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[NOTE: There is a short list of bookmarks, or pointers, at the end of the file for those who may wish to sample the author's ideas before making an entire meal of them. D.W.]

NORTHERN LIGHTS

By Gilbert Parker

Volume 1.

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INTRODUCTION

This book, Northern Lights, belongs to an epoch which is a generation later than that in which Pierre

and His People moved. The conditions under which Pierre and Shon McGann lived practically ended with the advent of the railway. From that time forwards, with the rise of towns and cities accompanied by an amazing growth of emigration, the whole life lost much of that character of isolation and pathetic loneliness which marked the days of Pierre. When, in 1905, I visited the Far West again after many years, and saw the strange new life with its modern episode, energy, and push, and realised that even the characteristics which marked the period just before the advent, and just after the advent, of the railway were disappearing, I determined to write a series of stories which would catch the fleeting characteristics and hold something of the old life, so adventurous, vigorous, and individual, before it passed entirely and was forgotten. Therefore, from 1905 to 1909, I kept drawing upon all those experiences of others, from the true tales that had been told me, upon the reminiscences of Hudson's Bay trappers and hunters, for those incidents natural to the West which imagination could make true. Something of the old atmosphere had gone, and there was a stir and a murmur in all the West which broke that grim yet fascinating loneliness of the time of Pierre.

Thus it is that Northern Lights is written in a wholly different style from that of Pierre and His People, though here and there, as for instance in A Lodge in the Wilderness, Once at Red Man's River, The Stroke of the Hour, Qu'appelle, and Marcile, the old note sounds, and something of the poignant mystery, solitude, and big primitive incident of the earlier stories appears. I believe I did well—at any rate for myself and my purposes—in writing this book, and thus making the human narrative of the Far West and North continuous from the time of the sixties onwards. So have I assured myself of the rightness of my intention, that I shall publish a novel presently which will carry on this human narrative of the West into still another stage-that of the present, when railways are intersecting each other, when mills and factories are being added to the great grain elevators in the West, and when hundreds and thousands of people every year are moving across the plains where, within my own living time, the buffalo ranged in their millions, and the red men, uncontrolled, set up their tepees.

NOTE

The tales in this book belong to two different epochs in the life of the Far West. The first five are reminiscent of "border days and deeds"— of days before the great railway was built which changed a waste into a fertile field of civilisation. The remaining stories cover the period passed since the Royal North-West Mounted Police and the Pullman car first startled the early pioneer, and sent him into the land of the farther North, or drew him into the quiet circle of civic routine and humdrum occupation.

G. P.

Volume 1.

A LODGE IN THE WILDERNESS ONCE AT RED MAN'S RIVER THE STROKE OF THE HOUR BUCKMASTER'S BOY

A LODGE IN THE WILDERNESS

"Hai—Yai, so bright a day, so clear!" said Mitiahwe as she entered the big lodge and laid upon a wide, low couch, covered with soft skins, the fur of a grizzly which had fallen to her man's rifle. "Hai-yai, I wish it would last for ever—so sweet!" she added, smoothing the fur lingeringly, and showing her teeth in a smile.

"There will come a great storm, Mitiahwe. See, the birds go south so soon," responded a deep voice from a corner by the doorway.

The young Indian wife turned quickly, and, in a defiant fantastic mood —or was it the inward cry

against an impending fate, the tragic future of those who will not see, because to see is to suffer?—she made some quaint, odd motions of the body which belonged to a mysterious dance of her tribe, and, with flashing eyes, challenged the comely old woman seated on a pile of deer-skins.

"It is morning, and the day will last for ever," she said nonchalantly, but her eyes suddenly took on a faraway look, half apprehensive, half wondering. The birds were indeed going south very soon, yet had there ever been so exquisite an autumn as this, had her man ever had so wonderful a trade—her man with the brown hair, blue eyes, and fair, strong face?

"The birds go south, but the hunters and buffalo still go north," Mitiahwe urged searchingly, looking hard at her mother—Oanita, the Swift Wing.

"My dream said that the winter will be dark and lonely, that the ice will be thick, the snow deep, and that many hearts will be sick because of the black days and the hunger that sickens the heart," answered Swift Wing.

Mitiahwe looked into Swift Wing's dark eyes, and an anger came upon her. "The hearts of cowards will freeze," she rejoined, "and to those that will not see the sun the world will be dark," she added. Then suddenly she remembered to whom she was speaking, and a flood of feeling ran through her; for Swift Wing had cherished her like a fledgeling in the nest till her young white man came from "down East." Her heart had leapt up at sight of him, and she had turned to him from all the young men of her tribe, waiting in a kind of mist till he, at last, had spoken to her mother, and then one evening, her shawl over her head, she had come along to his lodge.

A thousand times as the four years passed by she had thought how good it was that she had become his wife—the young white man's wife, rather than the wife of Breaking Rock, son of White Buffalo, the chief, who had four hundred horses, and a face that would have made winter and sour days for her. Now and then Breaking Rock came and stood before the lodge, a distance off, and stayed there hour after hour, and once or twice he came when her man was with her; but nothing could be done, for earth and air and space were common to them all, and there was no offence in Breaking Rock gazing at the lodge where Mitiahwe lived. Yet it seemed as though Breaking Rock was waiting—waiting and hoping. That was the impression made upon all who saw him, and even old White Buffalo, the chief, shook his head gloomily when he saw Breaking Rock, his son, staring at the big lodge which was so full of happiness, and so full also of many luxuries never before seen at a trading post on the Koonce River. The father of Mitiahwe had been chief, but because his three sons had been killed in battle the chieftainship had come to White Buffalo, who was of the same blood and family. There were those who said that Mitiahwe should have been chieftainess; but neither she nor her mother would ever listen to this, and so White Buffalo, and the tribe loved Mitiahwe because of her modesty and goodness. She was even more to White Buffalo than Breaking Rock, and he had been glad that Dingan the white man—Long Hand he was called—had taken Mitiahwe for his woman. Yet behind this gladness of White Buffalo, and that of Swift Wing, and behind the silent watchfulness of Breaking Rock, there was a thought which must ever come when a white man mates with an Indian maid, without priest or preacher, or writing, or book, or bond.

Yet four years had gone; and all the tribe, and all who came and went, half-breeds, traders, and other tribes, remarked how happy was the white man with his Indian wife. They never saw anything but light in the eyes of Mitiahwe, nor did the old women of the tribe who scanned her face as she came and went, and watched and waited too for what never came—not even after four years.

Mitiahwe had been so happy that she had not really missed what never came; though the desire to have something in her arms which was part of them both had flushed up in her veins at times, and made her restless till her man had come home again. Then she had forgotten the unseen for the seen, and was happy that they two were alone together—that was the joy of it all, so much alone together; for Swift Wing did not live with them, and, like Breaking Rock, she watched her daughter's life, standing afar off, since it was the unwritten law of the tribe that the wife's mother must not cross the path or enter the home of her daughter's husband. But at last Dingan had broken through this custom, and insisted that Swift Wing should be with her daughter when he was away from home, as now on this wonderful autumn morning, when Mitiahwe had been singing to the Sun, to which she prayed for her man and for everlasting days with him.

She had spoken angrily but now, because her soul sharply resented the challenge to her happiness which her mother had been making. It was her own eyes that refused to see the cloud, which the sage and bereaved woman had seen and conveyed in images and figures of speech natural to the Indian mind.

"Hai-yai," she said now, with a strange touching sigh breathing in the words, "you are right, my

mother, and a dream is a dream; also, if it be dreamt three times, then is it to be followed, and it is true. You have lived long, and your dreams are of the Sun and the Spirit." She shook a little as she laid her hand on a buckskin coat of her man hanging by the lodge-door; then she steadied herself again, and gazed earnestly into her mother's eyes. "Have all your dreams come true, my mother?" she asked with a hungering heart. "There was the dream that came out of the dark five times, when your father went against the Crees, and was wounded, and crawled away into the hills, and all our warriors fled—they were but a handful, and the Crees like a young forest in number! I went with my dream, and found him after many days, and it was after that you were born, my youngest and my last. There was also"—her eyes almost closed, and the needle and thread she held lay still in her lap—"when two of your brothers were killed in the drive of the buffalo. Did I not see it all in my dream, and follow after them to take them to my heart? And when your sister was carried off, was it not my dream which saw the trail, so that we brought her back again to die in peace, her eyes seeing the Lodge whither she was going, open to her, and the Sun, the Father, giving her light and promise—for she had wounded herself to die that the thief who stole her should leave her to herself. Behold, my daughter, these dreams have I had, and others; and I have lived long and have seen the bright day break into storm, and the herds flee into the far hills where none could follow, and hunger come, and—"

"Hai-yo, see, the birds flying south," said the girl with a gesture towards the cloudless sky. "Never since I lived have they gone south so soon." Again she shuddered slightly, then she spoke slowly: "I also have dreamed, and I will follow my dream. I dreamed"—she knelt down beside her mother, and rested her hands in her mother's lap—"I dreamed that there was a wall of hills dark and heavy and far away, and that whenever my eyes looked at them they burned with tears; and yet I looked and looked, till my heart was like lead in my breast; and I turned from them to the rivers and the plains that I loved. But a voice kept calling to me, 'Come, come! Beyond the hills is a happy land. The trail is hard, and your feet will bleed, but beyond is the happy land.' And I would not go for the voice that spoke, and at last there came an old man in my dream and spoke to me kindly, and said, 'Come with me, and I will show thee the way over the hills to the Lodge where thou shalt find what thou hast lost.' And I said to him, 'I have lost nothing;' and I would not go. Twice I dreamed this dream, and twice the old man came, and three times I dreamed it; and then I spoke angrily to him, as but now I did to thee; and behold he changed before my eyes, and I saw that he was now become—"she stopped short, and buried her face in her hands for a moment, then recovered herself—"Breaking Rock it was, I saw before me, and I cried out and fled. Then I waked with a cry, but my man was beside me, and his arm was round my neck; and this dream, is it not a foolish dream, my mother?"

The old woman sat silent, clasping the hands of her daughter firmly, and looking out of the wide doorway towards the trees that fringed the river; and presently, as she looked, her face changed and grew pinched all at once, and Mitiahwe, looking at her, turned a startled face towards the river also.

"Breaking Rock!" she said in alarm, and got to her feet quickly.

Breaking Rock stood for a moment looking towards the lodge, then came slowly forward to them. Never in all the four years had he approached this lodge of Mitiahwe, who, the daughter of a chief, should have married himself, the son of a chief! Slowly but with long slouching stride Breaking Rock came nearer. The two women watched him without speaking. Instinctively they knew that he brought news, that something had happened; yet Mitiahwe felt at her belt for what no Indian girl would be without; and this one was a gift from her man, on the anniversary of the day she first came to his lodge.

Breaking Rock was at the door now, his beady eyes fixed on Mitiahwe's, his figure jerked to its full height, which made him, even then, two inches less than Long Hand. He spoke in a loud voice:

"The last boat this year goes down the river tomorrow. Long Hand, your man, is going to his people. He will not come back. He has had enough of the Blackfoot woman. You will see him no more." He waved a hand to the sky. "The birds are going south. A hard winter is coming quick. You will be alone. Breaking Rock is rich. He has five hundred horses. Your man is going to his own people. Let him go. He is no man. It is four years, and still there are but two in your lodge. How!"

He swung on his heel with a chuckle in his throat, for he thought he had said a good thing, and that in truth he was worth twenty white men. His quick ear caught a movement behind him, however, and he saw the girl spring from the lodge door, something flashing from her belt. But now the mother's arms were round her, with cries of protest, and Breaking Rock, with another laugh, slipped away swiftly toward the river.

"That is good," he muttered. "She will kill him perhaps, when she goes to him. She will go, but he will not stay. I have heard."

As he disappeared among the trees Mitiahwe disengaged herself from her mother's arms, went slowly back into the lodge, and sat down on the great couch where, for so many moons, she had lain with her

man beside her.

Her mother watched her closely, though she moved about doing little things. She was trying to think what she would have done if such a thing had happened to her, if her man had been going to leave her. She assumed that Dingan would leave Mitiahwe, for he would hear the voices of his people calling far away, even as the red man who went East into the great cities heard the prairies and the mountains and the rivers and his own people calling, and came back, and put off the clothes of civilisation, and donned his buckskins again, and sat in the Medicine Man's tent, and heard the spirits speak to him through the mist and smoke of the sacred fire. When Swift Wing first gave her daughter to the white man she foresaw the danger now at hand, but this was the tribute of the lower race to the higher, and—who could tell! White men had left their Indian wives, but had come back again, and for ever renounced the life of their own nations, and become great chiefs, teaching useful things to their adopted people, bringing up their children as tribesmen—bringing up their children! There it was, the thing which called them back, the bright-eyed children with the colour of the brown prairie in their faces, and their brains so sharp and strong. But here was no child to call Dingan back, only the eloquent, brave, sweet face of Mitiahwe. . . . If he went! Would he go? Was he going? And now that Mitiahwe had been told that he would go, what would she do? In her belt was—but, no, that would be worse than all, and she would lose Mitiahwe, her last child, as she had lost so many others. What would she herself do if she were in Mitiahwe's place? Ah, she would make him stay somehow—by truth or by falsehood; by the whispered story in the long night, by her head upon his knee before the lodge-fire, and her eyes fixed on his, luring him, as the Dream lures the dreamer into the far trail, to find the Sun's hunting- ground where the plains are filled with the deer and the buffalo and the wild horse; by the smell of the cooking-pot and the favourite spiced drink in the morning; by the child that ran to him with his bow and arrows and the cry of the hunter—but there was no child; she had forgotten. She was always recalling her own happy early life with her man, and the clean-faced papooses that crowded round his knee—one wife and many children, and the old Harvester of the Years reaping them so fast, till the children stood up as tall as their father and chief. That was long ago, and she had had her share—twenty-five years of happiness; but Mitiahwe had had only four. She looked at Mitiahwe, standing still for a moment like one rapt, then suddenly she gave a little cry. Something had come into her mind, some solution of the problem, and she ran and stooped over the girl and put both hands on her head.

