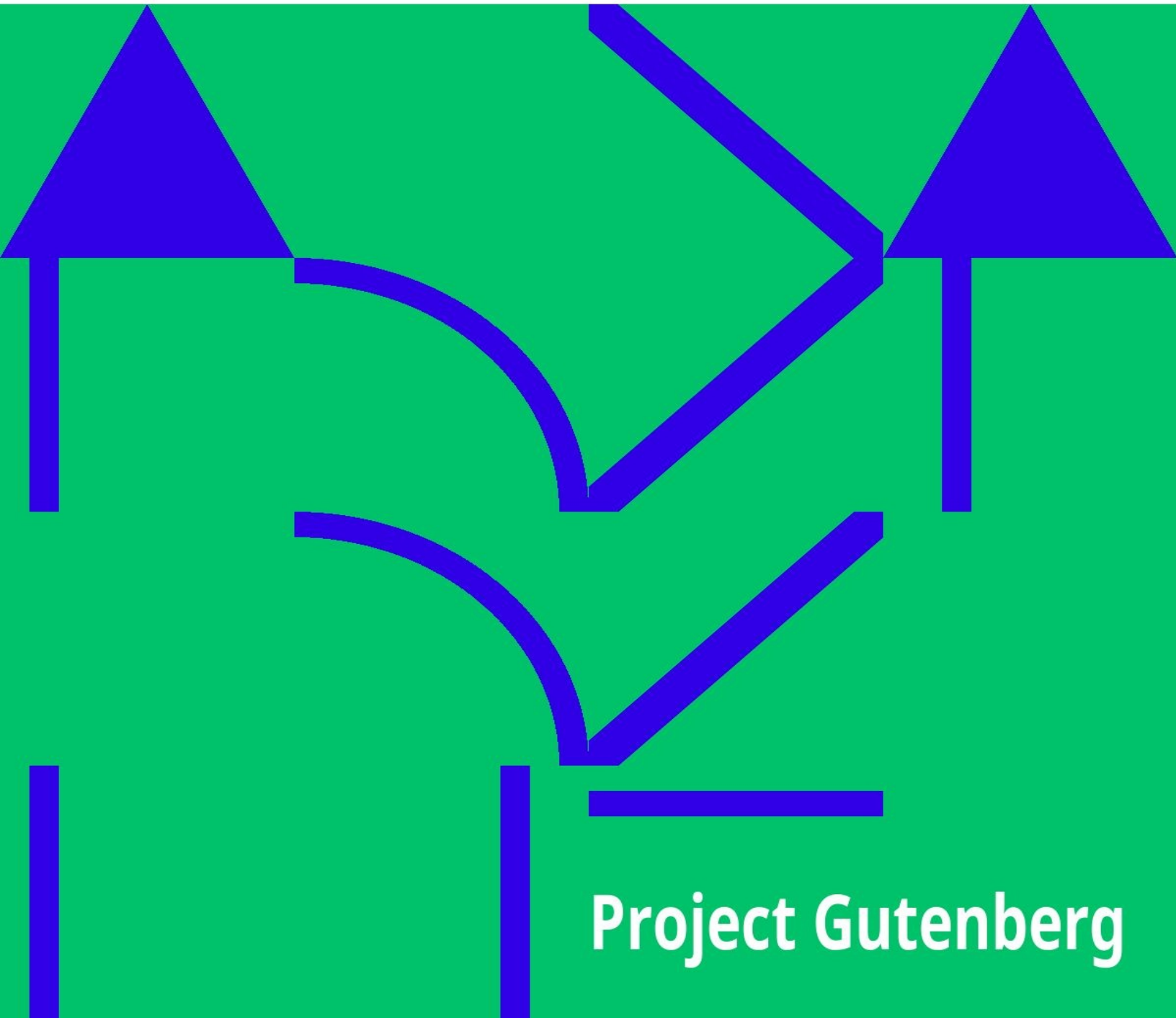
A Mating in the Wilds

Ottwell Binns



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By

OTTWELL BINNS

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN FROM THE RIVER

The man in the canoe was lean and hardy, and wielded the paddle against the slow-moving current of the wide river with a dexterity that proclaimed long practice. His bronzed face was that of a quite young man, but his brown hair was interspersed with grey; and his blue eyes had a gravity incompatible with youth, as if already he had experience of the seriousness of life, and had eaten of its bitter fruits. He was in a gala dress of tanned deerskin, fringed and worked by native hands, the which had quite probably cost him more than the most elegant suit by a Bond Street tailor, and the effect was as picturesque as the heart of a young male could desire. To be in keeping with such gay attire he should have worn a smiling face, and sung some joyous chanson of the old voyageurs, but he neither sang nor smiled; paddling steadily on towards his destination.

This was a northern post of the Hudson Bay Company, built in the form of a hollow square with a wide frontage open to the river. The trading store, the warehouse, and the factor's residence with its trim garden, occupied the other three sides of the square, and along the river front was a small floating wharf. A tall flag-pole rose above the buildings, and the flag itself fluttered gaily in the summer breeze, taking the eye at once with its brave colouring.

The young man in the canoe noticed it whilst he was half a mile away, and for a moment, ceasing his paddling, he looked at it doubtfully, his brow puckering over his grave eyes. The canoe began to drift backward in the current, but he made no effort to check it, instead, he sat there staring at the distant flag, with a musing look upon his face, as if he were debating some question with himself. At last he spoke aloud, after the habit of men who dwell much alone.

"The steamer can't have come yet. It probably means nothing except that the factor is expecting its arrival. Anyway I must have the grub, and I can get away in the morning."

He dipped his paddle again. The canoe ceased to drift and began to forge ahead towards the post. Before he drew level with it, he started to steer across the current, but instead of making for the wharf, beached his canoe on the rather marshy bank to the north of the buildings; then having lifted it out of the water, he stood to his full height and stretched himself, for he had been travelling in the canoe eleven days and was conscious of body stiffness owing to the cramped position he had so long maintained.

Standing on the bank he surveyed the river carefully. Except for a drifting log there was nothing moving on its wide expanse. He listened intently. The soft wind was blowing down river, but it did not bring with it the throb of a steamer's screw which he half expected to hear. He nodded to himself.

"Time enough!"

Then he became aware of sounds for which he had not listened—the voices of men somewhere in the post's enclosure, and, nearer at hand, that of some one singing in some soft Indian dialect. He turned swiftly, and coming along a half-defined path between the willows, caught sight of the singer—a native girl of amazing beauty.

She wore a tunic of beaded caribou-skin, which fitting closely revealed rather than concealed the lines of her lithe young figure. Her face was light-bronze in colour, every feature clearly cut as a cameo, the forehead smooth and high, the nose delicately aquiline, the lips a perfect cupid's bow, the eyebrows high and arched. The eyes themselves were soft and dark and had the wildness of the wilderness-born, whilst the hair, black and luminous as the raven's wing, crisped in curls instead of hanging in the straight plaits of the ordinary native woman. She moved forward slowly with graceful stride of one whose feet had never known the cramping of civilized foot-gear, tall and straight and as royal-looking as Eve must have been when she left the hand of God.

To the man, as he stood there, she seemed like an incarnate spirit of the wilds, like the soft breath of the Northland spring, like——

Similes failed him of the suddenest, for in that instant the girl grew aware of him and checked her stride and song at the same moment. For a fraction of time they stood there looking at each other, the man of the white dominant race, the

girl of a vanishing people, whose origin is shrouded in the grey mists of time. There was wonder on the man's face, for never had he seen such beauty in a native, and on the girl's face there was a startled look such as the forest doe shows when the wind brings the breath of a presence that it does not see. Then the delicate nostrils quivered, the soft dark eyes kindled with sudden flame, and the rich blood surged in the bronze face from chin to brow. Almost unconsciously the man took a step forward. But at that the girl, turning suddenly, fled between the willows like the creature of the wild she was, and the man checked himself and stood watching until she was lost to view.

There was a thoughtful look in his blue eyes which suddenly gave way as he smiled.

"A tinted Venus!" he murmured to himself. "I wonder where she belongs."

Looking round, away across the willows, planted on the meadow above the marshy banks, he caught sight of the tops of a couple of moose-hide tepees, and nodded to himself.

"Come with the family to barter the winter's fur-catch."

For a moment he stood there with his eyes fixed on the skin-tents. There was a reflective look upon his face, and at the end of the moment he made a movement towards the path along which the girl had fled. Then he stopped, laughed harshly at himself, and with the old look back on his face, turned again to his canoe, unloaded it, and began to pitch camp.

At the end of half an hour, having lit a pipe, he strolled towards the trading-post. Entering the Square of the enclosure he looked nonchalantly about him. Two men, half-breeds, were sitting on a roughly-made bench outside the store, smoking and talking. Inside the store a tall Indian was bartering with a white man, whom he easily guessed to be the factor, and as he looked round from the open door of the factor's house, emerged a white woman whom he divined was the factor's wife. She was followed by a rather dapper young man of medium height, and who, most incongruously in that wild Northland, sported a single eyeglass. The man fell into step by the woman's side, and together they began to walk across the Square in the direction of the store.

The man from the river watched them idly, waiting where he was, puffing slowly at his pipe, until they drew almost level with him. Then he stiffened suddenly, and an alert look came in his eyes.

At the same moment the other man, apparently becoming aware of his presence for the first time, stared at him calmly, almost insolently. Then he started. The monocle dropped from his eye, and his face went suddenly white. He half-paused in his stride, then averting his gaze from the other man hurried forward a little. The factor's wife, who had observed the incident, looked at him inquiringly.

"Do you know that man, Mr. Ainley?"

The dapper young man laughed a short, discordant laugh.

"He certainly bears a resemblance to a man whom I knew some years ago."

"He seemed to recognize you, Mr. Ainley. I saw that much in his eyes."

"Then probably he is the man whom I used to know, but I did not expect to meet him up here."

"No?" She waited as if for further information which was not immediately forthcoming, then she continued: "There are many men up here whom one does not expect to meet, men who belong 'to the legion of the lost ones, the cohort of the damned,' who have buried their old selves for ever. I wonder if that man is one of them?"

