm that manages the Harrow Fell estates. When we go to England——"

"When will that be?" asked Joy quickly.

Roger Bracknell smiled. "There is no hurry. I thought I might winter up here—that is if you are agreeable."

She looked at him reproachfully. "You know——"

"Wait! You have not heard everything, Joy! Down the river I passed the missionary priest, Father Doherty. He is going North—racing the winter. He knows he has already lost the race, and that he will have to finish his journey on the ice. I ventured to persuade him to break the journey at the Lodge, and he agreed to do so. It was very audacious of me——"

"Why should it be audacious? Travellers are always welcome at North Star."

"Well," he answered smilingly, "he is a priest you know."

For a couple of seconds she looked at him wonderingly, then comprehension came to her, and a blush mantled her face.

"It was very audacious of you," she said. "Very! But—but——"

"But what?" he asked.

"I am glad that—that——"

"Yes?"

"That Father Doherty is a priest."

She laughed with gladness as he stooped to kiss her; and when they resumed their way, she asked, "When will he arrive?"

"Tomorrow, I think."

"So soon?"

"No—so long!" he corrected smilingly.

"And we shall have a winter honeymoon at North Star?"

"Yes!"

"That," she said, "will be delightful!"

And as she spoke, through the trees the Lodge appeared in sight, and to them drifted a fragment of the boatman's song—

"—Till I go forth and bring it home,
And enter and close my door—
Row along, row along home, ci, ci!"

THE END

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—Obvious print and punctuation errors were corrected.

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