"Mitiahwe, heart's blood of mine," she said, "the birds go south, but they return. What matter if they go so soon, if they return soon. If the Sun wills that the winter be dark, and he sends the Coldmaker to close the rivers and drive the wild ones far from the arrow and the gun, yet he may be sorry, and send a second summer—has it not been so, and Coldmaker has hurried away—away! The birds go south, but they will return, Mitiahwe."

"I heard a cry in the night while my man slept," Mitiahwe answered, looking straight before her, "and it was like the cry of a bird-calling, calling, calling."

"But he did not hear—he was asleep beside Mitiahwe. If he did not wake, surely it was good luck. Thy breath upon his face kept him sleeping. Surely it was good luck to Mitiahwe that he did not hear."

She was smiling a little now, for she had thought of a thing which would, perhaps, keep the man here in this lodge in the wilderness; but the time to speak of it was not yet. She must wait and see.

Suddenly Mitiahwe got to her feet with a spring, and a light in her eyes. "Hai-yai!" she said with plaintive smiling, ran to a corner of the lodge, and from a leather bag drew forth a horse-shoe and looked at it, murmuring to herself.

The old woman gazed at her wonderingly. "What is it, Mitiahwe?" she asked.

"It is good-luck. So my man has said. It is the way of his people. It is put over the door, and if a dream come it is a good dream; and if a bad thing come, it will not enter; and if the heart prays for a thing hid from all the world, then it brings good-luck. Hai-yai! I will put it over the door, and then—"All at once her hand dropped to her side, as though some terrible thought had come to her, and, sinking to the floor, she rocked her body backward and forward for a time, sobbing. But presently she got to her feet again, and, going to the door of the lodge, fastened the horseshoe above it with a great needle and a string of buckskin.

"Oh great Sun," she prayed, "have pity on me and save me! I cannot live alone. I am only a Blackfoot wife; I am not blood of his blood. Give, O great one, blood of his blood, bone of his bone, soul of his soul, that he will say, This is mine, body of my body, and he will hear the cry and will stay. O great Sun, pity me!" The old woman's heart beat faster as she listened. The same thought was in the mind of both. If there were but a child, bone of his bone, then perhaps he would not go; or, if he went, then surely he would return, when he heard his papoose calling in the lodge in the wilderness.

As Mitiahwe turned to her, a strange burning light in her eyes, Swift Wing said: "It is good. The white man's Medicine for a white man's wife. But if there were the red man's Medicine too—"

"What is the red man's Medicine?" asked the young wife, as she smoothed her hair, put a string of bright beads around her neck, and wound a red sash round her waist.

The old woman shook her head, a curious half-mystic light in her eyes, her body drawn up to its full height, as though waiting for something. "It is an old Medicine. It is of winters ago as many as the hairs of the head. I have forgotten almost, but it was a great Medicine when there were no white men in the land. And so it was that to every woman's breast there hung a papoose, and every woman had her man, and the red men were like leaves in the forest—but it was a winter of winters ago, and the Medicine Men have forgotten; and thou hast no child! When Long Hand comes, what will Mitiahwe say to him?"

Mitiahwe's eyes were determined, her face was set, she flushed deeply, then the colour fled. "What my mother would say, I will say. Shall the white man's Medicine fail? If I wish it, then it will be so: and I will say so."

"But if the white man's Medicine fail?"—Swift Wing made a gesture toward the door where the horse-shoe hung. "It is Medicine for a white man, will it be Medicine for an Indian?"

"Am I not a white man's wife?"

"But if there were the Sun Medicine also, the Medicine of the days long ago?"

"Tell me. If you remember—Kai! but you do remember—I see it in your face. Tell me, and I will make that Medicine also, my mother."

"To-morrow, if I remember it—I will think, and if I remember it, to-morrow I will tell you, my heart's blood. Maybe my dream will come to me and tell me. Then, even after all these years, a papoose—"

"But the boat will go at dawn to-morrow, and if he go also—"

"Mitiahwe is young, her body is warm, her eyes are bright, the songs she sings, her tongue—if these keep him not, and the Voice calls him still to go, then still Mitiahwe shall whisper, and tell him—"

"Hai-yo-hush," said the girl, and trembled a little, and put both hands on her mother's mouth.

For a moment she stood so, then with an exclamation suddenly turned and ran through the doorway, and sped toward the river, and into the path which would take her to the post, where her man traded with the Indians and had made much money during the past six years, so that he could have had a thousand horses and ten lodges like that she had just left. The distance between the lodge and the post was no more than a mile, but Mitiahwe made a detour, and approached it from behind, where she could not be seen. Darkness was gathering now, and she could see the glimmer of the light of lamps through the windows, and as the doors opened and shut. No one had seen her approach, and she stole through a door which was open at the rear of the warehousing room, and went quickly to another door leading into the shop. There was a crack through which she could see, and she could hear all that was said. As she came she had seen Indians gliding through the woods with their purchases, and now the shop was clearing fast, in response to the urging of Dingan and his partner, a Scotch half-breed. It was evident that Dingan was at once abstracted and excited.

Presently only two visitors were left, a French halfbreed call Lablache, a swaggering, vicious fellow, and the captain of the steamer, Ste. Anne, which was to make its last trip south in the morning—even now it would have to break its way through the young ice. Dingan's partner dropped a bar across the door of the shop, and the four men gathered about the fire. For a time no one spoke. At last the captain of the Ste. Anne said: "It's a great chance, Dingan. You'll be in civilisation again, and in a rising town of white people—Groise 'll be a city in five years, and you can grow up and grow rich with the place. The Company asked me to lay it all before you, and Lablache here will buy out your share of the business, at whatever your partner and you prove its worth. You're young; you've got everything before you. You've made a name out here for being the best trader west of the Great Lakes, and now's your time. It's none of my affair, of course, but I like to carry through what I'm set to do, and the Company said, 'You bring Dingan back with you. The place is waiting for him, and it can't wait longer than the last boat down.' You're ready to step in when he steps out, ain't you, Lablache?"

Lablache shook back his long hair, and rolled about in his pride. "I give him cash for his share to-night someone is behin' me, share, yes! It is worth so much, I pay and step in—I take the place over. I take half the business here, and I work with Dingan's partner. I take your horses, Dingan, I take you lodge, I take all in your lodge—everyt'ing."

His eyes glistened, and a red spot came to each cheek as he leaned forward. At his last word Dingan, who had been standing abstractedly listening, as it were, swung round on him with a muttered oath, and the skin of his face appeared to tighten. Watching through the crack of the door, Mitiahwe saw the look she knew well, though it had never been turned on her, and her heart beat faster. It was a look that came into Dingan's face whenever Breaking Rock crossed his path, or when one or two other names were mentioned in his presence, for they were names of men who had spoken of Mitiahwe lightly, and had attempted to be jocular about her.

As Mitiahwe looked at him, now unknown to himself, she was conscious of what that last word of Lablache's meant. Everyt'ing meant herself. Lablache—who had neither the good qualities of the white man nor the Indian, but who had the brains of the one and the subtilty of the other, and whose only virtue was that he was a successful trader, though he looked like a mere woodsman, with rings in his ears, gaily decorated buckskin coat and moccasins, and a furtive smile always on his lips! Everyt'ing!—Her blood ran cold at the thought of dropping the lodge- curtain upon this man and herself alone. For no other man than Dingan had her blood run faster, and he had made her life blossom. She had seen in many a half-breed's and in many an Indian's face the look which was now in that of Lablache, and her fingers gripped softly the thing in her belt that had flashed out on Breaking Rock such a short while ago. As she looked, it seemed for a moment as though Dingan would open the door and throw Lablache out, for in quick reflection his eyes ran from the man to the wooden bar across the door.

"You'll talk of the shop, and the shop only, Lablache," Dingan said grimly. "I'm not huckstering my home, and I'd choose the buyer if I was selling. My lodge ain't to be bought, nor anything in it—not even the broom to keep it clean of any half-breeds that'd enter it without leave."

There was malice in the words, but there was greater malice in the tone, and Lablache, who was bent on getting the business, swallowed his ugly wrath, and determined that, if he got the business, he would get the lodge also in due time; for Dingan, if he went, would not take the lodge- or the woman with him; and Dingan was not fool enough to stay when he could go to Groise to a sure fortune.

The captain of the Ste. Anne again spoke. "There's another thing the Company said, Dingan. You needn't go to Groise, not at once. You can take a month and visit your folks down East, and lay in a stock of home- feelings before you settle down at Groise for good. They was fair when I put it to them that you'd mebbe want to do that. 'You tell Dingan,' they said, 'that he can have the month glad and grateful, and a free ticket on the railway back and forth. He can have it at once,' they said."

Watching, Mitiahwe could see her man's face brighten, and take on a look of longing at this suggestion; and it seemed to her that the bird she heard in the night was calling in his ears now. Her eyes went blind a moment.

"The game is with you, Dingan. All the cards are in your hands; you'll never get such another chance again; and you're only thirty," said the captain.

"I wish they'd ask me," said Dingan's partner with a sigh, as he looked at Lablache. "I want my chance bad, though we've done well here—good gosh, yes, all through Dingan."

"The winters, they go queeck in Groise," said Lablache. "It is life all the time, trade all the time, plenty to do and see—and a bon fortune to make, bagosh!"

"Your old home was in Nove Scotia, wasn't it, Dingan?" asked the captain in a low voice. "I kem from Connecticut, and I was East to my village las' year. It was good seein' all my old friends again; but I kem back content, I kem back full of home-feelin's and content. You'll like the trip, Dingan. It'll do you good." Dingan drew himself up with a start. "All right. I guess I'll do it. Let's figure up again," he said to his partner with a reckless air.

With a smothered cry Mitiahwe turned and fled into the darkness, and back to the lodge. The lodge was empty. She threw herself upon the great couch in an agony of despair.

A half-hour went by. Then she rose, and began to prepare supper. Her face was aflame, her manner was determined, and once or twice her hand went to her belt, as though to assure herself of something.

Never had the lodge looked so bright and cheerful; never had she prepared so appetising a supper; never had the great couch seemed so soft and rich with furs, so homelike and so inviting after a long day's work. Never had Mitiahwe seemed so good to look at, so graceful and alert and refined—suffering does its work even in the wild woods, with "wild people." Never had the lodge such an air of welcome and peace and home as to-night; and so Dingan thought as he drew aside the wide curtains of deerskin and entered.

Mitiahwe was bending over the fire and appeared not to hear him.

"Mitiahwe," he said gently.

She was singing to herself to an Indian air the words of a song Dingan had taught her:

"Open the door: cold is the night, and my feet are heavy,
Heap up the fire, scatter upon it the cones and the scented leaves;
Spread the soft robe on the couch for the chief that returns,
Bring forth the cup of remembrance—"

It was like a low recitative, and it had a plaintive cadence, as of a dove that mourned.

"Mitiahwe," he said in a louder voice, but with a break in it too; for it all rushed upon him, all that she had been to him—all that had made the great West glow with life, made the air sweeter, the grass greener, the trees more companionable and human: who it was that had given the waste places a voice. Yet—yet, there were his own people in the East, there was another life waiting for him, there was the life of ambition and wealth, and, and home—and children.

His eyes were misty as she turned to him with a little cry of surprise, how much natural and how much assumed—for she had heard him enter—it would have been hard to say. She was a woman, and therefore the daughter of pretence even when most real. He caught her by both arms as she shyly but eagerly came to him. "Good girl, good little girl," he said. He looked round him. "Well, I've never seen our lodge look nicer than it does to-night; and the fire, and the pot on the fire, and the smell of the pine-cones, and the cedar-boughs, and the skins, and—"

"And everything," she said, with a queer little laugh, as she moved away again to turn the steaks on the fire. Everything! He started at the word. It was so strange that she should use it by accident, when but a little while ago he had been ready to choke the wind out of a man's body for using it concerning herself.

It stunned him for a moment, for the West, and the life apart from the world of cities, had given him superstition, like that of the Indians, whose life he had made his own.

Herself—to leave her here, who had been so much to him? As true as the sun she worshipped, her eyes had never lingered on another man since she came to his lodge; and, to her mind, she was as truly sacredly married to him as though a thousand priests had spoken, or a thousand Medicine Men had made their incantations. She was his woman and he was her man. As he chatted to her, telling her of much that he had done that day, and wondering how he could tell her of all he had done, he kept looking round the lodge, his eye resting on this or that; and everything had its own personal history, had become part of their lodge-life, because it had a use as between him and her, and not a conventional domestic place. Every skin, every utensil, every pitcher and bowl and pot and curtain, had been with them at one time or another, when it became of importance and renowned in the story of their days and deeds.