Gerald Ainley's face had regained its natural colour. Again he laughed as he replied: "If he is the man I knew he is certainly of the lost legion, for he has been in prison."

"In prison?" echoed the woman quickly. "He does not look like a gaol-bird. What was the crime?"

"Forgery! The judge was merciful and gave him three years' penal servitude."

"What is his name?"

"Stane—Hubert Stane!" replied the man shortly. As he spoke he glanced back over his shoulder towards the man whom they were discussing, then hastily averted his eyes.

The man from the river had turned round and was looking at him with concentrated gaze. His face was working as if he had lost control of his facial muscles, and his hands were tightly clenched. It was clear that the meeting with Ainley had been something of a shock to him, and from his attitude it appeared that he resented the other man's aloofness.

"The hound!" he whispered to himself, "the contemptible hound!"

Then as Ainley and the factor's wife disappeared in the store, he laughed harshly and relit his pipe. As he did so, his fingers shook so that the match bobbed against the pipe-bowl, and it was very manifest that he was undergoing a great strain. He stood there staring at the store. Once he began to move towards it irresolutely, then changed his mind and came to a standstill again.

"No!" he whispered below his breath. "I'll wait till the cad comes out—I'll force him to acknowledge me."

But scarcely had he reached the decision, when on the quiet air came the clear notes of a bugle sounding the alert and turning his thoughts in a new direction. The notes came from the river, and were so alien to that northern land that he swung round to discover their origin. At the same moment the two half-breeds leapt from the bench and began to run towards the wharf. John Rodwell, the factor and his wife, emerged from the store and hurried in the same direction, followed by the Indian who had been bartering. Two other men appeared at the warehouse door, and as the strains of the bugle sounded again, also began to run towards the wharf, whilst from the factor's house came a boy and girl, followed by a white woman and a couple of Indian servants, all of whom followed in the wake of the others.

The man in the Square did not move. Having turned towards the river as the bugle-call floated clear and silvery, and being unable to see upstream because of the fort buildings, he remained where he was, keeping one eye on the store. The man who had passed him in the Square had not emerged. Stane stood there for two or three minutes watching first the river and then the door. At the end of that

time, with a resolute look on his face, he began to stride towards the store. He was half-way there when the sound of a thin cheer reached him from the wharf. He turned and looked round. His change of position had given him an enlarged view of the river, and distant perhaps a quarter of a mile or so away he saw a brigade of boats. He stood and stared at them wonderingly for a moment, then resumed his way towards the store.

As he entered he looked round, and, standing near the parchment window he caught sight of the man for whom he was looking. Ainley was rather white of face, but his eyeglass was in its place, and outwardly he was collected and cool. Hubert Stane regarded him silently for a moment, then he laughed mirthlessly.

"Well, Ainley," he said abruptly, "this is a strange meeting place."

"Ah!" said the other quickly. "It is you, Stane, after all!"

"Surely you knew that just now?" was the reply in a cutting voice.

"No, you wrong me there! I was not sure. You must remember that I was not expecting to see you up here. You had dropped out, and I had never heard a word of you since—since——"

"Since I went to Dartmoor," Stane laughed again his cold, mirthless laugh. "There is no need to mince matters, Ainley. All the world knows I went there, and you need not go to any trouble to spare my feelings. When a man has been through hell nothing else matters, you know."

Gerald Ainley did not reply. He stood there with an embarrassed look on his face, obviously ill at ease, and the other continued: "You do not seem pleased to see me—an old friend—you cut me just now. Why?"

"Well—er—really, Stane you—you ought to—er—be able to guess!"

"Perhaps I can," answered Stane ruthlessly. "Things are different now. I am a discharged convict, down and out, and old friendship counts for nothing. Is that it?"

"Well," replied Ainley, half-apologetically, "you can scarcely expect that it sould be otherwise. I suppose that, really, that is why you left England. It would

have been impossible for you to resume your old life among the men you knew ____"

"You are the first of them that I have encountered—with one exception."

"Indeed," asked the other politely, "who was the exception?"

"It was Kingsley. You remember him? He came to see me just before I left Dartmoor. He believed in my innocence, and he wanted me to stay in England and clear my name. He also told me something that set me thinking, and latterly I have been rather wanting to meet you, because there is a question I want answering."

The sound of the bugle playing a gay fanfare broke in on the silence that followed his words, and this was followed by a rather scattered cheer. Ainley started.

"Really, Stane, you must excuse me just now; I must go down to the wharf—it is my duty to do so. At—er—a more fitting opportunity I shall be glad for the sake of old times, to answer any question that you may wish to ask me. But I really must go now. That is one of the governors of the company arriving. He will be expecting to see me!"

He took a step towards the door, but the other blocked the way.

"I'm not going to be fobbed off with a mere excuse, Ainley. I want to talk with you; and if I can't have it now, I must know when I can."

"Where are you staying?" asked the other shakily.

"My camp is just outside the post here."

"Then I will come to you tonight, Stane. I shall be late—midnight as like as not."

"I shall wait for you," answered Stane, and stepped aside.

Ainley made a hurried exit, and the man whom he had left, moving to the door, watched him running towards the wharf, where a large Peterboro' canoe

had just swung alongside. There were several others making for the wharf, and as Stane watched, one by one they drew up, and discharged their complement of passengers. From his vantage place on the rising ground the watcher saw a rather short man moving up from the wharf accompanied by the obsequious factor, and behind him two other men and four ladies, with the factor's wife and Gerald Ainley. The sound of feminine laughter drifted up the Square, and as it reached him Stane stepped out from the store and hurried away in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER II

AN ATTACK AT MIDNIGHT

It was near midnight, but far from dark. In the northern heavens a rosy glow proclaimed the midnight sun. Somewhere in the willows a robin was chirping, and from the wide bosom of the river, like the thin howl of a wolf, came the mocking cry of a loon still pursuing its finny prey. And in his little canvas tent, sitting just inside, so as to catch the smoke of the fire that afforded protection from the mosquitoes, Hubert Stane still watched and waited for the coming of his promised visitor. He was smoking, and from the look upon his face it was clear that he was absorbed in thoughts that were far from pleasant. His pipe went out, and still he sat there, thinking, thinking. Half an hour passed and the robin making the discovery that it was really bed-time, ceased its chirping; the loon no longer mocked the wolf, but still the man sat behind his smoke-smudge, tireless, unsleeping, waiting. Another half-hour crept by with leaden feet, then a new sound broke the stillness of the wild, the tinkling of a piano, sadly out of tune, followed by a chorus of voices lifted up in the homeland song.

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And never brought to min'?
Should auld acquaintance be forgot
And days o' lang syne?"

As the simple melody progressed, a look of bitterness came on Stane's face, for the song brought to him memories of other times and scenes which he had done his best to forget. He started to his feet and stepping outside the tent began to walk restlessly to and fro. The music ended and he stood still to listen. Now no sound except the ripple of the river broke the quiet, and after a moment he nodded to himself. "Now, he will come."

The thin pungent song of a mosquito impinged upon the stillness, something settled on his neck and there followed a swift sting like the puncture of a hypodermic needle. Instantly he slapped the place with his hand, and retreated

behind his smoke-smudge. There he threw himself once more on the pack that served him for seat and waited, as it seemed interminably.

His fire died down, the smoke ceased to hide the view, and through the adjacent willows came the sudden sough of moving air. A robin broke into song, and once more the wail of the loon sounded from the wide river. Away to the north the sky flushed with crimson glory, then the sun shot up red and golden. A new day had broken; and Stane had watched through the brief night of the Northland summer for a man who had not appeared and he was now assured, would not come.

He laughed bitterly, and rising kicked the fire together, threw on fresh fuel, and after one look towards the still sleeping Post, returned to the tent, wrapped himself in a blanket, and shortly after fell asleep.

Three hours later he was awakened by a clatter of voices and the clamour of barking dogs, passing from sleep to full wakeness like a healthy child. Kicking the blanket from him he slipped on his moccasins and stepped outside where the source of the clamour at once manifested itself. A party of Indians had just beached their canoes, and were exchanging greetings with another party, evidently that whose tepees stood on the meadow outside the fort, for among the women he saw the Indian girl who had fled through the willows after encountering him. He watched the scene with indifferent eyes for a moment or two, then securing a canvas bucket went down to the river for water, and made his toilet. That done, he cooked his breakfast, ate it, tided up his camp, and lighting a pipe strolled into the enclosure of the Post. Several Indians were standing outside the store, and inside the factor and his clerk were already busy with others; bartering for the peltries brought from the frozen north to serve the whims of fashion in warmer lands. In the Square itself stood the plump gentleman who had landed the day before, talking to a cringing half-breed, whilst a couple of ladies with him watched the aborigines outside the store with curious eyes. Stane glanced further afield. Two men were busy outside the warehouse, a second half-breed sprawled on the bench by the store, but the man for whom he had waited through the night was not in sight.

With a grimace of disappointment he moved towards the store. As he did so a little burst of mellow laughter sounded, and turning swiftly he saw the man whom he was looking for round the corner of the warehouse accompanied by a

girl, who laughed heartily at some remark of her companion. Stane halted in his tracks and looked at the pair who were perhaps a dozen yards or so away. The monocled Ainley could not but be aware of his presence, yet except that he kept his gaze resolutely averted, he gave no sign of being so. But the girl looked at him frankly, and as she did so, Hubert Stane looked back, and caught his breath, as he had reason to.

She was fair as an English rose, moulded in spacious lines like a daughter of the gods, with an aureole of glorious chestnut hair, shot with warm tints of gold and massed in simplicity about a queenly head. Her mouth was full, her chin was softly strong, her neck round and firm as that of a Grecian statue, and her eyes were bluey-grey as the mist of the northern woods. Fair she was, and strong—a true type of those women who, bred by the English meadows, have adventured with their men and made their homes in the waste places of the earth.

Her grey eyes met Stane's quite frankly, without falling, then turned nonchalantly to her companion, and Stane, watching, saw her speak, and as Ainley flashed a swift glance in his direction, and then replied with a shrug of his shoulders, he easily divined that the girl had asked a question about himself. They passed him at half a dozen yards distance, Ainley with his face set like a flint, the girl with a scrutinizing sidelong glance that set the blood rioting in Stane's heart. He stood and watched them until they reached the wharf, saw them step into a canoe, and then, both of them paddling, they thrust out to the broad bosom of the river.

Not till then did he avert his gaze, and turn again to the store. The great man of the company was still talking to the half-breed, and the other half-breed had risen from his seat and was staring into the store. He looked round as Stane approached him.

"By gar," he said enthusiastically, "dat one very fine squaw-girl dere."

Stane looked forward through the open doorway, and standing near the long counter, watching a tall Indian bartering with the factor, saw the beautiful Indian girl from the neighbouring camp. He nodded an affirmative, and seeing an opportunity to obtain information turned and spoke to the man.

"Yes, but that girl there with Mr. Ainley——"

"Oui, m'sieu. But she no squaw-girl. She grand person who make' ze tour with ze governor."

"Oh, the governor makes the tour, does he?"

"Oui, oui! In the old style, with a brigade of boats, and a bugler. A summer trip, vous comprenez—a picnic to all ze posts in ze province. Thus it is to be a great man!"

"And Mr. Ainley, what is he doing at Fort Malsun?"

"Ah, M'sieu Ainley! He also is ze great man. He is to be among the governors —one day. He also visits ze posts, and will no doubt travel with ze governor, whose protégé he is."

"Is that so?"

"Dat is so! He is ze favourite, vous comprenez?"

"I did not know it."

"Non? But so it ees! And Louis and me, we go with heem in ze canoe to serve heem. Though by gar, I like to make stop here, an' talk to dat squaw-girl."

Stane made no vocal reply to this. He nodded carelessly and passed into the store. Factor Rodwell looked round as he entered, and surveyed him with a measuring eye, as if taking stock of a new acquaintance, then gave him a curt nod and resumed his barter with the Indian. His assistant being also busy for the moment, Stane turned towards the Indian girl whose liquid eyes were regarding him shyly, and addressed her in her native dialect.

"Little sister, why did you run from me yesterday?"

The girl was covered with confusion at the directness of his question, and to help her over her embarrassment the young man laughed.

"You did not mistake me for Moorseen (the black bear) or the bald-face grizzly, did you?"

At the question the girl laughed shyly, and shook her head without speaking.

"I am but a man, and not the grizzled one. Wherefore should you run from me, little sister?"

"I had never seen such a man before."

The directness of the answer, given in a shy voice, astonished him. It was his turn to be embarrassed and he strove to turn the edge of the compliment.

"Never seen a white man before!" he cried in mock amazement.

"I did not say that I had never seen a white man before. I have seen many. The priest up at Fort of God, the doctor priest at the Last Hope, the factor there, and M'sieu Ainley who came to our camp yesternight. And there is also this fat man they call the governor—a great chief, it is said; though he does not look as such a great one should look. Yes, I have seen many white men, but none like thee before."

Hubert Stane was routed once more by the girl's directness, but strove to recover himself by a return of compliments.

"Well," he laughed, "for that matter there are none so many like thyself in the world. I wonder what thy name is?"

The girl flushed with pleasure at the compliment, and answered his question without reserve.

"I am Miskodeed."

"The Beauty of the Spring! Then thou art well-named, little sister!"

The girl flushed with pleasure. The flame that had leapt in her dark eyes at their first meeting burned once more, and where, but for an interruption, the conversation would have drifted can only be conjectured. But at that precise moment the tall Indian called to her.

"Miskodeed."

The girl moved swiftly to him and with a gesture that was almost royal the Indian pointed to a pile of trade goods heaped upon the long counter. The girl gathered as much as was possible in her arms, and staggered with her load from the store, and as Factor Rodwell nodded to him, Hubert Stane moved up the counter, and began to give his order. The factor wrote it down without comment, glancing at his customer from time to time with shrewd appraising eyes, and when Stane had paid for the goods which were to be ready before noon, he asked a question.

"New to the district, aren't you?"

"I wintered here," replied Stane briefly.

"Then you did no trapping," said the factor with a laugh, "or you'd have brought your pelts in. I guess you must be prospecting?"

"I have done a little," agreed Stane, a touch of reserve in his manner.

"A lonely job!" commented the factor.

"Yes," was Stane's reply, then he nodded and turned towards the door.

The factor watched him go with frowning eyes, then turned to his assistant.

"Not a very sociable sort, hey, Donald?"

The assistant grinned, and shook his head. "Tongue-tied, I guess."

"I wonder where he has his location."

"Somewhere North!" answered Donald. "He came upstream, I saw him."

The factor said no more to him, but passed out of the store towards the warehouse. As he did so he caught sight of Stane standing in the Square watching a canoe far out on the river. The factor's eyes were good and he recognized the occupants of the craft quite easily, and as he saw Stane's interest in them, the frown gathered about his eyes once more, and he muttered to himself:

"I wonder what Mr. Ainley's little game means?"

Then as he was unable to find any answer to his question he turned again to his own affairs.

As for Hubert Stane he stood in the Square for quite a long time watching for the return of the canoe, determined to have speech with Ainley. Then, as it still lingered, he turned and made his way to his own camp.

It was quite late in the afternoon when the opportunity he sought was given to him. Impelled by the merest curiosity he had strolled over to the Indian tepees and had there encountered Miskodeed teaching a puppy-dog tricks. He had stopped to speak to her, and was still engaged in a rather one-sided conversation, when the sound of English voices caused him to turn round.

The governor's party, accompanied by the factor, was moving towards the tepees. His first impulse was to go away, then seeing Ainley among the little knot of people, he decided to remain, and to serve his own end, kept Miskodeed in conversation, as when left to herself she would have fled to the moose-hide tent.

The party drew nearer. Stane was conscious of its attention, and the blood in Miskodeed's face came and went in a manner that was almost painful. Any one looking at them, and noting the apparent absorption of the man and the certain embarrassment of the girl, must have utterly miscomprehended the situation, and that was what happened, for a moment later, the sound of a laughing feminine voice reached him.

"Behold an idyll of the land!"

He looked up with an angry light in his blue eyes. The party was just passing, and nearly every pair of eyes was regarding him curiously. And one pair, the grey eyes of the girl who had been with Ainley, met his in level glance, and in them he saw a flicker of contempt. That glance sent the blood to his face, and increased the anger which had surged within him at the laughing remark he had overheard. Ainley was among these people, and come what might he would have speech with him before them all. He stepped forward determinedly; but Ainley, who had been watching him closely, anticipated his move by falling out of the

group.

"Don't be a fool, Stane! You'll do yourself no good by kicking up a dust here. I couldn't come last night, but tonight at the same time I will not fail."

He turned and moved on again before Stane could reply, and as he joined the English girl, the latter inquired in a surprised voice, "You know that gentleman, Mr. Ainley?"

Stane caught the question, but the answer he did not hear, though he could guess its purport and found no pleasure at the thought of what it would be. Consumed with wrath and shame he went his way to his own camp, and seeking relief from intolerable thoughts busied himself with preparations for a start on the morrow, then schooled himself to wait as best he could, through the long hours before Ainley's appointed time.

Again the midnight sun found him sitting behind his smoke-smudge, waiting, listening. All the songs and cries of the wild faded into silence and still Ainley had not come. Then he caught the sound of light feet running, and looking up he saw Miskodeed hurrying towards him between the willows. Wondering what had brought her forth at this hour he started to his feet and in that instant he saw a swift look of apprehension and agony leap to her face.

"Beware, my brother——"

He heard no more. A man rose like a shadow by his side, with lifted hand holding an ax-shaft. Before he could move or cry out the shaft descended on his uncovered head and he dropped like a man suddenly stricken dead. When he came to himself the rosy Northland night had given place to rosier dawn, and he found that he was lying, bound hand and foot, at the bottom of a Peterboro' canoe. There were three Indians in the canoe, one of whom he recognized for Miskodeed's father, and after lying for a few minutes wondering what was the meaning of the situation in which he found himself he addressed himself to the Indian:

"What is the meaning of this?"

The Indian stared at him like a graven image, but vouchsafed no reply. Stane

lay there wondering if it had anything to do with Miskodeed, and finally, recalling the girl's dramatic appearance at the very moment when he had been stricken down, decided that it had.

"What are you going to do with me?" he inquired after an interval.

"Nothing," replied the Indian. "At the end of five days thou wilt be set free, and the canoe follows behind."

"But why——"

"It is an order," said the Indian gravely, and beyond that Stane could learn nothing, though he tried repeatedly in the five days that followed.

At the end of the fifth day they pitched camp as usual, at the evening meal, and lay down to sleep, Stane tied hand and foot with buckskin thongs. In the morning, when he awoke, he was alone and his limbs were free. Scarce believing the facts he sat up and looked around him. Unquestionably his captors had gone, taking the Peterboro' with them, but leaving his own canoe hauled up on the bank. Still overcome with astonishment he rose to his feet and inspected the contents of the canoe. All the stores that he had purchased at the Post were there intact, with his rifle, his little tent and camp utensils, so far as he could tell, not a single article was missing. What on earth was the meaning of it all?

"Miskodeed!"

As he spoke the name the possibility that his acquaintance with the girl had been misunderstood by her relations shot into his mind. But in that case why had they dealt with him after this fashion? Then again he seemed to hear the Indian speaking. "It is an order!"

"Whose order?"

As his mind asked the question, he visioned Gerald Ainley, and was suddenly conscious of a great anger. Was it possible that he——? He broke off the question in his mind without finishing it; but lifted his clenched hand and shook it before the silent wilderness. His attitude was full of dumb menace, and left in no doubt his belief as to who was the author of the event that had befallen him.

CHAPTER III

A LOST GIRL

Mr. Gerald Ainley standing in the meadow outside the Post, looked towards the river bank with smiling eyes. Where Hubert Stane's little tent had been the willows now showed an unbroken line, and he found that fact a source of satisfaction. Then between the willows he caught sight of a moving figure, and after one glance at it, began to hurry forward. A moment later the figure emerged from the willows and stood on the edge of the meadow, revealing its identity as that of the English girl with whom he had walked on the previous day. Without observing him the girl turned round and began to walk towards the Indian encampment and Ainley immediately altered his course, walking quickly so as to intercept her. He joined her about a score of paces from the tents and smilingly doffed his cap.