How could he break it to her—that he was going to visit his own people, and that she must be alone with her mother all winter, to await his return in the spring? His return? As he watched her sitting beside him, helping him to his favourite dish, the close, companionable trust and gentleness of her, her exquisite cleanness and grace in his eyes, he asked himself if, after all, it was not true that he would return in the spring. The years had passed without his seriously thinking of this inevitable day. He had put it off and off, content to live each hour as it came and take no real thought for the future; and yet, behind all was the warning fact that he must go one day, and that Mitiahwe could not go with him. Her mother must have known that when she let Mitiahwe come to him. Of course; and, after all, she would find another mate, a better mate, one of her own people.

But her hand was in his now, and it was small and very warm, and suddenly he shook with anger at the thought of one like Breaking Rock taking her to his wigwam; or Lablache—this roused him to an inward fury; and Mitiahwe saw and guessed the struggle that was going on in him, and she leaned her head against his shoulder, and once she raised his hand to her lips, and said, "My chief!"

Then his face cleared again, and she got him his pipe and filled it, and held a coal to light it; and, as the smoke curled up, and he leaned back contentedly for the moment, she went to the door, drew open the curtains, and, stepping outside, raised her eyes to the horseshoe. Then she said softly to the sky: "O Sun, great Father, have pity on me, for I love him, and would keep him. And give me bone of his bone, and one to nurse at my breast that is of him. O Sun, pity me this night, and be near me when I speak to him, and hear what I say!"

"What are you doing out there, Mitiahwe?" Dingan cried; and when she entered again he beckoned her to him. "What was it you were saying? Who were you speaking to?" he asked. "I heard your voice."

"I was thanking the Sun for his goodness to me. I was speaking for the thing that is in my heart, that is life of my life," she added vaguely.

"Well, I have something to say to you, little girl," he said, with an effort.

She remained erect before him waiting for the blow—outwardly calm, inwardly crying out in pain. "Do you think you could stand a little parting?" he asked, reaching out and touching her shoulder.

"I have been alone before—for five days," she answered quietly.

"But it must be longer this time."

"How long?" she asked, with eyes fixed on his. "If it is more than a week I will go too."

"It is longer than a month," he said. "Then I will go."

"I am going to see my people," he faltered.

"By the Ste. Anne?"

He nodded. "It is the last chance this year; but I will come back— in the spring."

As he said it he saw her shrink, and his heart smote him. Four years such as few men ever spent, and all the luck had been with him, and the West had got into his bones! The quiet, starry nights, the wonderful days, the hunt, the long journeys, the life free of care, and the warm lodge; and, here, the great couch—ah, the cheek pressed to his, the lips that whispered at his ear, the smooth arm round his neck. It all rushed upon him now. His people? His people in the East, who had thwarted his youth, vexed and cramped him, saw only evil in his widening desires, and threw him over when he came out West—the scallywag, they called him, who had never wronged a man or-or a woman! Never—wronged-a-woman? The question sprang to his lips now. Suddenly he saw it all in a new light. White or brown or red, this heart and soul and body before him were all his, sacred to him; he was in very truth her "Chief."

Untutored as she was, she read him, felt what was going on in him. She saw the tears spring to his eyes. Then, coming close to him she said softly, slowly: "I must go with you if you go, because you must be with me when—oh, hai-yai, my chief, shall we go from here? Here in this lodge wilt thou be with thine own people—thine own, thou and I—and thine to come." The great passion in her heart made the lie seem very truth.

With a cry he got to his feet, and stood staring at her for a moment, scarcely comprehending; then suddenly he clasped her in his arms.

"Mitiahwe—Mitiahwe, oh, my little girl!" he cried. "You and me—and our own—our own people!" Kissing her, he drew her down beside him on the couch. "Tell me again—it is so at last?" he said, and she whispered in his ear once more.

In the middle of the night he said to her, "Some day, perhaps, we will go East—some day, perhaps."

"But now?" she asked softly.

"Not now—not if I know it," he answered. "I've got my heart nailed to the door of this lodge."

As he slept she got quietly out, and, going to the door of the lodge, reached up a hand and touched the horse-shoe.

"Be good Medicine to me," she said. Then she prayed. "O Sun, pity me that it may be as I have said to him. O pity me, great Father!"

In the days to come Swift Wing said that it was her Medicine; when her hand was burned to the wrist in the dark ritual she had performed with the Medicine Man the night that Mitiahwe fought for her man—but Mitiahwe said it was her Medicine, the horse-shoe, which brought one of Dingan's own people to the lodge, a little girl with Mitiahwe's eyes and form and her father's face. Truth has many mysteries, and the faith of the woman was great; and so it was that, to the long end, Mitiahwe kept her man. But truly she was altogether a woman, and had good fortune.

ONCE AT RED MAN'S RIVER

"It's got to be settled to-night, Nance. This game is up here, up for ever. The redcoat police from Ottawa are coming, and they'll soon be roostin' in this post; the Injuns are goin', the buffaloes are most gone, and the fur trade's dead in these parts. D'ye see?"

The woman did not answer the big, broad-shouldered man bending over her, but remained looking into the fire with wide, abstracted eyes and a face somewhat set.

"You and your brother Bantry's got to go. This store ain't worth a cent now. The Hudson's Bay Company'll come along with the redcoats, and they'll set up a nice little Sunday-school business here for what they call 'agricultural settlers.' There'll be a railway, and the Yankees'll send up their marshals to work with the redcoats on the border, and—"

"And the days of smuggling will be over," put in the girl in a low voice.
"No more bull-wackers and muleskinners 'whooping it up'; no more
Blackfeet and Piegans drinking alcohol and water, and cutting each
others' throats. A nice quiet time coming on the border, Abe, eh?"

The man looked at her queerly. She was not prone to sarcasm, she had not been given to sentimentalism in the past; she had taken the border-life as it was, had looked it straight between the eyes. She had lived up to it, or down to it, without any fuss, as good as any man in any phase of the life, and the only white woman in this whole West country. It was not in the words, but in the tone, that Abe Hawley found something unusual and defamatory.

"Why, gol darn it, Nance, what's got into you? You bin a man out West, as good a pioneer as ever was on the border. But now you don't sound friendly to what's been the game out here, and to all of us that've been risking our lives to get a livin'."

"What did I say?" asked the girl, unmoved.

"It ain't what you said, it's the sound o' your voice."

"You don't know my voice, Abe. It ain't always the same. You ain't always about; you don't always hear it."

He caught her arm suddenly. "No, but I want to hear it always. I want to be always where you are, Nance. That's what's got to be settled to-day—to-night."

"Oh, it's got to be settled to-night!" said the girl meditatively, kicking nervously at a log on the fire. "It takes two to settle a thing like that, and there's only one says it's got to be settled. Maybe it takes more than two—or three—to settle a thing like that." Now she laughed mirthlessly.

The man started, and his face flushed with anger; then he put a hand on himself, drew a step back, and watched her.

"One can settle a thing, if there's a dozen in it. You see, Nance, you and Bantry's got to close out. He's fixing it up to-night over at Dingan's Drive, and you can't go it alone when you quit this place. Now, it's this way: you can go West with Bantry, or you can go North with me. Away North there's buffalo and deer, and game aplenty, up along the Saskatchewan, and farther up on the Peace River. It's going to be all right up there for half a lifetime, and we can have it in our own way yet. There'll be no smuggling, but there'll be trading, and land to get; and, mebbe, there'd be no need of smuggling, for we can make it, I know how—good white whiskey—and we'll still have this free life for our own. I can't make up my mind to settle down to a clean collar and going to church on Sundays, and all that. And the West's in your bones too. You look like the West—"

The girl's face brightened with pleasure, and she gazed at him steadily.

"You got its beauty and its freshness, and you got its heat and cold—"

She saw the tobacco-juice stain at the corners of his mouth, she became conscious of the slight odour of spirits in the air, and the light in her face lowered in intensity.

"You got the ways of the deer in your walk, the song o' the birds in your voice; and you're going North with me, Nance, for I bin talkin' to you stiddy four years. It's a long time to wait on the chance, for there's always women to be got, same as others have done—men like Dingan with Injun girls, and men like Tobey with half-breeds. But I ain't bin lookin' that way. I bin lookin' only towards you." He laughed eagerly, and lifted a tin cup of whiskey standing on a table near. "I'm lookin' towards you now, Nance.

Your health and mine together. It's got to be settled now. You got to go to the 'Cific Coast with Bantry, or North with me."

The girl jerked a shoulder and frowned a little. He seemed so sure of himself.

"Or South with Nick Pringle, or East with someone else," she said quizzically. "There's always four quarters to the compass, even when Abe Hawley thinks he owns the world and has a mortgage on eternity. I'm not going West with Bantry, but there's three other points that's open."

With an oath the man caught her by the shoulders, and swung her round to face him. He was swelling with anger. "You—Nick Pringle, that trading cheat, that gambler! After four years, I—"

"Let go my shoulders," she said quietly. "I'm not your property. Go and get some Piegan girl to bully. Keep your hands off. I'm not a bronco for you to bit and bridle. You've got no rights. You—" Suddenly she relented, seeing the look in his face, and realising that, after all, it was a tribute to herself that she could keep him for four years and rouse him to such fury—"but yes, Abe," she added, "you have some rights. We've been good friends all these years, and you've been all right out here. You said some nice things about me just now, and I liked it, even if it was as if you learned it out of a book. I've got no po'try in me; I'm plain homespun. I'm a sapling, I'm not any prairie-flower, but I like when I like, and I like a lot when I like. I'm a bit of hickory, I'm not a prairie-flower—"

"Who said you was a prairie-flower? Did I? Who's talking about prairie- flowers—"

He stopped suddenly, turned round at the sound of a footstep behind him, and saw, standing in a doorway leading to another room, a man who was digging his knuckles into his eyes and stifling a yawn. He was a refined-looking stripling of not more than twenty-four, not tall, but well made, and with an air of breeding, intensified rather than hidden by his rough clothes.

"Je-rick-ety! How long have I slept?" he said, blinking at the two beside the fire. "How long?" he added, with a flutter of anxiety in his tone.

"I said I'd wake you," said the girl, coming forwards. "You needn't have worried."

"I don't worry," answered the young man. "I dreamed myself awake, I suppose. I got dreaming of redcoats and U. S. marshals, and an ambush in the Barfleur Coulee, and—" He saw a secret, warning gesture from the girl, and laughed, then turned to Abe and looked him in the face. "Oh, I know him! Abe Hawley's all O. K.—I've seen him over at Dingan's Drive. Honour among rogues. We're all in it. How goes it—all right?" he added carelessly to Hawley, and took a step forwards, as though to shake hands. Seeing the forbidding look by which he was met, however, he turned to the girl again, as Hawley muttered something they could not hear.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"It's nine o'clock," answered the girl, her eyes watching his every movement, her face alive.

"Then the moon's up almost?"

"It'll be up in an hour."

"Jerickety! Then I've got to get ready." He turned to the other room again and entered.

"College pup!" said Hawley under his breath savagely. "Why didn't you tell me he was here?"

"Was it any of your business, Abe?" she rejoined quietly.

"Hiding him away here—"

"Hiding? Who's been hiding him? He's doing what you've done. He's smuggling—the last lot for the traders over by Dingan's Drive. He'll get it there by morning. He has as much right here as you. What's got into you, Abe?"

"What does he know about the business? Why, he's a college man from the East. I've heard o' him. Ain't got no more sense for this life than a dicky-bird. White-faced college pup! What's he doing out here? If you're a friend o' his, you'd better look after him. He's green."

"He's going East again," she said, "and if I don't go West with Bantry, or South over to Montana with Nick Pringle, or North—"

"Nancy—" His eyes burned, his lips quivered.

She looked at him and wondered at the power she had over this bully of the border, who had his own way with most people, and was one of the most daring fighters, hunters, and smugglers in the country. He was cool, hard, and well-in-hand in his daily life, and yet, where she was concerned, "went all to pieces," as someone else had said about himself to her.

She was not without the wiles and tact of her sex. "You go now, and come back, Abe," she said in a soft voice. "Come back in an hour. Come back then, and I'll tell you which way I'm going from here."

He was all right again. "It's with you, Nancy," he said eagerly. "I bin waiting four years."

As he closed the door behind him the "college pup" entered the room again. "Oh, Abe's gone!" he said excitedly. "I hoped you'd get rid of the old rip-roarer. I wanted to be alone with you for a while. I don't really need to start yet. With the full moon I can do it before daylight." Then, with quick warmth, "Ah, Nancy, Nancy, you're a flower— the flower of all the prairies," he added, catching her hand and laughing into her eyes.

She flushed, and for a moment seemed almost bewildered. His boldness, joined to an air of insinuation and understanding, had influenced her greatly from the first moment they had met two months ago, as he was going South on his smuggling enterprise. The easy way in which he had talked to her, the extraordinary sense he seemed to have of what was going on in her mind, the confidential meaning in voice and tone and words had, somehow, opened up a side of her nature hitherto unexplored. She had talked with him freely then, for it was only when he left her that he said what he instinctively knew she would remember till they met again. His quick comments, his indirect but acute questions, his exciting and alluring reminiscences of the East, his subtle yet seemingly frank compliments, had only stimulated a new capacity in her, evoked comparisons of this delicate-looking, fine-faced gentleman with the men of the West by whom she was surrounded. But later he appeared to stumble into expressions of admiration for her, as though he was carried off his feet and had been stunned by her charm. He had done it all like a master. He had not said that she was beautiful—she knew she was not— but that she was wonderful, and fascinating, and with "something about her" he had never seen in all his life, like her own prairies, thrilling, inspiring, and adorable. His first look at her had seemed full of amazement. She had noticed that, and thought it meant only that he was surprised to find a white girl out here among smugglers, hunters, squaw- men, and Indians. But he said that the first look at her had made him feel things-feel life and women different from ever before; and he had never seen anyone like her, nor a face with so much in it. It was all very brilliantly done.

"You make me want to live," he had said, and she, with no knowledge of the nuances of language, had taken it literally, and had asked him if it had been his wish to die; and he had responded to her mistaken interpretation of his meaning, saying that he had had such sorrow he had not wanted to live. As he said it his face looked, in truth, overcome by some deep inward care; so that there came a sort of feeling she had never had so far for any man—that he ought to have someone to look after him. This was the first real stirring of the maternal and protective spirit in her towards men, though it had shown itself amply enough regarding animals and birds. He had said he had not wanted to live, and yet he had come out West in order to try and live, to cure the trouble that had started in his lungs. The Eastern doctors had told him that the rough outdoor life would cure him, or nothing would, and he had vanished from the college walls and the pleasant purlieus of learning and fashion into the wilds. He had not lied directly to her when he said that he had had deep trouble; but he had given the impression that he was suffering from wrongs which had broken his spirit and ruined his health. Wrongs there certainly had been in his life, by whomever committed.

Two months ago he had left this girl with her mind full of memories of what he had said to her, and there was something in the sound of the slight cough following his farewell words which had haunted her ever since. Her tremendous health and energy, the fire of life burning so brightly in her, reached out towards this man living on so narrow a margin of force, with no reserve for any extra strain, with just enough for each day's use and no more. Four hours before he had come again with his team of four mules and an Indian youth, having covered forty miles since his last stage. She was at the door and saw him coming while he was yet along distance off. Some instinct had told her to watch that afternoon, for she knew of his intended return and of his dangerous enterprise. The Indians had trailed south and east, the traders had disappeared with them, her brother Bantry had gone up and over to Dingan's Drive, and, save for a few loiterers and last hangers-on, she was alone with what must soon be a deserted post; its walls, its great enclosed yard, and its gun-platforms (for it had been fortified) left for law and order to enter upon, in the persons of the red-coated watchmen of the law.

Out of the South, from over the border, bringing the last great smuggled load of whiskey which was to be handed over at Dingan's Drive, and then floated on Red Man's River to settlements up North, came the "college pup," Kelly Lambton, worn out, dazed with fatigue, but smiling too, for a woman's face was ever a tonic to his blood since he was big enough to move in life for himself. It needed courage

—or recklessness—to run the border now; for, as Abe Hawley had said, the American marshals were on the pounce, the red-coated mounted police were coming west from Ottawa, and word had winged its way along the prairie that these redcoats were only a few score miles away, and might be at Fort Fair Desire at any moment. The trail to Dingan's Drive lay past it. Through Barfleur Coulee, athwart a great open stretch of country, along a wooded belt, and then, suddenly, over a ridge, Dingan's Drive and Red Man's River would be reached.

The Government had a mind to make an example, if necessary, by killing some smugglers in conflict, and the United States marshals had been goaded by vanity and anger at one or two escapes "to have something for their money," as they said. That, in their language, meant, "to let the red run," and Kelly Lambton had none too much blood to lose.

He looked very pale and beaten as he held Nance Machell's hands now, and called her a prairie-flower, as he had done when he left her two months before. On his arrival but now he had said little, for he saw that she was glad to see him, and he was dead for sleep, after thirty-six hours of ceaseless travel and watching and danger. Now, with the most perilous part of his journey still before him, and worn physically as he was, his blood was running faster as he looked into the girl's face, and something in her abundant force and bounding life drew him to her. Such vitality in a man like Abe Hawley would have angered him almost, as it did a little time ago, when Abe was there; but possessed by the girl, it roused in him a hunger to draw from the well of her perfect health, from the unused vigour of her being, something for himself. The touch of her hands warmed him, in the fulness of her life, in the strong eloquence of face and form, he forgot she was not beautiful. The lightness passed from his words, and his face became eager.

"Flower, yes, the flower of the life of the West—that's what I mean," he said. "You are like an army marching. When I look at you, my blood runs faster. I want to march too. When I hold your hand I feel that life's worth living—I want to do things."

She drew her hand away rather awkwardly. She had not now that command of herself which had ever been easy with the men of the West, except, perhaps, with Abe Hawley when—

But with an attempt, only half-meant, to turn the topic, she said: "You must be starting if you want to get through to-night. If the redcoats catch you this side of Barfleur Coulee, or in the Coulee itself, you'll stand no chance. I heard they was only thirty miles north this afternoon. Maybe they'll come straight on here to-night, instead of camping. If they have news of your coming, they might. You can't tell."

"You're right." He caught her hand again. "I've got to be going now. But Nance—Nance—Nancy, I want to stay here, here with you; or to take you with me."

She drew back. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Take me with you—me— where?"

"East—away down East."

Her brain throbbed, her pulses beat so hard. She scarcely knew what to say, did not know what she said. "Why do you do this kind of thing? Why do you smuggle?" she asked. "You wasn't brought up to this."

"To get this load of stuff through is life and death to me," he answered. "I've made six thousand dollars out here. That's enough to start me again in the East, where I lost everything. But I've got to have six hundred dollars clear for the travel—railways and things; and I'm having this last run to get it. Then I've finished with the West, I guess. My health's better; the lung is closed up, I've only got a little cough now and again; and I'm off East. I don't want to go alone." He suddenly caught her in his arms. "I want you—you, to go with me, Nancy—Nance!"

Her brain swam. To leave the West behind, to go East to a new life full of pleasant things, as this man's wife! Her great heart rose, and suddenly the mother in her as well as the woman in her was captured by his wooing. She had never known what it was to be wooed like this.

She was about to answer, when there came a sharp knock at the door leading from the backyard, and Lambton's Indian lad entered. "The soldier—he come—many. I go over the ridge; I see. They come quick here," he said.

Nance gave a startled cry, and Lambton turned to the other room for his pistols, overcoat, and cap, when there was the sound of horses' hoofs, the door suddenly opened, and an officer stepped inside.

"You're wanted for smuggling, Lambton," he said brusquely. "Don't stir!"
In his hand was a revolver.

"Oh, bosh! Prove it," answered the young man, pale and startled, but cool in speech and action. "We'll prove it all right. The stuff is hereabouts." The girl said something to the officer in the Chinook language. She saw he did not understand. Then she spoke quickly to Lambton in the same tongue.

"Keep him here a bit," she said. "His men haven't come yet. Your outfit is well hid. I'll see if I can get away with it before they find it. They'll follow, and bring you with them, that's sure. So if I have luck and get through, we'll meet at Dingan's Drive."

Lambton's face brightened. He quickly gave her a few directions in Chinook, and told her what to do at Dingan's if she got there first. Then she was gone. The officer did not understand what Nance had said, but he realised that, whatever she intended to do, she had an advantage over him. With an unnecessary courage he had ridden on alone to make his capture, and, as it proved, without prudence. He had got his man, but he had not got the smuggled whiskey and alcohol he had come to seize. There was no time to be lost. The girl had gone before he realised it. What had she said to the prisoner? He was foolish enough to ask Lambton, and Lambton replied coolly: "She said she'd get you some supper, but she guessed it would have to be cold—What's your name? Are you a colonel, or a captain, or only a principal private?"

"I am Captain MacFee, Lambton. And you'll now bring me where your outfit is. March!"

The pistol was still in his hand, and he had a determined look in his eye. Lambton saw it. He was aware of how much power lay in the threatening face before him, and how eager that power was to make itself felt, and provide "Examples"; but he took his chances.

"I'll march all right," he answered, "but I'll march to where you tell me. You can't have it both ways. You can take me, because you've found me, and you can take my outfit too when you've found it; but I'm not doing your work, not if I know it."

There was a blaze of anger in the eyes of the officer, and it looked for an instant as though something of the lawlessness of the border was going to mark the first step of the Law in the Wilderness, but he bethought himself in time, and said quietly, yet in a voice which Lambton knew he must heed:

"Put on your things-quick."

When this was accomplished, and MacFee had secured the smuggler's pistols, he said again, "March, Lambton."

Lambton marched through the moonlit night towards the troop of men who had come to set up the flag of order in the plains and hills, and as he went his keen ear heard his own mules galloping away down towards the Barfleur Coulee. His heart thumped in his breast. This girl, this prairie-flower, was doing this for him, was risking her life, was breaking the law for him. If she got through, and handed over the whiskey to those who were waiting for it, and it got bundled into the boats going North before the redcoats reached Dingan's Drive, it would be as fine a performance as the West had ever seen; and he would be six hundred dollars to the good. He listened to the mules galloping, till the sounds had died into the distance, but he saw now that his captor had heard too, and that the pursuit would be desperate.

A half-hour later it began, with MacFee at the head, and a dozen troopers pounding behind, weary, hungry, bad-tempered, ready to exact payment for their hardships and discouragement.

They had not gone a dozen miles when a shouting horseman rode furiously on them from behind. They turned with carbines cocked, but it was Abe Hawley who cursed them, flung his fingers in their faces, and rode on harder and harder. Abe had got the news from one of Nancy's half-breeds, and, with the devil raging in his heart, had entered on the chase. His spirit was up against them all; against the Law represented by the troopers camped at Fort Fair Desire, against the troopers and their captain speeding after Nancy Machell—his Nonce, who was risking her life and freedom for the hated, pale-faced smuggler riding between the troopers; and his spirit was up against Nance herself.

Nance had said to him, "Come back in an hour," and he had come back to find her gone. She had broken her word. She had deceived him. She had thrown the four years of his waiting to the winds, and a savage lust was in his heart, which would not be appeased till he had done some evil thing to someone.

The girl and the Indian lad were pounding through the night with ears strained to listen for hoof-beats coming after, with eyes searching forward into the trail for swollen creeks and direful obstructions. Through Barfleur Coulee it was a terrible march, for there was no road, and again and again they were nearly overturned, while wolves hovered in their path, ready to reap a midnight harvest. But once in the open again, with the full moonlight on their trail, the girl's spirits rose. If she

could do this thing for the man who had looked into her eyes as no one had ever done, what a finish to her days in the West! For they were finished, finished for ever, and she was going—she was going East; not West with Bantry, nor South with Nick Pringle, nor North with Abe Hawley, ah, Abe Hawley, he had been a good friend, he had a great heart, he was the best man of all the western men she had known; but another man had come from the East, a man who had roused something in her never felt before, a man who had said she was wonderful; and he needed someone to take good care of him, to make him love life again. Abe would have been all right if Lambton had never come, and she had meant to marry Abe in the end; but it was different now, and Abe must get over it. Yet she had told Abe to come back in an hour. He was sure to do it; and, when he had done it, and found her gone on this errand, what would he do? She knew what he would do. He would hurt someone. He would follow too. But at Dingan's Drive, if she reached it before the troopers and before Abe, and did the thing she had set out to do; and, because no whiskey could be found, Lambton must go free; and they all stood there together, what would be the end? Abe would be terrible; but she was going East, not North, and when the time came she would face it and put things right somehow.

The night seemed endless to her fixed and anxious eyes and mind, yet dawn came, and there had fallen no sound of hoof-beats on her ear. The ridge above Dingan's Drive was reached and covered, but yet there was no sign of her pursuers. At Red Man's River she delivered her load of contraband to the traders waiting for it, and saw it loaded into the boats and disappear beyond the wooded bend above Dingan's.

Then she collapsed into the arms of her brother Bantry, and was carried, fainting, into Dingan's Lodge. A half-hour later MacFee and his troopers and Lambton came. MacFee grimly searched the post and the shore, but he saw by the looks of all that he had been foiled. He had no proof of anything, and Lambton must go free.

"You've fooled us," he said to Nance sourly, yet with a kind of admiration too. "Through you they got away with it. But I wouldn't try it again, if I were you."

"Once is enough," answered the girl laconically, as Lambton, set free, caught both her hands in his and whispered in her ear.

MacFee turned to the others. "You'd better drop this kind of thing," he said. "I mean business." They saw the troopers by the horses, and nodded.

"Well, we was about quit of it anyhow," said Bantry. "We've had all we want out here."

A loud laugh went up, and it was still ringing when there burst into the group, out of the trail, Abe Hawley, on foot.