"Good morning, Miss Yardely. You are astir early."

Helen Yardely laughed lightly. "It is impossible to do anything else in this country, where it is daylight all the time, and birds are crying half the night. Besides we are to make a start after breakfast."

"Yes, I know; I'm going with you."

"You are going with us, Mr. Ainley!" There was a little note of surprise in the girl's tones. "My uncle has not mentioned it!"

"No! It was only finally decided last night; though from the beginning of the excursion it has been contemplated. Sir James is making notes of his journey which I am to supplement. I believe he has an idea of bringing out a book describing the journey!"

"Which you are to write, I suppose?" laughed the girl.

"Well," countered the man also laughing, "I am to act as amanuensis. And

after all you know I am in the service of the Company, whose fortunes Sir James directs."

"He may direct them," answered the girl lightly, "but it is other men who carry them—the men of the wilds who bring the furs to the posts, and the traders who live in isolation from year's end to year's end. You must not take my uncle quite so seriously as he takes himself, Mr. Ainley."

Gerald Ainley smiled. "You forget, Miss Yardely, he can make or break a man who is in the Company's service."

"Perhaps!" laughed the girl. "Though if I were a man I should not so easily be made or broken by another. I should make myself and see that none broke me." She paused as if waiting for an answer, then as her companion continued silent, abruptly changed the topic. "By the by, I see that your acquaintance of other days has removed himself!"

"Yes," answered Ainley, "I noticed that."

"He must have gone in the night."

"Yes," was the reply. "I suppose he folded his tent like the Arabs and as silently stole away."

"I daresay the meeting with an old acquaintance was distasteful to him."

"That is possible," answered Ainley. "When a man has deliberately buried himself in this wild land he will hardly wish to be resurrected."

"And yet he did not appear to avoid you yesterday?" said the girl thoughtfully.

"A momentary impulse, I suppose," replied her companion easily. "I daresay he thought I might fraternise and forget the past."

"And you couldn't?"

"Well, scarcely. One does not fraternise with gaol-birds even for old time's sake."

They had now arrived at the tepees and as they halted, the flap of one was thrown aside, and Miskodeed emerged. She did not see them, as the moment she stepped into the open air her eyes turned towards the willows where Stane's camp had been. A look of sadness clouded the wild beauty of her face, and there was a poignant light in her eyes.

"Ah!" whispered Helen Yardely. "She knows that he has gone."

"Perhaps it is just as well for her that he has," answered Ainley carelessly. "These marriages of the country are not always happy—for the woman."

Miskodeed caught the sound of his voice, and, turning suddenly, became aware of their presence. In an instant a swift change came over her face. Its sadness vanished instantly, and as her eyes flashing fiercely fixed themselves upon Ainley, a look of scorn came on her face intensifying its bizarre beauty. She took a step forward as if she would speak to the white man, then apparently changed her mind, and swinging abruptly on her heel, re-entered the tent. Helen Yardely glanced swiftly at her companion, and surprised a look of something very like consternation in his eyes.

"That was very queer!" she said quickly.

"What was very queer?" asked Ainley.

"That girl's action. Did you see how she looked at you? She was going to speak to you and changed her mind."

Ainley laughed a trifle uneasily. "Possibly she blames me for the disappearance of her lover!"

"But why should she do that? She can hardly know of your previous acquaintance with him."

"You forget—she saw him speak to me yesterday!"

"Ah yes," was the girl's reply. "I had forgotten that." The notes of a bugle, clear and silvery in the still air, floated across the meadow at that moment, and Gerald Ainley laughed.

"The breakfast bell! We must hurry, Miss Yardely. It will scarcely do to keep your uncle waiting."

They turned and hurried back to the Post, nothing more being said in reference to Miskodeed and Hubert Stane. And an hour later, in the bustle of the departure, the whole matter was brushed aside by Helen Yardely, though now and again through the day, it recurred to her mind as a rather unpleasant episode; and she found herself wondering how so fine a man as Stane could stoop to the folly of which many men in the North were guilty.

At the end of that day her uncle ordered the camp to be pitched on a little meadow backed by a sombre forest of spruce. And after the evening meal, in company with Gerald Ainley, she walked towards the timber where an owl was hooting dismally. The air was perfectly still, the sky above crystal clear, and the Northern horizon filled with a golden glow. As they reached the shadow of the spruce, and seated themselves on a fallen trunk, a fox barked somewhere in the recess of the wood, and from afar came the long-drawn melancholy howl of a wolf. Helen Yardely looked down the long reach of the river and her eyes fixed themselves on a tall bluff crowned with spruce, distant perhaps a mile and a half away.

"I like the Wild," she said suddenly, breaking the silence that had been between them.

"It is all right," laughed Ainley, "when you can journey through it comfortably as we are doing."

"It must have its attractions even when comfort is not possible," said the girl musingly, "for the men who live here live as nature meant man to live."

"On straight moose-meat—sometimes," laughed Ainley. "With bacon and beans and flour brought in from the outside for luxuries."

"I was not thinking of the food," answered the girl quickly. "I was thinking of the toil, the hardship—the Homeric labours of those who face the hazards of the North."

"Yes," agreed the man, "the labours are certainly Homeric, and there are men

who like the life well enough, who have made fortunes here and have gone back to their kind in Montreal, New York, London, only to find that civilization has lost its attraction for them."

"I can understand that," was the quick reply. "There is something in the silence and wildness of vast spaces which gets into the blood. Only yesterday I was thinking how small and tame the lawns at home would look after this." She swept a hand in a half-circle, and then gave a little laugh. "I believe I could enjoy living up here."

Ainley laughed with her. "A year of this," he said, lightly, "and you would begin to hunger for parties and theatres and dances and books—and you would look to the Southland as to Eden."

"Do you really think so?" she asked seriously.

"I am sure of it," he answered with conviction.

"But I am not so sure," she answered slowly. "Deep down there must be something aboriginal in me, for I find myself thrilling to all sorts of wild things. Last night I was talking with Mrs. Rodwell. Her husband used to be the trader up at Kootlach, and she was telling me of a white man who lived up there as a chief. He was a man of education, a graduate of Oxford and he preferred that life to the life of civilization. It seems he died, and was buried as a chief, wrapped in furs, a hunting spear by his side, all the tribe chanting a wild funeral chant! Do you know, as she described it, the dark woods, the barbaric burying, the wild chant, I was able to vision it all—and my sympathies were with the man, who, in spite of Oxford, had chosen to live his own life in his own way."

Ainley laughed. "You see it in the glamour of romance," he said. "The reality I imagine was pretty beastly."

"Well!" replied the girl quickly. "What would life be without romance?"

"A dull thing," answered Ainley, promptly, with a sudden flash of the eyes. "I am with you there, Miss Yardely, but romance does not lie in mere barbarism, for most men it is incarnated in a woman."

"Possibly! I suppose the mating instinct is the one elemental thing left in the

modern world."

"It is the one dominant thing," answered Ainley, with such emphasis of conviction that the girl looked at him in quick surprise.

"Why, Mr. Ainley, one would think that you—that you——" she hesitated, stumbled in her speech, and did not finish the sentence. Her companion had risen suddenly to his feet. The monocle had fallen from its place, and he was looking down at her with eyes that had a strange glitter.

"Yes," he cried, answering her unfinished utterance. "Yes! I do know. That is what you would say, is it not? I have known since the day Sir James sent me to the station at Ottawa to meet you. The knowledge was born in me as I saw you stepping from the car. The one woman—my heart whispered it in that moment, and has shouted it ever since. Helen, I did not mean to speak yet, but—well, you see how it is with me! Tell me it is not altogether hopeless! You know what my position is; you know that in two years——"

Helen Yardely rose swiftly to her feet. Her beautiful face had paled a little. She stopped the flood of words with her lifted hand.

"Please, Mr. Ainley! There is no need to enter on such details."

"Then——"

"You have taken me by surprise," said the girl slowly. "I had no idea that you—that you—I have never thought of it."

"But you can think now, Helen," he said urgently. "I mean every word that I have said. I love you. You must see that—now. Let us join our lives together, and together find the romance for which you crave."

The blood was back in the girl's cheeks now, running in rosy tides, and there was a light in her grey eyes that made Ainley's pulse leap with hope, since he mistook it for something else. His passion was real enough, as the girl felt, and she was simple and elemental enough to be thrilled by it; but she was sufficiently wise not to mistake the response in herself for the greater thing. The grey eyes looked steadily into his for a moment, then a thoughtful look crept into them, and Ainley knew that for the moment he had lost.

"No," she said slowly, "no, I am not sure that would be wise. I do not feel as I ought to feel in taking such a decision as that. And besides——"

"Yes?" he said, urgently, as she paused. "Yes?"

"Well," she flushed a little, and her tongue stumbled among the words, "you are not quite the man—that I—that I have thought of—for—for——." She broke off again, laughed a little at herself and then blurted confusedly: "You see all my life, from being a very little girl, I have worshipped heroes."

"And I am not a hero," said Ainley with a harsh laugh. "No! I am just the ordinary man doing the ordinary things, and my one claim to notice is that I love you! But suppose the occasion came? Suppose I——." He broke off and stood looking at her for a moment. Then he asked, "Would that make no difference?"

"It might," replied the girl, the shrinking from the infliction of too severe a blow.

"Then I live for that occasion!" cried Ainley. "And who knows? In this wild land it may come any hour!"

As a matter of fact the occasion offered itself six days later—a Sunday, when Sir James Yardely had insisted on a day's rest. The various members of the party were employing their leisure according to their inclinations, and Ainley had gone after birds for the pot, whilst Helen Yardely, taking a small canoe, had paddled down stream to explore a creek where, according to one of the Indians, a colony of beavers had established itself.

When Ainley returned with a couple of brace of wood partridges it was to find that the girl was still absent from the camp. The day wore on towards evening and still the girl had not returned, and her uncle became anxious, as did others of the party.

"Some one had better go to look for her, Ainley," said Sir James. "I gather that a mile or two down the river the current quickens, and that there are a number of islands where an inexpert canoeist may come to grief. I should never forgive myself if anything has happened to my niece."