He looked round the group savagely till his eyes rested on Nance and Lambton. "I'm last in," he said in a hoarse voice. "My horse broke its leg cutting across to get here before her—" He waved a hand towards Nance. "It's best stickin' to old trails, not tryin' new ones." His eyes were full of hate as he looked at Lambton. "I'm keeping to old trails. I'm for goin' North, far up, where these two-dollar-a-day and hash-and-clothes people ain't come yet." He made a contemptuous gesture toward MacFee and his troopers. "I'm goin' North—" He took a step forward and fixed his bloodshot eyes on Nance. "I say I'm goin' North. You comin' with me, Nance?" He took off his cap to her.

He was haggard, his buckskins were torn, his hair was dishevelled, and he limped a little; but he was a massive and striking figure, and MacFee watched him closely, for there was that in his eyes which meant trouble. "You said, 'Come back in an hour,' Nance, and I come back, as I said I would," he went on. "You didn't stand to your word. I've come to git it. I'm goin' North, Nance, and I bin waitin' for four years for you to go with me. Are you comin'?"

His voice was quiet, but it had a choking kind of sound, and it struck strangely in the ears of all. MacFee came nearer.

"Are you comin' with me, Nance, dear?"

She reached a hand towards Lambton, and he took it, but she did not speak. Something in Abe's eyes overwhelmed her—something she had never seen before, and it seemed to stifle speech in her. Lambton spoke instead.

"She's going East with me," he said. "That's settled."

MacFee started. Then he caught Abe's arm. "Wait!" he said peremptorily. "Wait one minute." There was something in his voice which held Abe back for the instant.

"You say she is going East with you," MacFee said sharply to Lambton. "What for?" He fastened Lambton with his eyes, and Lambton quailed. "Have you told her you've got a wife—down East? I've got your history, Lambton. Have you told her that you've got a wife you married when you were at college—and as good a girl as ever lived?"

It had come with terrible suddenness even to Lambton, and he was too dazed to make any reply. With a cry of shame and anger Nancy started back. Growling with rage and hate, Abe Hawley sprang toward Lambton, but the master of the troopers stepped between.

No one could tell who moved first, or who first made the suggestion, for the minds of all were the same, and the general purpose was instantaneous; but in the fraction of a minute Lambton, under menace, was on his hands and knees crawling to the riverside. Watchful, but not interfering, the master of the troopers saw him set adrift in a canoe without a paddle, while he was pelted with mud from the shore.

The next morning at sunrise Abe Hawley and the girl he had waited for so long started on the North trail together, MacFee, master of the troopers and justice of the peace, handing over the marriage lines.

THE STROBE OF THE HOUR

"They won't come to-night—sure."

The girl looked again towards the west, where, here and there, bare poles, or branches of trees, or slips of underbrush marked a road made across the plains through the snow. The sun was going down golden red, folding up the sky a wide soft curtain of pink and mauve and deep purple merging into the fathomless blue, where already the stars were beginning to quiver. The house stood on the edge of a little forest, which had boldly asserted itself in the wide flatness. At this point in the west the prairie merged into an undulating territory, where hill and wood rolled away from the banks of the Saskatchewan, making another England in beauty. The forest was a sort of advance-post of that land of beauty.

Yet there was beauty too on this prairie, though there was nothing to the east but snow and the forest so far as eye could see. Nobility and peace and power brooded over the white world.

As the girl looked, it seemed as though the bosom of the land rose and fell. She had felt this vibrating life beat beneath the frozen surface. Now, as she gazed, she smiled sadly to herself, with drooping eyelids looking out from beneath strong brows.

"I know you—I know you," she said aloud. "You've got to take your toll. And when you're lying asleep like that, or pretending to, you reach up- and kill. And yet you can be kind-ah, but you can be kind and beautiful! But you must have your toll one way or t'other." She sighed and paused; then, after a moment, looking along the trail—"I don't expect they'll come to-night, and mebbe not to-morrow, if—if they stay for THAT."

Her eyes closed, she shivered a little. Her lips drew tight, and her face seemed suddenly to get thinner. "But dad wouldn't—no, he couldn't, not considerin'—" Again she shut her eyes in pain.

Her face was now turned from the western road by which she had expected her travellers, and towards the east, where already the snow was taking on a faint bluish tint, a reflection of the sky deepening nightwards in that half-circle of the horizon. Distant and a little bleak and cheerless the half-circle was looking now.

"No one—not for two weeks," she said, in comment on the eastern trail, which was so little frequented in winter, and this year had been less travelled than ever. "It would be nice to have a neighbour," she added, as she faced the west and the sinking sun again. "I get so lonely—just minutes I get lonely. But it's them minutes that seem to count more than all the rest when they come. I expect that's it—we don't live in months and years, but just in minutes. It doesn't take long for an earthquake

to do its work—it's seconds then. . . . P'r'aps dad won't even come to-morrow," she added, as she laid her hand on the latch. "It never seemed so long before, not even when he's been away a week." She laughed bitterly. "Even bad company's better than no company at all. Sure. And Mickey has been here always when dad's been away past times. Mickey was a fool, but he was company; and mebbe he'd have been better company if he'd been more of a scamp and less a fool. I dunno, but I really think he would. Bad company doesn't put you off so."

There was a scratching at the inside of the door. "My, if I didn't forget Shako," she said, "and he dying for a run!"

She opened the door quickly, and out jumped a Russian dog of almost full breed, with big, soft eyes like those of his mistress, and with the air of the north in every motion—like his mistress also.

"Come, Shako, a run—a run!"

An instant after she was flying off on a path towards the woods, her short skirts flying and showing limbs as graceful and shapely as those of any woman of that world of social grace which she had never seen; for she was a prairie girl through and through, born on the plains and fed on its scanty fare—scanty as to variety, at least. Backwards and forwards they ran, the girl shouting like a child of ten,—she was twenty-three, her eyes flashing, her fine white teeth showing, her hands thrown up in sheer excess of animal life, her hair blowing about her face-brown, strong hair, wavy and plentiful.

Fine creature as she was, her finest features were her eyes and her hands. The eyes might have been found in the most savage places; the hands, however, only could have come through breeding. She had got them honestly; for her mother was descended from an old family of the French province. That was why she had the name of Loisette—and had a touch of distinction. It was the strain of the patrician in the full blood of the peasant; but it gave her something which made her what she was—what she had been since a child, noticeable and besought, sometimes beloved. It was too strong a nature to compel love often, but it never failed to compel admiration. Not greatly a creature of words, she had become moody of late; and even now, alive with light and feeling and animal life, she suddenly stopped her romp and run, and called the dog to her.

"Heel, Shako!" she said, and made for the door of the little house, which looked so snug and home-like. She paused before she came to the door, to watch the smoke curling up from the chimney straight as a column, for there was not a breath of air stirring. The sun was almost gone and the strong bluish light was settling on everything, giving even the green spruce trees a curious burnished tone.

Swish! Thud! She faced the woods quickly. It was only a sound that she had heard how many hundreds of times! It was the snow slipping from some broad branch of the fir trees to the ground. Yet she started now. Something was on her mind, agitating her senses, affecting her self- control.

"I'll be jumping out of my boots when the fire snaps, or the frost cracks the ice, next," she said aloud contemptuously. "I dunno what's the matter with me. I feel as if someone was hiding somewhere ready to pop out on me. I haven't never felt like that before."

She had formed the habit of talking to herself, for it had seemed at first, as she was left alone when her father went trapping or upon journeys for the Government, that by and by she would start at the sound of her own voice, if she didn't think aloud. So she was given to soliloquy, defying the old belief that people who talked to themselves were going mad. She laughed at that. She said that birds sang to themselves and didn't go mad, and crickets chirruped, and frogs croaked, and owls hooted, and she would talk and not go crazy either. So she talked to herself and to Shako when she was alone.

How quiet it was inside when her light supper was eaten, bread and beans and pea-soup—she had got this from her French mother. Now she sat, her elbows on her knees, her chin on her hands, looking into the fire. Shako was at her feet upon the great musk-ox rug, which her father had got on one of his hunting trips in the Athabasca country years ago. It belonged as she belonged. It breathed of the life of the north-land, for the timbers of the hut were hewn cedar; the rough chimney, the seats, and the shelves on which a few books made a fair show beside the bright tins and the scanty crockery, were of pine; and the horned heads of deer and wapiti made pegs for coats and caps, and rests for guns and rifles. It was a place of comfort; it had an air of well-to-do thrift, even as the girl's dress, though plain, was made of good sound stuff, grey, with a touch of dark red to match the auburn of her hair.

A book lay open in her lap, but she had scarcely tried to read it. She had put it down after a few moments fixed upon it. It had sent her thoughts off into a world where her life had played a part too big for books, too deep for the plummet of any save those who had lived through the storm of life's trials; and life when it is bitter to the young is bitter with an agony the old never know. At last she spoke to herself.

"She knows now. Now she knows what it is, how it feels—your heart like red-hot coals, and something in your head that's like a turnscrew, and you want to die and can't, for you've got to live and suffer."

Again she was quiet, and only the dog's heavy breathing, the snap of the fire, or the crack of a timber in the deadly frost broke the silence. Inside it was warm and bright and home-like; outside it was twenty degrees below zero, and like some vast tomb where life itself was congealed, and only the white stars, low, twinkling, and quizzical, lived-a life of sharp corrosion, not of fire.

Suddenly she raised her head and listened. The dog did the same. None but those whose lives are lived in lonely places can be so acute, so sensitive to sound. It was a feeling delicate and intense, the whole nature getting the vibration. You could have heard nothing had you been there; none but one who was of the wide spaces could have done so. But the dog and the woman felt, and both strained towards the window. Again they heard, and started to their feet. It was far, far away, and still you could not have heard; but now they heard clearly—a cry in the night, a cry of pain and despair. The girl ran to the window and pulled aside the bearskin curtain which had completely shut out the light. Then she stirred the fire, threw a log upon it, snuffed the candles, hastily put on her moccasins, fur coat, wool cap, and gloves, and went to the door quickly, the dog at her heels. Opening it, she stepped out into the night.

"Qui va la? Who is it? Where?" she called, and strained towards the west. She thought it might be her father or Mickey the hired man, or both.

The answer came from the east, out of the homeless, neighbourless, empty east—a cry, louder now. There were only stars, and the night was dark, though not deep dark. She sped along the prairie road as fast as she could, once or twice stopping to call aloud. In answer to her calls the voice sounded nearer and nearer. Now suddenly she left the trail and bore away northward. At last the voice was very near. Presently a figure appeared ahead, staggering towards her.

"Qui va la? Who is it?" she asked.

"Ba'tiste Caron," was the reply in English, in a faint voice. She was beside him in an instant.

"What has happened? Why are you off the trail?" she said, and supported him.

"My Injun stoled my dogs and run off," he replied. "I run after. Then, when I am to come to the trail"—he paused to find the English word, and could not—"encore to this trail I no can. So. Ah, bon Dieu, it has so awful!" He swayed and would have fallen, but she caught him, bore him up. She was so strong, and he was as slight as a girl, though tall.

"When was that?" she asked.

"Two nights ago," he answered, and swayed. "Wait," she said, and pulled a flask from her pocket. "Drink this-quick."

He raised it to his lips, but her hand was still on it, and she only let him take a little. Then she drew it away, though she had almost to use force, he was so eager for it. Now she took a biscuit from her pocket.

"Eat; then some more brandy after," she urged. "Come on; it's not far. See, there's the light," she added cheerily, raising her head towards the hut.

"I saw it just when I have fall down—it safe me. I sit down to die— like that! But it safe me, that light —so. Ah, bon Dieu, it was so far, and I want eat so!" Already he had swallowed the biscuit.

"When did you eat last?" she asked, as she urged him on.

"Two nights—except for one leetla piece of bread—O—O—I fin' it in my pocket. Grace! I have travel so far. Jesu, I think it ees ten thousan' miles I go. But I mus' go on, I mus' go—O—certainement."

The light came nearer and nearer. His footsteps quickened, though he staggered now and then, and went like a horse that has run its race, but is driven upon its course again, going heavily with mouth open and head thrown forwards and down.

"But I mus' to get there, an' you-you will to help me, eh?"

Again he swayed, but her strong arm held him up. As they ran on, in a kind of dog-trot, her hand firm upon his arm—he seemed not to notice it —she became conscious, though it was half dark, of what sort of man she had saved. He was about her own age, perhaps a year or two older, with little, if any, hair upon his face, save a slight moustache. His eyes, deep sunken as they were, she made out were black,

and the face, though drawn and famished, had a handsome look. Presently she gave him another sip of brandy, and he quickened his steps, speaking to himself the while.

"I haf to do it—if I lif. It is to go, go, go, till I get."

Now they came to the hut where the firelight flickered on the window- pane; the door was flung open, and, as he stumbled on the threshold, she helped him into the warm room. She almost pushed him over to the fire.

Divested of his outer coat, muffler, cap, and leggings, he sat on a bench before the fire, his eyes wandering from the girl to the flames, and his hands clasping and unclasping between his knees. His eyes dilating with hunger, he watched her preparations for his supper; and when at last—and she had been but a moment—it was placed before him, his head swam, and he turned faint with the stress of his longing. He would have swallowed a basin of pea-soup at a draught, but she stopped him, holding the basin till she thought he might venture again. Then came cold beans, and some meat which she toasted at the fire and laid upon his plate. They had not spoken since first entering the house, when tears had shone in his eyes, and he had said:

"You have safe—ah, you have safe me, and so I will do it yet by help bon
Dieu—yes."