"I will go myself, Sir James, and I will not return without her."

"Oh, I don't suppose anything very serious has happened," replied Sir James, with an uneasy laugh, "but it is just as well to take precautions."

"Yes, Sir James! I will go at once and take one of the Indians with me—one who knows the river. And it may be as well to send upstream also, as Miss Yardely may have changed her mind and taken that direction."

"Possibly so!" answered Sir James, turning away to give the necessary orders.

Gerald Ainley called one of the Indians to him, and ordered him to put three days' supply of food into the canoe, blankets and a small folding tent, and was just preparing to depart when Sir James drew near, and stared with evident surprise at the load in the canoe.

"Why, Gerald," he said, "you seem to have made preparations for a long search."

"That is only wise, Sir James. This river runs for sixty miles before it falls into the main river, and sixty miles will take a good deal of searching. If the search is a short one, and the food not needed, the burden of it will matter little; on the other hand——"

"In God's name go, boy—and bring Helen back!"

"I will do my best, Sir James."

The canoe pushed off, leaping forward under the combined propulsion of the paddles and the current, and sweeping round a tall bluff was soon out of sight of the camp.

The Indian in the bow of the canoe, after a little time, set the course slantingly across the current, making for the other side, and Ainley asked a sharp question. The Indian replied over his shoulder.

"The white Klootchman go to see the beaver! Beaver there!"

He jerked his head towards a creek now opening out on the further shore, and

a look of impatience came on Ainley's face. He said nothing however, though to any one observing him closely it must have been abundantly clear that he had no expectation of finding the missing girl at the place which the Indian indicated. As a matter of fact they did not. Turning into the creek they presently caught sounds that were new to Ainley, and he asked a question.

"It is the beavers. They smite the water with their tails!"

Two minutes later they came in sight of the dam and in the same moment the Indian turned the canoe towards a soft bar of sand. A few seconds later, having landed, he pointed to the sand. A canoe had been beached there, and plain as the footprints which startled Crusoe, were the marks of moccasined feet going from and returning to the sand bar.

"White Klootchman been here!" said the Indian. "She go away. No good going to the beaver."

He turned to the canoe again, and Gerald Ainley turned with him, without a word in reply. There was no sign of disappointment on his face, nor when they struck the main current again did he even glance at the shore on either side. But seven miles further down, when the current visibly quickened, and a series of small spruce-clad islands began to come in view, standing out of the water for all the world like ships in battle line, a look of interest came on his face, and he began to look alertly in front of him and from side to side, all his demeanour betraying expectation.

CHAPTER IV

A PIECE OF WRECKAGE

The canoe drew near the first of the islands and the Indian directed it inshore and in a quiet bay as the canoe floated quietly out of the current, they lifted up their voices and shouted again and again. Except for the swirl of the waters everything was perfectly still, and any one on the island must have heard the shouting; but there came no response.

"No good!" said the Indian, and turned the bow of the canoe to the river once more.

Island after island they inspected and hailed; meanwhile keeping a sharp look out on either side of the river, but in vain. They were hoarse with shouting when the last of the islands was reached, and on Ainley's face a look of anxiety manifested itself. Landing at the tail of the island the Indian hunted around until he found a dry branch, and this he threw into the water and stood to watch its course as it went down river. The drift of it seemed to be towards a bar on the eastern bank, and towards that, distant perhaps a couple of miles, the course of their canoe was directed. When they reached it, again the Indian landed, and began to inspect the flotsam on the edge of the bank closely. Ainley watched him with apprehension. Presently the Indian stooped, and after two or three attempts fished something from the water. He looked at it keenly for a moment, then he gave a shout, and began to walk along the bar towards the canoe.

As he came nearer, the white man saw that the object he carried was the spoon end of a paddle. When close at hand the Indian held it out for his inspection.

"Him broke," he said in English. "And the break quite fresh."

There was no question as to that. Notwithstanding that the paddle had been in the water, the clean wood of the fracture showed quite plainly, and whilst Ainley was looking at it the Indian stretched a finger and pointed to a semi-circular

groove which ran across the broken end.

"Him shot!" he announced quite calmly.

"Are you sure?" asked Ainley, betraying no particular surprise.

The Indian nodded his head gravely, and fitted his little finger in the groove.

"Bullet-mark!"

Ainley did not dispute the contention, nor apparently was he greatly troubled by the Indian's contention. He looked round a little anxiously.

"But where is the canoe?" he asked. "And Miss Yardely?"

The Indian waved a hand down river. "Canoe miss this bar, and go in the current like hell to the meeting of the waters. Better we keep straight on and watch out."

As they started down river again, Ainley's face took on a settled look of anxiety. It was now close on midnight, but very light, and on either bank everything could be clearly seen. They kept a sharp look out, but found no further trace of the missing canoe, and the early dawn found them in a quickening current, racing for the point where the tributary river joined the main stream.

Presently it came in sight, and between walls of spruce and a foaming crest of water they swept into the broader river, which rolled its turbid way towards its outfall in one of the great Northern lakes. The canoe pranced like a frightened horse at the meeting of the waters, and when they were safely through it, Ainley looked back and questioned his companion.

"Would Miss Yardely's canoe come through that?"

"Like a dry stick," answered the Indian, letting the canoe drift for a moment in order to swing into the main current of the broader stream.

Ainley looked ahead. Downstream the river narrowed and the low broad banks about them gradually rose, until they were like high ramparts on either

hand. The Indian pointed towards the tree-crowned cliffs.

"No good there," he said. "We land here, and make grub; walk down and see what water like."

It seemed to Ainley the only sensible thing to do, and he did not demur. Accordingly, the Indian, seeing a favourable beach, turned the canoe inshore, and whilst his companion was preparing breakfast, the white man walked downstream towards the ramparts of rocks through which the river ran. When he reached them he looked down at the water. It ran smooth and glassy and swift, whirling against the rocky sides a good foot higher than between the earthen banks upstream. He followed the gorge, forgetting that he was tired, forgetting the preparing breakfast, a look of extreme anxiety upon his face. Three-quarters of an hour's walking brought him to the end of the gorge, and for a mile or two the country opened out once more, the river running wide between low-lying banks to disappear in the lee of a range of hills above which hung a veil of mist. He stood regarding the scene for a few minutes and then, the anxiety on his face more pronounced than ever, made his way back to the place where the Indian awaited him. The Indian had already eaten, and whilst he himself breakfasted he told him what he had seen. The native listened carefully, and in the end replied in his own language.

"Good! We go through the cliffs, in place of making the portage. It is the swifter way, and if the white Klootchman come this way, she has gone through these gates of the waters. We follow, but not very far, for again we come to the hills, and to a place where the earth is rent, and the waters fall down a wall that is higher than the highest spruce. If the Klootchman's canoe go there—it is the end."

Falls! So that was the meaning of that mist among the hills. There the river plunged into a chasm, and if Helen Yardely's canoe had been swept on in the current it was indeed the end. Ainley's anxiety mounted to positive fear. He pushed from him the fried deer-meat and bacon which the other had prepared for him, and rose suddenly to his feet.

"Let us be going!" he said sharply, and walked restlessly to and fro whilst his companion broke camp. A few minutes later they were afloat again, and after a little time there was no need to paddle. The current caught them and flung them

towards the limestone gateway at express speed. In an amazingly short time they had passed through the gorge, and were watching the banks open out on either side of them.

There was no sign of life anywhere, no indication that any one had passed that way since time began. As they sped onward a peculiar throb and rumble began to make itself heard. It increased as they neared the range of hills towards which they were making, and as the banks began to grow rocky, and the water ahead broken by boulders, the Indian looked for a good place to land.

He found it on the lee side of a bluff where an eddy had scooped a little bay in the steep bank, and turning the canoe inside it, they stepped ashore. Making the canoe secure they climbed to the top of the bank and began to push their way down stream. The rapids, as Ainley noted, grew worse. Everywhere the rocks stood up like teeth tearing the water to tatters, and the rumble ahead grew more pronounced. Standing still for a moment, they felt the earth trembling beneath their feet, and the white man's face paled with apprehension. A tangle of spruce hid the view of the river as it skirted a big rock, and as the river evidently made a swerve at this point, they struck a bee-line through the timber. The rumble, of which they had long been conscious, of the suddenest seemed to become a roar, and, as they came to an open place where they could see the water again, they understood the reason.

The river but a few feet below them, bordered by shelving terraces of rock, suddenly disappeared. Rolling glassily for perhaps fifty yards, with scarce a ripple on its surface, the water seemed to gather itself together, and leap into a gorge, the bottom of which was ninety feet below. Ainley stood looking at the long cascade for a full minute, a wild light in his eyes, then he looked long and steadily at the gorge through which the river ran after its great leap. His face was white and grim, and his mouth was quivering painfully.

Then without a word he turned and began to hurry along the line of the gorge. The Indian strode after him.

"Where go to?" he asked.

"The end of the gorge," was the brief reply.

The Indian nodded, and then looked back. "If canoe can go over there it smash to small bits."

"Oh, I know it, don't I?" cried Ainley savagely. "Hold your tongue, can't you?"

An hour's wild walking brought them to the end of the gorge, and looking down the rather steep face of the hill, to the widening river, the white man carefully surveyed the banks. After a time he found what he was looking for—a pile of debris heaped against a bluff, whose hard rock resisted the action of the water. It was about a quarter of a mile away and on the same bank of the river as himself. Still in silence he began to drop down the face of the hill, and sometimes climbing over moss-grown rocks, sometimes wading waist-high in the river itself, he made his way to the heap of debris. It was the drift-pile made by the river, which at this point cast out from its bosom logs and trees and all manner of debris brought over the falls and down the gorge, a great heap piled in inextricable confusion as high as a tall fir tree, and as broad as a church.

Feverishly, Gerald Ainley began to wade round its wide base; and the Indian also joined in the search, poking among the drift-logs and occasionally tumbling one aside. Then the Indian gave a sharp grunt, and out of the pile dragged a piece of wreckage that was obviously part of the side and bow of a canoe. He shouted to Ainley, who hurried scramblingly over a heap of the obstructing logs, and who, after one look at that which the Indian had retrieved, stood there shaking like wind-stricken corn; his face white and ghastly, his eyes full of agony. The Indian put a brown finger on a symbol painted on the bows, with the letters H. B. C. beneath. Both of them recognized the piece of wreckage as belonging to the canoe in which Helen Yardely had left the camp, and the Indian, with a glance at the gorge which had vomited the wreckage, gave emphatic utterance to his belief.

"All gone."

Gerald Ainley made no reply. He had no doubt that what the Indian said was true, and the truth was terrible enough. Turning away he began anew to search the drift-pile, looking now for the body of a dead girl, though with but little hope of finding it. For an hour he searched in vain, then began to scramble down river, searching the bank. A mile below the first drift-pile he came upon a second, caught by a sand-bar, that, thrusting itself out in the water, snared the smaller

debris. This also he searched diligently, with no result; and after wandering a little further down the river without finding anything, returned to where the Indian awaited him.

"We will go back," he said, and these were the only words he spoke until they reached their canoe again.

The Indian cooked a meal, of which Ainley partook with but little care for what he was eating, his eyes fixed on the ochre-coloured water as it swept by, his face the index of unfathomable thoughts. After the meal they began to track their canoe upstream, until they reached water where it would be possible to paddle, one of them towing with a line, and the other working hard with the paddle to keep the canoe's nose from the bank. A little way before they reached the limestone ramparts through which they had swept at such speed a few hours before, the Indian, who was at the towline, stopped and indicated that they must make a portage over the gorge, since the configuration of the cliffs made it impossible to tow the canoe through. In this task, a very hard one, necessitating two journeys, one with the canoe and one with the stores, they were occupied the remainder of the day, and when they pitched camp again and had eaten the evening meal, the Indian promptly fell asleep.

But there was no sleep for Gerald Ainley. He sat there staring at the water rushing by, reflecting the crimson flare of the Northern night. And it was not crimson that he saw it, but ochre-coloured as he had seen it earlier in the day, hurrying towards the rapids below, and to that ninety-foot leap into the gorge. And all the time, in vision, he saw a canoe swept on the brown flood, a canoe in which crouched a chestnut-haired girl, her grey eyes wide with fear; her hands helplessly clasped, as she stared ahead, whilst the canoe danced and leaped in the quickening waters hurrying towards the ramparts below, which for aught she knew might well be the gates of death.

Sometimes the vision changed, and he saw the canoe in the rapids below the ramparts, and waited in agony for it to strike one of the ugly teeth of rock. Again and again it seemed that it must, but always the current swept it clear, and it moved on at an increasing pace, swept in that quick mill-race immediately above the falls. On the very edge he saw it pause for a brief fraction of time and then the water flung it and the white-faced girl into the depths beneath, and he saw them falling, falling through the clouds of spray, the girl's dying cry ringing

through the thunder of the waters. He cried out in sudden agony.

"My God! No!"

Then at the sound of his own cry, the vision left him for a time, and he saw the river as it was, rosy in the light of the midnight sun. A sound behind him caused him to turn round. The Indian, awakened by his cry of anguish, had sat up and was staring at him in an odd way.

"It is all right, Joe," he said, and with a grunt the Indian lay down to sleep again.

Ainley could not remain where he was to become again the prey of terrible imaginations. Rising to his feet, he stumbled out of the camp, and began to walk restlessly along the bank of the river. He was body-tired, but his mind was active with an activity that was almost feverish. Try as he would he could not shut out the visions which haunted him, and as fast as he dismissed one, a new one was conjured up. Now, as already shown, it was the canoe with the girl dancing to destruction, now that final leap; then again it was that broken piece of flotsam by the drift-pile at the end of the gorge; and later, in some still reach far down the river, a dead girl, white-faced, but peaceful, like drowned Ophelia.

He walked far without knowing it, driven by the secret agonies within, and all the time conscious that he could not escape from them. Then that befell which put a term to these agonizing imaginings. As he walked he came suddenly on the ashes of a camp fire. For a moment he stared at it uncomprehendingly. Then his interest quickened, as the state of the ashes showed some one had camped at this place quite recently. He began to look about him carefully, walking down the shelving bank to the edge of the river. At that point there was a stratum of soft clay, which took and preserved the impression of everything of weight which rested upon it; and instantly he perceived a number of footmarks about a spot where a canoe had been beached twice.

Stooping he examined the footmarks minutely. There was quite a jumble of them, mostly made by a long and broad moccasined foot, which was certainly that of a man; but in the jumble he found the print of smaller feet, which must have been made by a youth or girl. A quick hope kindled in his heart as he began to trace these prints among the others. He had little of the craft of the wilds, but one thing quickly arrested his attention—the smaller footprints all pointed one way and that was down the bank towards the water. Now why should that be? Had the person who had made those footprints not been in the canoe when the owner had landed to pitch camp? And if such were the case, and the maker of them was indeed a woman, what was she doing here, alone in the wilderness?

Had Helen Yardely been saved by some fortunate chance, and wandering along the river bank, stumbled on the camp of some prospector or trapper making his way to the wild North? His mind clutched at this new hope, eagerly. Hurriedly he climbed the sticky bank and began feverishly to search for any sign that could help him. Then suddenly the hope became a certainty, for in the rough grass he saw something gleam, and stooping to recover it, found that it was a small enamelled Swastiki brooch similar to one which he had seen three days before at Miss Yardely's throat.

As he saw this he gave a shout of joy, and a moment later was hurrying back along the bank to his own encampment. As he went, almost at a run, his mind was busy with the discovery he had made. There were other brooches in the world like this, thousands of them no doubt, but there were few if any at all in this wild Northland, and not for a single moment did he question that this was the one that Miss Yardely had worn. And if he were right, then the girl was safe,

and no doubt was already on her way back to her uncle's camp in the care of whatever man had found her.

Excitedly he broke on the slumbers of his Indian companion, and after showing him the brooch, bade him accompany him to the place where he had found it, and there pointed to the footmarks on the river bank.

"Can you read the meaning of those signs?"

The Indian studied them as a white man would a cryptogram, and presently he stood up, and spoke with the slow gravity of his race.

"The Klootchman she came from the river. The man he carry her from the water in his arms."

"How do you know that, Joe?"

The Indian pointed to certain footprints which were much more deeply marked than the others.

"The man he carry heavy weight when he make these, and the Klootchman she weigh, how much? One hundred and ten pounds, sure. He not carry that weight back to the canoe, because the Klootchman she walk." He pointed again, this time to the smaller footprints, and to Ainley, reading the signs through the Indian's eyes, the explanation amounted to a demonstration.

"Yes, yes, I understand," he cried, "but in that case where is she?"

The Indian looked up and down the river, then waved a hand upstream. "The man he take her back to camp."

"Then why did we not meet them as we came down?"

A puzzled expression came on the Indian's face. For a moment he stood considering the problem, then he shook his head gravely.

"I not know."

"We must get back to the camp at once, Joe. We must find out if Miss Yardely

has returned. We know now that she is alive, and at all costs we must find her. We will start at once for there is no time to lose."

He turned on his heel and led the way back to the canoe, and half an hour later they were paddling upstream towards the junction of the rivers, the Indian grave and imperturbable; Ainley with a puzzled, anxious look upon his handsome face.

CHAPTER V

A BRAVE RESCUE

When Hubert Stane took stock of his position, after his captors had left him, he found himself in a country which was strange to him, and spent the best part of a day in ascertaining his whereabouts. The flow of the wide river where the camp had been pitched told him nothing, and it was only after he had climbed a high hill a mile and a half away from the river that he began to have any indication of his whereabouts. Then with the country lying before him in a bird's-eye view he was able to learn his position. There was more than one river in view, and a chain of small lakes lay between one of them and the river where he had been left by his captors. From the last of those lakes a long portage, such as had been made on the last day but one of the journey, would bring them to a river which a few miles away joined the river on the bank of which he had been left to shift for himself. Studying the disposition of the country carefully, he reached the conclusion that by a roundabout journey he had been brought to the river on the upper reaches of which he had his permanent camp; and as the conviction grew upon him, he made his way back to the canoe, and began to work his way upstream.

As he paddled, the problem of his deportation exercised his mind; and nowhere could he find any explanation of it, unless it had to do with Miskodeed. But that explanation failed as he recalled the words of her father: "It is an order." Who had given the order? He thought in turn of the factor, of Sir James Yardely, of Gerald Ainley. The first two were instantly dismissed, but the thought of Ainley remained fermenting in his mind. It was an odd coincidence that he should have been attacked whilst awaiting Ainley's coming, and in view of his one-time friend's obvious reluctance to an interview and of his own urgent reasons for desiring it; the suspicion that Ainley was the man who had issued the order for his forcible deportation grew until it became almost a conviction.

"I will find out about this—and the other thing," he said aloud. "I can't go back now, but sooner or later my chance will come. The cur!"

That evening he camped at the foot of a fall, which he had heard of, but never before seen, and spent the whole of the next day in portaging his belongings to navigable water, and on the following evening well beyond the rocky ramparts, where the river ran so swiftly, made his camp, happily conscious that now the river presented no barrier for two hundred miles.

As he sat smoking outside his little tent, an absent, thoughtful look upon his face, his eyes fixed dreamily on the river, his mind reverted once more to the problem of recent happenings, and as he considered it, there came to him the picture of Miskodeed as he had seen her running towards him between the willows just before the blow which had knocked him unconscious. She had cried to him to put him on his guard, and the apprehension in her face as he remembered it told him that she knew of the ill that was to befall him. His mind dwelt on her for a moment as he visioned her face with its bronze beauty, her dark, wild eyes flashing with apprehension for him, and as he did so his own eyes softened a little. He recalled the directness of her speech in their first conversation and smiled at the naïveté of her estimate of himself. Then the smile died, leaving the absent, thoughtful look more pronounced, and in the same moment the vision of Miskodeed was obliterated by the vision of Helen Yardely —the woman of his own race, fair and softly-strong, and as different as well as could be from the daughter of the wilds.

Again, as he recalled the steady scrutinizing glance of her grey eyes, he felt the blood rioting in his heart, and for a moment his eyes were alight with dreams. Then he laughed in sudden bitterness.