The meat was done at last, and he sat with a great dish of tea beside him, and his pipe alight.

"What time, if please?" he asked. "I t'ink nine hour, but no sure."

"It is near nine," she said. She hastily tidied up the table after his meal, and then came and sat in her chair over against the wall of the rude fireplace. "Nine—dat is good. The moon rise at 'leven; den I go. I go on," he said, "if you show me de queeck way."

"You go on—how can you go on?" she asked, almost sharply.

"Will you not to show me?" he asked. "Show you what?" she asked abruptly.

"The queeck way to Askatoon," he said, as though surprised that she should ask. "They say me if I get here you will tell me queeck way to Askatoon. Time, he go so fas', an' I have loose a day an' a night, an' I mus' get Askatoon if I lif—I mus' get dere in time. It is all safe to de stroke of de hour, mais, after, it is —bon Dieu—it is hell then. Who shall forgif me—no!"

"The stroke of the hour—the stroke of the hour!" It beat into her brain. Were they both thinking of the same thing now?

"You will show me queeck way. I mus' be Askatoon in two days, or it is all over," he almost moaned. "Is no man here—I forget dat name, my head go round like a wheel; but I know dis place, an' de good God He help me fin' my way to where I call out, bien sur. Dat man's name I have forget."

"My father's name is John Alroyd," she answered absently, for there were hammering at her brain the words, "The stroke of the hour."

"Ah, now I get—yes. An' your name, it is Loisette Alroy'—ah, I have it in my mind now—Loisette. I not forget dat name, I not forget you—no."

"Why do you want to go the 'quick' way to Askatoon?" she asked.

He puffed a moment at his pipe before he answered her. Presently he said, holding out his pipe, "You not like smoke, mebbe?"

She shook her head in negation, making an impatient gesture.

"I forget ask you," he said. "Dat journee make me forget. When Injun
Jo, he leave me with the dogs, an' I wake up all alone, an' not know my
way—not like Jo, I think I die, it is so bad, so terrible in my head.
Not'ing but snow, not'ing. But dere is de sun; it shine. It say to me,
'Wake up, Ba'tiste; it will be all right bime-bye.' But all time I t'ink
I go mad, for I mus' get Askatoon before—dat."

She started. Had she not used the same word in thinking of Askatoon.
"That," she had said.

"Why do you want to go the 'quick' way to Askatoon?" she asked again, her face pale, her foot beating the floor impatiently.

"To save him before dat!" he answered, as though she knew of what he was speaking and thinking. "What is that?" she asked. She knew now, surely, but she must ask it nevertheless.

"Dat hanging—of Haman," he answered. He nodded to himself. Then he took to gazing into the fire. His lips moved as though talking to himself, and the hand that held the pipe lay forgotten on his knee. "What have you to do with Haman?" she asked slowly, her eyes burning.

"I want safe him—I mus' give him free." He tapped his breast. "It is hereto mak' him free." He still tapped his breast.

For a moment she stood frozen still, her face thin and drawn and white; then suddenly the blood rushed back into her face, and a red storm raged in her eyes.

She thought of the sister, younger than herself, whom Rube Haman had married and driven to her grave within a year—the sweet Lucy, with the name of her father's mother. Lucy had been all English in face and tongue, a flower of the west, driven to darkness by this horse-dealing brute, who, before he was arrested and tried for murder, was about to marry Kate Wimper. Kate Wimper had stolen him from Lucy before Lucy's first and only child was born, the child that could not survive the warm mother-life withdrawn, and so had gone down the valley whither the broken-hearted mother had fled. It was Kate Wimper, who, before that, had waylaid the one man for whom she herself had ever cared, and drawn him from her side by such attractions as she herself would keep for an honest wife, if such she ever chanced to be. An honest wife she would have been had Kate Wimper not crossed the straight path of her life. The man she had loved was gone to his end also, reckless and hopeless, after he had thrown away his chance of a lifetime with Loisette Alroyd. There had been left behind this girl, to whom tragedy had come too young, who drank humiliation with a heart as proud as ever straightly set its course through crooked ways.

It had hurt her, twisted her nature a little, given a fountain of bitterness to her soul, which welled up and flooded her life sometimes. It had given her face no sourness, but it put a shadow into her eyes.

She had been glad when Haman was condemned for murder, for she believed he had committed it, and ten times hanging could not compensate for that dear life gone from their sight—Lucy, the pride of her father's heart. She was glad when Haman was condemned, because of the woman who had stolen him from Lucy, because of that other man, her lover, gone out of her own life. The new hardness in her rejoiced that now the woman, if she had any heart at all, must have it bowed down by this supreme humiliation and wrung by the ugly tragedy of the hempen rope.

And now this man before her, this man with a boy's face, with the dark luminous eyes, whom she had saved from the frozen plains, he had that in his breast which would free Haman, so he had said. A fury had its birth in her at that moment. Something seemed to seize her brain and master it, something so big that it held all her faculties in perfect control, and she felt herself in an atmosphere where all life moved round her mechanically, she herself the only sentient thing, so much greater than all she saw, or all that she realised by her subconscious self. Everything in the world seemed small. How calm it was even with the fury within!

"Tell me," she said quietly—"tell me how you are able to save Haman?"

"He not kill Wakely. It is my brudder Fadette dat kill and get away. Haman he is drunk, and everyt'ing seem to say Haman he did it, an' everyone know Haman is not friend to Wakely. So the juree say he must be hanging. But my brudder he go to die with hawful bad cold queeck, an' he send for the priest an' for me, an' tell all. I go to Governor with the priest, an' Governor gif me dat writing here." He tapped his breast, then took out a wallet and showed the paper to her. "It is life of dat Haman, voici! And so I safe him for my brudder. Dat was a bad boy, Fadette. He was bad all time since he was a baby, an' I t'ink him pretty lucky to die on his bed, an' get absolve, and go to purgatore. If he not have luck like dat he go to hell, an' stay there."

He sighed, and put the wallet back in his breast carefully, his eyes half-shut with weariness, his handsome face drawn and thin, his limbs lax with fatigue.

"If I get Askatoon before de time for dat, I be happy in my heart, for dat brudder off mine he get out of purgatore bime-bye, I t'ink."

His eyes were almost shut, but he drew himself together with a great effort, and added desperately, "No sleep. If I sleep it is all smash. Man say me I can get Askatoon by dat time from here, if I go queeck way across lak'—it is all froze now, dat lak'—an' down dat Foxtail Hills. Is it so, ma'm'selle?"

"By the 'quick' way if you can make it in time," she said; "but it is no way for the stranger to go. There are always bad spots on the ice—it is not safe. You could not find your way."

"I mus' get dere in time," he said desperately. "You can't do it— alone," she said. "Do you want to risk all and lose?"

He frowned in self-suppression. "Long way, I no can get dere in time?" he asked.

She thought a moment. "No; it can't be done by the long way. But there is another way—a third trail, the trail the Gover'ment men made a year ago when they came to survey. It is a good trail. It is blazed in the woods and staked on the plains. You cannot miss. But—but there is so little time." She looked at the clock on the wall. "You cannot leave here much before sunrise, and—"

"I will leef when de moon rise, at eleven," he interjected.

"You have had no sleep for two nights, and no food. You can't last it out," she said calmly.

The deliberate look on his face deepened to stubbornness.

"It is my vow to my brudder—he is in purgatore. An' I mus' do it," he rejoined, with an emphasis there was no mistaking. "You can show me dat way?"

She went to a drawer and took out a piece of paper. Then, with a point of blackened stick, as he watched her and listened, she swiftly drew his route for him.

"Yes, I get it in my head," he said. "I go dat way, but I wish—I wish it was dat queeck way. I have no fear, not'ing. I go w'en dat moon rise—I go, bien sur."

"You must sleep, then, while I get some food for you." She pointed to a couch in a corner. "I will wake you when the moon rises."

For the first time he seemed to realise her, for a moment to leave the thing which consumed him, and put his mind upon her.

"You not happy—you not like me here?" he asked simply; then added quickly, "I am not bad man like me brudder—no."

Her eyes rested on him for a moment as though realising him, while some thought was working in her mind behind.

"No, you are not a bad man," she said. "Men and women are equal on the plains. You have no fear—I have no fear."

He glanced at the rifles on the walls, then back at her. "My mudder, she was good woman. I am glad she did not lif to know what Fadette do." His eyes drank her in for a minute, then he said: "I go sleep now, t'ank you —till moontime."

In a moment his deep breathing filled the room, the only sound save for the fire within and the frost outside.

Time went on. The night deepened.

....

Loisette sat beside the fire, but her body was half-turned from it towards the man on the sofa. She was not agitated outwardly, but within there was that fire which burns up life and hope and all the things that come between us and great issues. It had burned up everything in her except one thought, one powerful motive. She had been deeply wronged, and justice had been about to give "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But the man lying there had come to sweep away the scaffolding of justice —he had come for that.

Perhaps he might arrive at Askatoon before the stroke of the hour, but still he would be too late, for in her pocket now was the Governor's reprieve. The man had slept soundly. His wallet was still in his breast; but the reprieve was with her.

If he left without discovering his loss, and got well on his way, and discovered it then, it would be too late. If he returned—she only saw one step before her, she would wait for that, and deal with it when it came. She was thinking of Lucy, of her own lover ruined and gone. She was calm in her madness.

At the first light of the moon she roused him. She had put food into his fur-coat pocket, and after he had drunk a bowl of hot pea-soup, while she told him his course again, she opened the door, and he passed out into the night. He started forward without a word, but came back again and caught her hand.

"Pardon," he said; "I go forget everyt'ing except dat. But I t'ink what you do for me, it is better than all my life. Bien sur, I will come again, when I get my mind to myself. Ah, but you are beautibul," he said, "an' you not happy. Well, I come again—yes, a Dieu."

He was gone into the night, with the moon silvering the sky, and the steely frost eating into the sentient life of this northern world. Inside the house, with the bearskin blind dropped at the window again, and the fire blazing high, Loisette sat with the Governor's reprieve in her hand. Looking at it, she wondered why it had been given to Ba'tiste Caron, and not to a police-officer. Ah yes, it was plain—Ba'tiste was a woodsman and plainsman, and could go far more safely than a constable, and faster. Ba'tiste had reason for going fast, and he would travel night and day—he was travelling night and day indeed. And now Ba'tiste might get there, but the reprieve would not. He would not be able to stop the hanging of Haman—the hanging of Rube Haman.

A change came over her. Her eyes blazed, her breast heaved now. She had been so quiet, so cold and still. But life seemed moving in her once again. The woman, Kate Wimper, who had helped to send two people to their graves, would now drink the dregs of shame, if she was capable of shame—would be robbed of her happiness, if so be she loved Rube Haman.

She stood up, as though to put the paper in the fire, but paused suddenly at one thought—Rube Haman was innocent of murder.

Even so, he was not innocent of Lucy's misery and death, of the death of the little one who only opened its eyes to the light for an instant, and then went into the dark again. But truly she was justified! When Haman was gone things would go on just the same—and she had been so bitter, her heart had been pierced as with a knife these past three years. Again she held out her hand to the fire, but suddenly she gave a little cry and put her hand to her head. There was Ba'tiste!

What was Ba'tiste to her? Nothing-nothing at all. She had saved his life—even if she wronged Ba'tiste, her debt would be paid. No, she would not think of Ba'tiste. Yet she did not put the paper in the fire, but in the pocket of her dress. Then she went to her room, leaving the door open. The bed was opposite the fire, and, as she lay there—she did not take off her clothes, she knew not why-she could see the flames. She closed her eyes, but could not sleep, and more than once when she opened them she thought she saw Ba'tiste sitting there as he had sat hours before. Why did Ba'tiste haunt her so? What was it he had said in his broken English as he went away?—that he would come back; that she was "beautibul."

All at once as she lay still, her head throbbing, her feet and hands icy cold, she sat up listening. "Ah-again!" she cried. She sprang from her bed, rushed to the door, and strained her eyes into the silver night. She called into the icy void, "Qui va la? Who goes?"

She leaned forwards, her hand at her ear, but no sound came in reply. Once more she called, but nothing answered. The night was all light and frost and silence.

She had only heard, in her own brain, the iteration of Ba'tiste's calling. Would he reach Askatoon in time, she wondered, as she shut the door? Why had she not gone with him and attempted the shorter way the quick way, he had called it? All at once the truth came back upon her, stirring her now. It would do no good for Ba'tiste to arrive in time. He might plead to them all and tell the truth about the reprieve, but it would not avail—Rube Haman would hang. That did not matter—even though he was innocent; but Ba'tiste's brother would be so long in purgatory. And even that would not matter; but she would hurt Ba'tiste—Ba'tiste— Ba'tiste. And Ba'tiste he would know that she—and he had called her "beautibul," that she had—

With a cry she suddenly clothed herself for travel. She put some food and drink in a leather bag and slung them over her shoulder. Then she dropped on a knee and wrote a note to her father, tears falling from her eyes. She heaped wood on the fire and moved towards the door. All at once she turned to the crucifix on the wall which had belonged to her mother, and, though she had followed her father's Protestant religion, she kissed the feet of the sacred figure.

"Oh, Christ, have mercy on me, and bring me safe to my journey's end-in time," she said breathlessly; then she went softly to the door, leaving the dog behind.

It opened, closed, and the night swallowed her. Like a ghost she sped the quick way to Askatoon. She was six hours behind Ba'tiste, and, going hard all the time, it was doubtful if she could get there before the fatal hour.

On the trail Ba'tiste had taken there were two huts where he could rest, and he had carried his blanket slung on his shoulder. The way she went gave no shelter save the trees and caves which had been used to cache buffalo meat and hides in old days. But beyond this there was danger in travelling

by night, for the springs beneath the ice of the three lakes she must, cross made it weak and rotten even in the fiercest weather, and what would no doubt have been death to Ba'tiste would be peril at least to her. Why had she not gone with him?

"He had in his face what was in Lucy's," she said to herself, as she sped on. "She was fine like him, ready to break her heart for those she cared for. My, if she had seen him first instead of—"

She stopped short, for the ice gave way to her foot, and she only sprang back in time to save herself. But she trotted on, mile after mile, the dog-trot of the Indian, head bent forwards, toeing in, breathing steadily but sharply.

The morning came, noon, then a fall of snow and a keen wind, and despair in her heart; but she had passed the danger-spots, and now, if the storm did not overwhelm her, she might get to Askatoon in time. In the midst of the storm she came to one of the caves of which she had known. Here was wood for a fire, and here she ate, and in weariness unspeakable fell asleep. When she waked it was near sun-down, the storm had ceased, and, as on the night before, the sky was stained with colour and drowned in splendour.

"I will do it—I will do it, Ba'tiste!" she called, and laughed aloud into the sunset. She had battled with herself all the way, and she had conquered. Right was right, and Rube Haman must not be hung for what he did not do. Her heart hardened whenever she thought of the woman, but softened again when she thought of Ba'tiste, who had to suffer for the deed of a brother in "purgatore." Once again the night and its silence and loneliness followed her, the only living thing near the trail till long after midnight. After that, as she knew, there were houses here and there where she might have rested, but she pushed on unceasing.

At daybreak she fell in with a settler going to Askatoon with his dogs. Seeing how exhausted she was, he made her ride a few miles upon his sledge; then she sped on ahead again till she came to the borders of Askatoon.

People were already in the streets, and all were tending one way. She stopped and asked the time. It was within a quarter of an hour of the time when Haman was to pay another's penalty. She spurred herself on, and came to the jail blind with fatigue. As she neared the jail she saw her father and Mickey. In amazement her father hailed her, but she would not stop. She was admitted to the prison on explaining that she had a reprieve. Entering a room filled with excited people, she heard a cry.

It came from Ba'tiste. He had arrived but ten minutes before, and, in the Sheriff's presence had discovered his loss. He had appealed in vain.

But now, as he saw the girl, he gave a shout of joy which pierced the hearts of all.

"Ah, you haf it! Say you haf it, or it is no use—he mus' hang. Spik- spik! Ah, my brudder—it is to do him right! Ah, Loisette—bon Dieu, merci!"

For answer she placed the reprieve in the hands of the Sheriff. Then she swayed and fell fainting at the feet of Ba'tiste.

She had come at the stroke of the hour.

When she left for her home again the Sheriff kissed her.

And that was not the only time he kissed her. He did it again six months later, at the beginning of the harvest, when she and Ba'tiste Caron started off on the long trail of life together. None but Ba'tiste knew the truth about the loss of the reprieve, and to him she was "beautibul" just the same, and greatly to be desired.

BUCKMASTER'S BOY

"I bin waitin' for him, an' I'll git him of it takes all winter. I'll git him—plumb."

The speaker smoothed the barrel of his rifle with mittened hand, which had, however, a trigger-finger free. With black eyebrows twitching over sunken grey eyes, he looked doggedly down the frosty valley from the ledge of high rock where he sat. The face was rough and weather-beaten, with the deep tan got in the open life of a land of much sun and little cloud, and he had a beard which, untrimmed and growing wild, made him look ten years older than he was.

"I bin waitin' a durn while," the mountain-man added, and got to his feet slowly, drawing himself out to six and a half feet of burly manhood. The shoulders were, however, a little stooped, and the head was thrust forwards with an eager, watchful look—a habit become a physical characteristic.

Presently he caught sight of a hawk sailing southward along the peaks of the white icebound mountains above, on which the sun shone with such sharp insistence, making sky and mountain of a piece in deep purity and serene stillness.

"That hawk's seen him, mebbe," he said, after a moment. "I bet it went up higher when it got him in its eye. Ef it'd only speak and tell me where he is—ef he's a day, or two days, or ten days north."

Suddenly his eyes blazed and his mouth opened in superstitious amazement, for the hawk stopped almost directly overhead at a great height, and swept round in a circle many times, waveringly, uncertainly. At last it resumed its flight southward, sliding down the mountains like a winged star.

The mountaineer watched it with a dazed expression for a moment longer, then both hands clutched the rifle and half swung it to position involuntarily.

"It's seen him, and it stopped to say so. It's seen him, I tell you, an'
I'll git him. Ef it's an hour, or a day, or a week, it's all the same.
I'm here watchin', waitin' dead on to him, the poison skunk!"

The person to whom he had been speaking now rose from the pile of cedar boughs where he had been sitting, stretched his arms up, then shook himself into place, as does a dog after sleep. He stood for a minute looking at the mountaineer with a reflective, yet a furtively sardonic, look. He was not above five feet nine inches in height, and he was slim and neat; and though his buckskin coat and breeches were worn and even frayed in spots, he had an air of some distinction and of concentrated force. It was a face that men turned to look at twice and shook their heads in doubt afterwards—a handsome, worn, secretive face, in as perfect control as the strings of an instrument under the bow of a great artist. It was the face of a man without purpose in life beyond the moment—watchful, careful, remorselessly determined, an adventurer's asset, the dial-plate of a hidden machinery.

Now he took the handsome meerschaum pipe from his mouth, from which he had been puffing smoke slowly, and said in a cold, yet quiet voice, "How long you been waitin', Buck?"

"A month. He's overdue near that. He always comes down to winter at Fort o' Comfort, with his string of half-breeds, an' Injuns, an' the dogs."

"No chance to get him at the Fort?"

"It ain't so certain. They'd guess what I was doin' there. It's surer here. He's got to come down the trail, an' when I spot him by the Juniper clump"—he jerked an arm towards a spot almost a mile farther up the valley—"I kin scoot up the underbrush a bit and git him—plumb. I could do it from here, sure, but I don't want no mistake. Once only, jest one shot, that's all I want, Sinnet."

He bit off a small piece of tobacco from a black plug Sinnet offered him, and chewed it with nervous fierceness, his eyebrows working, as he looked at the other eagerly. Deadly as his purpose was, and grim and unvarying as his vigil had been, the loneliness had told on him, and he had grown hungry for a human face and human companionship. Why Sinnet had come he had not thought to inquire. Why Sinnet should be going north instead of south had not occurred to him. He only realised that Sinnet was not the man he was waiting for with murder in his heart; and all that mattered to him in life was the coming of his victim down the trail. He had welcomed Sinnet with a sullen eagerness, and had told him in short, detached sentences the dark story of a wrong and a waiting revenge, which brought a slight flush to Sinnet's pale face and awakened a curious light in his eyes.

"Is that your shack—that where you shake down?" Sinnet said, pointing towards a lean-to in the fir trees to the right.

"That's it. I sleep there. It's straight on to the Juniper clump, the front door is." He laughed viciously, grimly. "Outside or inside, I'm on to the Juniper clump. Walk into the parlour?" he added, and drew

open a rough-made door, so covered with green cedar boughs that it seemed of a piece with the surrounding underbrush and trees. Indeed, the little but was so constructed that it could not be distinguished from the woods even a short distance away.

"Can't have a fire, I suppose?" Sinnet asked.

"Not daytimes. Smoke 'd give me away if he suspicioned me," answered the mountaineer. "I don't take no chances. Never can tell."

"Water?" asked Sinnet, as though interested in the surroundings, while all the time he was eyeing the mountaineer furtively—as it were, prying to the inner man, or measuring the strength of the outer man. He lighted a fresh pipe and seated himself on a rough bench beside the table in the middle of the room, and leaned on his elbows, watching.

The mountaineer laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh to hear. "Listen," he said. "You bin a long time out West. You bin in the mountains a good while. Listen."

There was silence. Sinnet listened intently. He heard the faint drip, drip, drip of water, and looked steadily at the back wall of the room.

"There—rock?" he said, and jerked his head towards the sound.

"You got good ears," answered the other, and drew aside a blanket which hung on the back wall of the room. A wooden trough was disclosed hanging under a ledge of rock, and water dripped into it softly, slowly.

"Almost providential, that rock," remarked Sinnet. "You've got your well at your back door. Food—but you can't go far, and keep your eye on the Bend too," he nodded towards the door, beyond which lay the frost-touched valley in the early morning light of autumn.

"Plenty of black squirrels and pigeons come here on account of the springs like this one, and I get 'em with a bow and arrow. I didn't call myself Robin Hood and Daniel Boone not for nothin' when I was knee-high to a grasshopper." He drew from a rough cupboard some cold game, and put it on the table, with some scones and a pannikin of water. Then he brought out a small jug of whiskey and placed it beside his visitor. They began to eat.

"How d'ye cook without fire?" asked Sinnet. "Fire's all right at nights. He'd never camp 'twixt here an' Juniper Bend at night. The next camp's six miles north from here. He'd only come down the valley daytimes. I studied it 'all out, and it's a dead sure thing. From daylight till dusk I'm on to him. I got the trail in my eye."

He showed his teeth like a wild dog, as his look swept the valley. There was something almost revolting in his concentrated ferocity.

Sinnet's eyes half closed as he watched the mountaineer, and the long, scraggy hands and whipcord neck seemed to interest him greatly. He looked at his own slim brown hands with a half smile, and it was almost as cruel as the laugh of the other. Yet it had, too, a knowledge and an understanding which gave it humanity.

"You're sure he did it?" Sinnet asked presently, after drinking a very small portion of liquor, and tossing some water from the pannikin after it. "You're sure Greevy killed your boy, Buck?"

"My name's Buckmaster, ain't it—Jim Buckmaster? Don't I know my own name? It's as sure as that. My boy said it was Greevy when he was dying. He told Bill Ricketts so, and Bill told me afore he went East. Bill didn't want to tell, but he said it was fair I should know, for my boy never did nobody any harm—an' Greevy's livin' on. But I'll git him. Right's right."

"Wouldn't it be better for the law to hang him, if you've got the proof, Buck? A year or so in jail, an' a long time to think over what's going round his neck on the scaffold—wouldn't that suit you, if you've got the proof?"

A rigid, savage look came into Buckmaster's face.

"I ain't lettin' no judge and jury do my business. I'm for certain sure, not for p'r'aps! An' I want to do it myself. Clint was only twenty. Like boys we was together. I was eighteen when I married, an' he come when she went—jest a year—jest a year. An' ever since then we lived together, him an' me, an' shot together, an' trapped together, an' went gold-washin' together on the Cariboo, an' eat out of the same dish, an' slept under the same blanket, and jawed together nights—ever since he was five, when old Mother Lablache had got him into pants, an' he was fit to take the trail."

The old man stopped a minute, his whipcord neck swelling, his lips twitching. He brought a fist down on the table with a bang. "The biggest little rip he was, as full of fun as a squirrel, an' never a smile-o-jest his eyes dancin', an' more sense than a judge. He laid hold o' me, that cub did—it was like his mother and himself together; an' the years flowin' in an' peterin' out, an' him gettin' older, an' always jest the same. Always on rock-bottom, always bright as a dollar, an' we livin' at Black Nose Lake, layin' up cash agin' the time we was to go South, an' set up a house along the railway, an' him to git married. I was for his gittin' married same as me, when we had enough cash. I use to think of that when he was ten, and when he was eighteen I spoke to him about it; but he wouldn't listen—jest laughed at me. You remember how Clint used to laugh sort of low and teasin' like—you remember that laugh o' Clint's, don't you?"

Sinnet's face was towards the valley and Juniper Bend, but he slowly turned his head and looked at Buckmaster strangely out of his half-shut eyes. He took the pipe from his mouth slowly.

"I can hear it now," he answered slowly. "I hear it often, Buck."

The old man gripped his arm so suddenly that Sinnet was startled,—in so far as anything could startle anyone who had lived a life of chance and danger and accident, and his face grew a shade paler; but he did not move, and Buckmaster's hand tightened convulsively.

"You liked him, an' he liked you; he first learnt poker off you, Sinnet. He thought you was a tough, but he didn't mind that no more than I did. It ain't for us to say what we're goin' to be, not always. Things in life git stronger than we are. You was a tough, but who's goin' to judge you! I ain't; for Clint took to you, Sinnet, an' he never went wrong in his thinkin'. God! he was wife an' child to me—an' he's dead—dead— dead."

The man's grief was a painful thing to see. His hands gripped the table, while his body shook with sobs, though his eyes gave forth no tears. It was an inward convulsion, which gave his face the look of unrelieved tragedy and suffering—Laocoon struggling with the serpents of sorrow and hatred which were strangling him.