"What a confounded fool I am!" he said. "A discharged convict——"

The utterance was suddenly checked; and an interested look came on his face. There was something coming down the river. He rose quickly to his feet in order to get a better view of the object which had suddenly floated into his line of vision. It was a canoe. It appeared to be empty, and thinking it was a derelict drifting from some camp up river, he threw himself down again, for even if he salved it, it could be of no possible use to him. Lying there he watched it as it drifted nearer in the current, wondering idly whence it had come. Nearer it came, swung this way and that by various eddies, and drifting towards the further side of the river where about forty yards above his camp a mass of rock broke the smooth surface of the water. He wondered whether the current would swing it

clear; and now watched it with interest since he had once heard a river-man declare that anything that surrendered itself completely to a current would clear obstructions. He had not believed the theory at the time, and now before his eyes it was disproved; for the derelict swung straight towards the rocks, then twisted half-way round as it was caught by some swirl, and struck a sharp piece of rock broadside on.

Then happened a totally unexpected thing. As the canoe struck, a girl who had been lying at the bottom, raised herself suddenly, and stared at the water overside, one hand clutching the gunwale. A second later the canoe drifted against another rock and suddenly tilted, throwing the girl into the broken water.

By this time, taken by surprise though he was, Stane was on his feet, and running down the bank. He did not stop to launch his canoe but just as he was flung himself into the water, and started to swim across the river, drifting a little with the current, striving to reach a point where he could intercept the girl as she drifted down. It was no light task he had set himself, for the current was strong, and carried him further than he intended to go, but he was in front of the piece of human flotsam which the river was claiming for its prey, and as it came nearer he stretched a hand and grasped at it. He caught a handful of chestnut hair that floated like long weed in the river's tide, and the next moment turned the girl over on her back. She was unconscious, but as he glimpsed at her face, his heart leaped, for it was the face of that fair English girl of whom but a few minutes before he had been dreaming. For a second he was overcome with amazement, then stark fear leapt in his heart as he looked at the closed eyes and the white, unconscious face.

That fear shook him from his momentary inactivity. He looked for something else to hold by, and finding nothing, twisted the long strand of hair he had gripped into a rope, and held it with his teeth. Then he glanced round. The current had carried him further than he had realized, and now quickened for its rush between the rocky ramparts, so that there was some danger of their being caught and swept through. As he realized that, he began to exert all his strength, striking across the current for the nearest bank, which was the one furthest from his camp.

The struggle was severe, and the girl's body drifting against him impeded his movements terribly. It seemed impossible that he could make the bank, and the

ramparts frowned ominously ahead. He was already wondering what the chances were of making the passage through in safety, and was half-inclined to surrender to the current and take the risks ahead, when his eye caught that which spurred him to fresh efforts.

A hundred yards downstream a huge tree, by some collapse of the bank, had been flung from the position where it had grown for perhaps a hundred years, and now lay with its crown and three-quarters of its trunk in the river. Its roots, heavily laden with earth, still clung to the bank and fought with the river for its prey. If he could reach that Stane realized that he might yet avoid the perilous passage between the bastions of rock. He redoubled his efforts against the quickening current, and by supreme exertions pulled himself into a position where the current must carry him and the girl against the tree.

In a moment, as it seemed, they had reached it, and now holding the girl's hair firmly in one hand, with the other he clutched at one of the branches. He caught it, and the next moment was unexpectedly ducked overhead in the icy water. He came up gasping, and then understood. The tree was what in the voyageur's nomenclature is known as a "sweeper." Still held by its roots it bobbed up and down with the current, and the extra strain of his weight and the girl's had sunk it deeper in the water. It still moved up and down, and he had not finished spluttering when a new danger asserted itself. The suck of the current under the tree was tremendous. It seemed to Stane as if a thousand malevolent hands were conspiring to drag him under; and all the time he was afraid lest the unconscious girl should be entangled among the submerged branches.

Lying on his back holding the bough that he had caught, at the same time steadying himself with a foot against another branch, he swiftly considered the situation.

It was impossible that he could pull himself on to the trunk from the upper side. Even had he been unhampered by the unconscious girl that would have been difficult, the suck of the current under the tree being so great. He would have to get to the other side somehow. To do that there were new risks to be taken. He would have to let loose the branch which he held, drift through the other interlacing branches, and get a hold on the further side of the trunk.

It was risky, and beyond was the water swirling for its race between the

bastions. But he could do nothing where he was and, setting his teeth, he let go his hold. In a second, as it seemed, the tree leaped like a horse and the water swept him and the girl under the trunk. Scarcely were they under when his free arm shot out and flung itself round a fresh bough which floated level with the water. Immediately the bough bobbed under, but he was prepared for that, and after a brief rest, he set the girl's hair between his teeth once more, and with both hands free began to work from bough to bough. One that he clutched gave an ominous crack. It began to sag in a dangerous way, and at the fork where it joined a larger branch a white slit appeared and began to grow wider. He watched it growing, his eyes quite steady, his mind alert for the emergency that it seemed must arrive, but the branch held for the space of time that he needed it; and it was with heartfelt relief that he grasped a larger bough, and the next moment touched bottom with his feet.

At that he shifted his hold on the girl, towing her by a portion of her dress, and two minutes later, lifted her beyond the water-line on the high shelving bank. Then, as he looked in her white face and marked the ashen lips, a panic of fear fell on him. Dropping to his knees he took her wrist in his hand and felt for her pulse. At first he thought that she was dead, then very faint and slow he caught the beat of it. The next moment he had her in his arms and was scrambling up the bank.

At the top he had the good fortune to stumble on a trail that was evidently used by Indians or other dwellers in the wilderness, probably by men portaging the length of bad water down the river. It was a rough enough path, yet it made his task immeasurably easier. But even with its unexpected aid, the journey was a difficult one, and he staggered with exhaustion when he laid the girl down upon the rough grass at a point not quite opposite his own camp.

Gasping he stood looking at her until he had recovered his breath, the girl unconscious of his gaze; then when he felt equal to the task, he plunged again into the river and swam to his own camp. A few minutes later he returned in his canoe, carrying with him a field water-bottle filled with medical brandy.

The girl lay as he had left her, and his first action was to pour a few drops of brandy between her parted lips, and that done he waited, chafing her hands. A minute later the long-lashed eyelids fluttered and opened, and the grey eyes looked wildly round without seeing him, then closed again and a long sigh came

from her as she lapsed into unconsciousness anew. At that he wasted no more time. Lifting her, he carried her down to the canoe, and paddling across the river, bore her up to his own camp, and laid her down where the heat of the fire would reach her, then he administered further brandy and once more waited.

Again the eyelids fluttered and opened, and the girl looked round with wild, uncomprehending gaze, then her eyes grew steady, and a moment later fixed themselves upon Stane. He waited, saw wonder light them, then, in a voice that shook, the girl asked: "How did—I—come here?"

"That you know best yourself," answered the young man, cheerfully. "I fished you out of the river, that is all I know." The girl made as if to reply; but Stane prevented her.

"No, don't try to talk for a little while. Wait! Take a little more of this brandy."

He held it towards her in a tin cup, and with his hand supporting her head, the girl slowly sipped it. By the time she had finished, a little blood was running in her cheeks and her lips were losing their ashen colour. She moved and made as though to sit up.

"Better wait a little longer," he said, quietly.

"No," she said, "I feel better."

She lifted herself into a sitting posture, and he thoughtfully rolled a small sack of beans to support her back, then she looked at him with a quick questioning gaze.

"I have seen you before, have I not? You are the man who was at Fort Malsun, aren't you—the man whom Mr. Ainley used to know?"

"Yes," he answered with sudden bitterness, "I am the man whom Ainley used to know. My name is Hubert Stane, and I am a discharged convict, as I daresay he told you."

The sudden access of colour in Helen Yardely's face, and the look in her eyes, told him that he had guessed correctly, but the girl did not answer the implied question. Instead she looked at the river and shuddered.

"You—fished me out," she said, her eyes on the rocks across the river. "Was it there the canoe overturned?"

"Yes," he answered, "you struck the rocks."

"I must have been dozing," she replied. "I remember waking and seeing water pouring into the canoe, and the next moment I was in the river. You saw me, I suppose?"

Stane nodded. "I was sitting here and saw the canoe coming down the river. I thought it was empty until it struck the rocks and you suddenly sat up."

"And then you came after me?"

"Yes," he answered lightly.

Her grey eyes looked at him carefully, noted his dripping clothes and dank hair, and then with sudden comprehension asked: "How did you get me? Did you do it with your canoe or——"

"The canoe wouldn't have been any use," he interrupted brusquely. "It would have upset if I had tried to get you out of the water into it."

"Then you swam for me?" persisted the girl.

"Had to," he answered carelessly. "Couldn't let you drown before my eyes—even if I am a convict!"

Helen Yardely flushed a little. "I do not think you need mention that again. I am very grateful to a brave man."

"Oh, as to that——" he began; but she interrupted him.

"Tell me where you got me? I remember nothing about it."

He looked down the river.

"As near as I can tell you, it was by that clump of firs there; though I was not able to land for quite a long distance beyond. You were unconscious, and I

carried you along the opposite bank, then swam across for my canoe and ferried you over. There you have the whole story." He broke off sharply, then before she could offer comment he spoke again: "I think it would be as well if you could have a change of clothes. It is not cold, but to let those you have dry on you might bring on all sorts of ills. There are some things of mine in the tent. I will put them handy, and you can slip them on whilst I take a stroll. You can then dry your own outfit."

He did not wait for any reply, but walked to the little fly-tent, and three or four minutes later emerged, puffing a pipe. He waved towards the tent, and turning away began to walk rapidly up river. Helen Yardely sat where she was for a moment looking after him. There was a very thoughtful expression on her face.

"The whole story!" she murmured as she rose to her feet. "I wonder? That man may have been a convict; but he is no braggart."

She walked to the tent, and with amused eyes looked at the articles of attire obviously arranged for her inspection. A grey flannel shirt, a leather belt, a pair of Bedford cord breeches, a pair of moccasins, miles too large for her, and a mackinaw jacket a little the worse for wear.