"Dead an' gone," he repeated, as he swayed to and fro, and the table quivered in his grasp. Presently, however, as though arrested by a thought, he peered out of the doorway towards Juniper Bend. "That hawk seen him—it seen him. He's comin', I know it, an' I'll git him—plumb." He had the mystery and imagination of the mountain-dweller.

The rifle lay against the wall behind him, and he turned and touched it almost caressingly. "I ain't let go like this since he was killed, Sinnet. It don't do. I got to keep myself stiddy to do the trick when the minute comes. At first I usen't to sleep at nights, thinkin' of Clint, an' missin' him, an' I got shaky and no good. So I put a cinch on myself, an' got to sleepin' again—from the full dusk to dawn, for Greevy wouldn't take the trail at night. I've kept stiddy." He held out his hand as though to show that it was firm and steady, but it trembled with the emotion which had conquered him. He saw it, and shook his head angrily.

"It was seein' you, Sinnet. It burst me. I ain't seen no one to speak to in a month, an' with you sittin' there, it was like Clint an' me cuttin' and comin' again off the loaf an' the knuckle-bone of ven'son."

Sinnet ran a long finger slowly across his lips, and seemed meditating what he should say to the mountaineer. At length he spoke, looking into Buckmaster's face. "What was the story Ricketts told you? What did your boy tell Ricketts? I've heard, too, about it, and that's why I asked you if you had proofs that Greevy killed Clint. Of course, Clint should know, and if he told Ricketts, that's pretty straight; but I'd like to know if what I heard tallies with what Ricketts heard from Clint. P'r'aps it'd ease your mind a bit to tell it. I'll watch the Bend—don't you trouble about that. You can't do these two things at one time. I'll watch for Greevy; you give me Clint's story to Ricketts. I guess you know I'm feelin' for you, an' if I was in your place I'd shoot the man that killed Clint, if it took ten years. I'd have his heart's blood—all of it. Whether Greevy was in the right or in the wrong, I'd have him— plumb."

Buckmaster was moved. He gave a fierce exclamation and made a gesture of cruelty. "Clint right or wrong? There ain't no question of that. My boy wasn't the kind to be in the wrong. What did he ever do but what was right? If Clint was in the wrong I'd kill Greevy jest the same, for Greevy robbed him of all the years that was before him—only a sapling he was, an' all his growin' to do, all his branches to widen an' his roots to spread. But that don't enter in it, his bein' in the wrong. It was a quarrel, and Clint never did Greevy any harm. It was a quarrel over cards, an' Greevy was drunk, an' followed Clint out into the prairie in the night and shot him like a coyote. Clint hadn't no chance, an' he jest lay there on the ground till morning, when Ricketts and Steve Joicey found him. An' Clint told Ricketts who it was."

"Why didn't Ricketts tell it right out at once?" asked Sinnet.

"Greevy was his own cousin—it was in the family, an' he kept thinkin' of Greevy's gal, Em'ly. Her—what'll it matter to her! She'll get married, an she'll forgit. I know her, a gal that's got no deep feelin' like Clint had for me. But because of her Ricketts didn't speak for a year. Then he couldn't stand it any longer, an' he told me—seein' how I suffered, an' everybody hidin' their suspicions from me, an' me up here out o' the way, an' no account. That was the feelin' among 'em—what was the good of making things worse! They wasn't thinkin' of the boy or of Jim Buckmaster, his father. They was thinkin' of Greevy's gal—to save her trouble."

Sinnet's face was turned towards Juniper Bend, and the eyes were fixed, as it were, on a still more distant object—a dark, brooding, inscrutable look.

"Was that all Ricketts told you, Buck?" The voice was very quiet, but it had a suggestive note.

"That's all Clint told Bill before he died. That was enough."

There was a moment's pause, and then, puffing out long clouds of smoke, and in a tone of curious detachment, as though he were telling of something that he saw now in the far distance, or as a spectator of a battle from a far vantage-point might report to a blind man standing near, Sinnet said:

"P'r'aps Ricketts didn't know the whole story; p'r'aps Clint didn't know it all to tell him; p'r'aps Clint didn't remember it all. P'r'aps he didn't remember anything except that he and Greevy quarrelled, and that Greevy and he shot at each other in the prairie. He'd only be thinking of the thing that mattered most to him—that his life was over, an' that a man had put a bullet in him, an'—"

Buckmaster tried to interrupt him, but he waved a hand impatiently, and continued: "As I say, maybe he didn't remember everything; he had been drinkin' a bit himself, Clint had. He wasn't used to liquor, and couldn't stand much. Greevy was drunk, too, and gone off his head with rage. He always gets drunk when he first comes South to spend the winter with his girl Em'ly." He paused a moment, then went on a little more quickly. "Greevy was proud of her—couldn't even bear her being crossed in any way; and she has a quick temper, and if she quarrelled with anybody Greevy quarrelled too."

"I don't want to know anything about her," broke in Buckmaster roughly. "She isn't in this thing. I'm goin' to git Greevy. I bin waitin' for him, an' I'll git him."

"You're going to kill the man that killed your boy, if you can, Buck; but I'm telling my story in my own way. You told Ricketts's story; I'll tell what I've heard. And before you kill Greevy you ought to know all there is that anybody else knows—or suspicions about it."

"I know enough. Greevy done it, an' I'm here." With no apparent coherence and relevancy Sinnet continued, but his voice was not so even as before. "Em'ly was a girl that wasn't twice alike. She was changeable. First it was one, then it was another, and she didn't seem to be able to fix her mind. But that didn't prevent her leadin' men on. She wasn't changeable, though, about her father. She was to him what your boy was to you. There she was like you, ready to give everything up for her father."

"I tell y' I don't want to hear about her," said Buckmaster, getting to his feet and setting his jaws. "You needn't talk to me about her. She'll git over it. I'll never git over what Greevy done to me or to Clint—jest twenty, jest twenty! I got my work to do."

He took his gun from the wall, slung it into the hollow of his arm, and turned to look up the valley through the open doorway.

The morning was sparkling with life—the life and vigour which a touch of frost gives to the autumn world in a country where the blood tingles to the dry, sweet sting of the air. Beautiful, and spacious, and buoyant, and lonely, the valley and the mountains seemed waiting, like a new-born world, to be peopled by man. It was as though all had been made ready for him—the birds whistling and singing in the trees, the whisk of the squirrels leaping from bough to bough, the peremptory sound of the woodpecker's beak against the bole of a tree, the rustle of the leaves as a wood-hen ran past—a waiting, virgin world.

Its beauty and its wonderful dignity had no appeal to Buckmaster. His eyes and mind were fixed on a deed which would stain the virgin wild with the ancient crime that sent the first marauder on human life into the wilderness.

As Buckmaster's figure darkened the doorway Sinnet seemed to waken as from a dream, and he got swiftly to his feet.

"Wait—you wait, Buck. You've got to hear all. You haven't heard my story yet. Wait, I tell you." His voice was so sharp and insistent, so changed, that Buckmaster turned from the doorway and came back

into the room.

"What's the use of my hearin'? You want me not to kill Greevy, because of that gal. What's she to me?"

"Nothing to you, Buck, but Clint was everything to her."

The mountaineer stood like one petrified.

"What's that—what's that you say? It's a damn lie!"

"It wasn't cards—the quarrel, not the real quarrel. Greevy found Clint kissing her. Greevy wanted her to marry Gatineau, the lumber-king. That was the quarrel."

A snarl was on the face of Buckmaster. "Then she'll not be sorry when I git him. It took Clint from her as well as from me." He turned to the door again. "But, wait, Buck, wait one minute and hear—" He was interrupted by a low, exultant growl, and he saw Buckmaster's rifle clutched as a hunter, stooping, clutches his gun to fire on his prey.

"Quick, the spy-glass!" he flung back at Sinnet. "It's him—but I'll make sure."

Sinnet caught the telescope from the nails where it hung, and looked out towards Juniper Bend. "It's Greevy—and his girl, and the half-breeds," he said, with a note in his voice that almost seemed agitation, and yet few had ever seen Sinnet agitated. "Em'ly must have gone up the trail in the night."

"It's my turn now," the mountaineer said hoarsely, and, stooping, slid away quickly into the undergrowth. Sinnet followed, keeping near him, neither speaking. For a half mile they hastened on, and now and then Buckmaster drew aside the bushes, and looked up the valley, to keep Greevy and his bois brulees in his eye. Just so had he and his son and Sinnet stalked the wapiti and the red deer along these mountains; but this was a man that Buckmaster was stalking now, with none of the joy of the sport which had been his since a lad; only the malice of the avenger. The lust of a mountain feud was on him; he was pursuing the price of blood.

At last Buckmaster stopped at a ledge of rock just above the trail. Greevy would pass below, within three hundred yards of his rifle. He turned to Sinnet with cold and savage eyes. "You go back," he said. "It's my business. I don't want you to see. You don't want to see, then you won't know, and you won't need to lie. You said that the man that killed Clint ought to die. He's going to die, but it's none o' your business. I want to be alone. In a minute he'll be where I kin git him —plumb. You go, Sinnet-right off. It's my business."

There was a strange, desperate look in Sinnet's face; it was as hard as stone, but his eyes had a light of battle in them.

"It's my business right enough, Buck," he said, "and you're not going to kill Greevy. That girl of his has lost her lover, your boy. It's broke her heart almost, and there's no use making her an orphan too. She can't stand it. She's had enough. You leave her father alone—you hear me, let up!" He stepped between Buckmaster and the ledge of rock from which the mountaineer was to take aim.

There was a terrible look in Buckmaster's face. He raised his single- barrelled rifle, as though he would shoot Sinnet; but, at the moment, he remembered that a shot would warn Greevy, and that he might not have time to reload. He laid his rifle against a tree swiftly.

"Git away from here," he said, with a strange rattle in his throat.
"Git away quick; he'll be down past here in a minute."

Sinnet pulled himself together as he saw Buckmaster snatch at a great clasp-knife in his belt. He jumped and caught Buckmaster's wrist in a grip like a vice.

"Greevy didn't kill him, Buck," he said. But the mountaineer was gone mad, and did not grasp the meaning of the words. He twined his left arm round the neck of Sinnet, and the struggle began, he fighting to free Sinnet's hand from his wrist, to break Sinnet's neck. He did not realise what he was doing. He only knew that this man stood between him and the murderer of his boy, and all the ancient forces of barbarism were alive in him. Little by little they drew to the edge of the rock, from which there was a sheer drop of two hundred feet. Sinnet fought like a panther for safety, but no sane man's strength could withstand the demoniacal energy that bent and crushed him. Sinnet felt his strength giving. Then he said in a hoarse whisper, "Greevy didn't kill him. I killed him, and—"

At that moment he was borne to the ground with a hand on his throat, and an instant after the knife went home.

Buckmaster got to his feet and looked at his victim for an instant, dazed and wild; then he sprang for his gun. As he did so the words that Sinnet had said as they struggled rang in his ears, "Greevy didn't kill him; I killed him!"

He gave a low cry and turned back towards Sinnet, who lay in a pool of blood.

Sinnet was speaking. He went and stooped over him. "Em'ly threw me over for Clint," the voice said huskily, "and I followed to have it out with Clint. So did Greevy, but Greevy was drunk. I saw them meet. I was hid. I saw that Clint would kill Greevy, and I fired. I was off my head—I'd never cared for any woman before, and Greevy was her father. Clint was off his head too. He had called me names that day—a cardsharp, and a liar, and a thief, and a skunk, he called me, and I hated him just then. Greevy fired twice wide. He didn't know but what he killed Clint, but he didn't. I did. So I tried to stop you, Buck—"

Life was going fast, and speech failed him; but he opened his eyes again and whispered, "I didn't want to die, Buck. I am only thirty-five, and it's too soon; but it had to be. Don't look that way, Buck. You got the man that killed him—plumb. But Em'ly didn't play fair with me—made a fool of me, the only time in my life I ever cared for a woman. You leave Greevy alone, Buck, and tell Em'ly for me I wouldn't let you kill her father."

"You—Sinnet—you, you done it! Why, he'd have fought for you. You— done it—to him—to Clint!" Now that the blood-feud had been satisfied, a great change came over the mountaineer. He had done his work, and the thirst for vengeance was gone. Greevy he had hated, but this man had been with him in many a winter's hunt. His brain could hardly grasp the tragedy—it had all been too sudden.

Suddenly he stooped down. "Sinnet," he said, "ef there was a woman in it, that makes all the difference. Sinnet, of—"

But Sinnet was gone upon a long trail that led into an illimitable wilderness. With a moan the old man ran to the ledge of rock. Greevy and his girl were below.

"When there's a woman in it—!" he said, in a voice of helplessness and misery, and watched Em'ly till she disappeared from view. Then he turned, and, lifting up in his arms the man he had killed, carried him into the deeper woods.

ETEXT EDITOR'S BOOKMARKS:

Even bad company's better than no company at all
Future of those who will not see, because to see is to suffer
I like when I like, and I like a lot when I like
It ain't for us to say what we're goin' to be, not always
Things in life git stronger than we are
We don't live in months and years, but just in minutes

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NORTHERN LIGHTS, VOLUME 1 ***

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