She broke into sudden laughter as she considered them, and after a moment went to the tent-door and shyly looked up the river. The figure of her rescuer was still receding at a rapid rate. She nodded to herself, and then dropping the flap of the tent, faced the problem of the unaccustomed garments.

CHAPTER VI

A MYSTERIOUS SHOT

Twenty minutes later, as Hubert Stane returned along the river bank, he saw the girl emerge from the tent, and begin to arrange her own sodden attire where the heat of the fire would dry it. The girl completed her task just as he arrived at the camp, and stood upright, the rich blood running in her face. Then a flash of laughter came in her grey eyes.

"Well?" she asked, challenging his gaze.

"You make a very proper man," he answered, laughing.

"And I am as hungry as two!" she retorted. "I have eaten nothing for many hours. I wonder if——"

"What a fool I am," he broke in brusquely. "I never thought of that. I will do what I can at once."

Without further delay he began to prepare a meal, heating an already roasted partridge on a spit, and making coffee, which, with biscuit he set before her.

"It is not exactly a Savoy supper, but——"

"It will be better," she broke in gaily, "for I was never so hungry in my life."

"Then eat! There are one or two little things I want to attend to, if you will excuse me."

"Certainly," she replied laughingly. "It will be less embarrassing if there is no witness of my gluttony."

Stane once more left the camp, taking with him a hatchet, and presently returned dragging with him branches of young spruce with which he formed a

bed a little way from the tent, and within the radius of the heat from the fire. On this he threw a blanket, and his preparation for the night completed, turned to the girl once more.

"I never enjoyed a meal so much in my life," she declared, as she lifted the tin plate from her lap. "And this coffee is delicious. Won't you have some, Mr. Stane?"

"Thank you, Miss a—Miss——"

"Yardely is my name," she said quickly, "Helen Yardely." He took the coffee as she handed it to him in an enamelled mug, then he said: "How did you come to be adrift, Miss Yardely?"

As he asked the question a thoughtful look came on the girl's beautiful face.

"I was making a little trip by myself," she said slowly, "to see a beaver dam in a creek a little below our encampment, and some one shot at me!"

"Shot at you!" Stane stared at her in amazement as he gave the exclamation.

"Yes, twice! The second shot broke my paddle, and as I had no spare one, and as I cannot swim, I could do nothing but drift with the current."

"But who can have done such a thing?" cried the young man.

"I have not the slightest idea, unless it was some wandering Indian, but I am quite sure it was not an accident. I saw the first shot strike the water close to the canoe. It came from some woods on the left bank, and I cried out to warn the shooter whom I could not see. It was about four minutes after when the second shot was fired, and the bullet hit the shaft of the paddle, so that it broke on my next stroke, and I was left at the mercy of the river."

"And no more shots were fired?"

"None!"

Stane sat there with a very thoughtful look upon his face; and after a moment Miss Yardely spoke again.

"What do you think, Mr. Stane?"

He shook his head. "I do not know what to think, Miss Yardely," he said slowly, "but it looks as if the thing had been done deliberately."

"You mean that some one tried to kill me?"

"No, not that," was the reply. "You would offer too fair a mark for any one accustomed to handling a rifle to miss. I mean that there was a deliberate attempt to set you adrift in the canoe. The first shot, you say, struck the water near you, the second smashed your paddle, and after that there was no more firing. Why? The only answer is that the shooter had accomplished his object."

"It certainly has that appearance," answered the girl. "But why should any one do a thing like that?"

"That is quite beyond me. It was so brutal a thing to do!"

"Some roaming Indian possibly," suggested Miss Yardely thoughtfully.

"But as you asked just now, why? Indians are not so rich in cartridges that they can afford to waste them on a mere whim."

"No, perhaps not," said the girl. "But I can think of no one else." She was silent for a moment, then she added, "Whoever did the vile thing frightened me badly. It is not nice to sit helpless in a canoe drifting out into such a wilderness as this." She waved her hand round the landscape as she spoke, and gave a little shudder. "You see I never knew what was coming next. I passed some islands and hoped that I might strike one of them, but the current swept me clear, and for hours I sat staring, watching the banks go by, and wondering how long it would be before I was missed; and then, I suppose I must have fallen asleep, because I remember nothing more until just before I was thrown into the water."

"It was a very fortunate thing you struck those rocks," said Stane meditatively.

"Fortunate, Mr. Stane? Why?"

"Because in all probability I should not have seen you if you had not; and a few miles below here, there are some bad rapids, and below them the river

makes a leap downwards of nearly a hundred feet."

"A fall?" cried the girl, her face blanching a little, as she flashed a glance downstream. "Oh, that would have been terrible! It was fortunate that you were here."

"Very," he agreed earnestly, "and I am beginning to think that it was providential; though all day I have been cursing my luck that I should have been in this neighbourhood at all. I have no business here."

"Then why——" she began, and stopped as if a little afraid that her question was too frankly curious.

It was so that Stane understood the interrupted utterance. He laughed a little, and then answered:

"You need not mind asking, Miss Yardely; because the truth is that my presence in this neighbourhood is due to a mystery that is almost as insoluble as the one that brought you drifting downstream. On the night after you arrived at Fort Malsun, I was waiting at my tent door for—er—a man whom I expected a visit from, when I was knocked on the head by an Indian, and when I came to, I found I was a prisoner, under sentence of deportation. We travelled some days, rather a roundabout journey, as I have since guessed, and one morning I awoke to find my captors had disappeared, leaving me with my canoe and stores and arms absolutely untouched."

"That was a strange adventure, Mr. Stane."

"So I think," answered Stane with conviction.

"What do you think was the reason for your deportation?"

"I do not know," answered Stane thoughtfully. "My chief captor said it was an order, but that may have been a lie; and such wildly possible reasons that I can think of are so inherently improbable that it is difficult to entertain any of them. And yet——"

He broke off, and an absent look came in his eyes. The girl waited, hoping that he would continue, and whilst she did so for one moment visioned

Miskodeed in all her wild barbaric beauty and her mind, recalling Ainley's words upon the matter of the girl's relation to the man before her, wondered if there lay the reason. Stane still remained silent, showing no disposition to complete his thought; and it was the girl who broke the silence.

"You say you were waiting for a man when you were seized, Mr. Stane; tell me, was the man Gerald Ainley?"

The young man was a little startled by her question, as his manner showed; but he answered frankly: "Yes! But how did you guess that?"

Helen Yardely smiled. "Oh, that was quite easy. You were the topic of conversation at the dinner-table on the very night that you disappeared; and I gathered that to the factor you were something of a mystery, whilst no one except Mr. Ainley knew anything whatever about you. As you and he were old acquaintances, what more natural than that you should be waiting for him? I suppose he did not come?"

"If he did, I never saw him—and I waited for him two nights!"

"Two!" cried Helen. "Then he could not have wanted to come."

"I rather fancy he did not," replied Stane with a bitter laugh.

"You wished to see him very much?" asked the girl quickly. "It was important that you should?"

"I wished to question him upon a matter that was important to me."

"Ah!" said the girl in a tone that was full of significance. Stane looked at her sharply, and then asked a question:

"What are you thinking, Miss Yardely?"

"Oh, I was just thinking that I had guessed one of your wildly possible reasons, Mr. Stane; and to tell the truth, if Mr. Ainley was really anxious to avoid answering your questions, it does not seem to me so inherently improbable as you appear to think."

"What convinces you of that, Miss Yardely?"

"Well," she replied quickly, "you say the Indian told you that it was an order. I ask myself—whose order? There were very few people at Fort Malsun to give orders. I think of them in turn. The factor? You were a stranger to him! My uncle? He never heard of you except in gossip over the dinner-table the night you were deported. Gerald Ainley? He knew you! He had made appointments with you that he twice failed to keep—which, quite evidently, he had no intention of keeping. He had—may I guess?—some strong reason for avoiding you; and he is a man of some authority in the Company and moving to still greater. He would not know the Indians who actually carried you away; but Factor Rodwell would, and factors are only human, and sooner or later Gerald Ainley will be able to considerably influence Mr. Rodwell's future. Therefore—well, Q.E.D.! Do you not agree with me?"

"I find your argument convincing," answered Stane, grimly. Then he lapsed into thoughtful silence, whilst the girl watched him, wondering what was in his mind. Presently she knew, for most unexpectedly the young man gave vent to a short laugh.

"What a fool the man is!" he declared. "He must know that we shall meet again some time!... But, Miss Yardely, I am keeping you from your rest! We must start betimes in the morning if I am to take you back to your uncle."

"If you take me back——?"

"There is no question of that," he answered promptly. "I could not dream of leaving you here."

"I was about to say you would very likely meet Gerald Ainley. He has joined my uncle's party."

"So much the better," cried Stane. "I shall certainly go."

There was a flash in his blue eyes, a grim look in his face, and instinctively Helen Yardely knew that the matter which lay between this man and Gerald Ainley was something much more serious than forced deportation. What it was she could not guess, and though after she had retired to the tent she lay awake

thinking of the matter, when she fell asleep she was as far off as ever from anything that offered a solution of the question which troubled her. And outside, staring into the fire, his strong face the index of dark thoughts, Hubert Stane sat through the short night of the Northland summer, never once feeling the need of sleep, reviewing from a different angle the same question as that which had perplexed the mind of the girl in the tent.

At the first hint of dawn, Stane rose from his seat, gathered up the girl's now dry raiment, and put it in a heap at the tent door, then procuring a canvas bucket of water he set that beside the clothes and busied himself with preparing breakfast. After a little time Helen emerged from the tent. Her eyes were bright, her beautiful face was radiant with health, and it was clear that she was no worse for her experience of the day before.

"Good morning, Mr. Stane," she said in gay salutation, "you are the early bird. I hope you slept well."

"May I reciprocate the hope, Miss Yardely?"

"Never better, thank you. I think hunger and adventure must be healthful. I slept like the Seven Sleepers rolled into one; I feel as fresh as the morning, and as hungry as—well, you will see," she ended with a laugh.

"Then fall to," he said, joining in the laughter. "The sooner the breakfast is over the sooner we shall start."

"I warn you I am in no hurry," she retorted gaily. "I quite like this. It is the real thing; whilst my uncle's camps are just civilization imposing itself on the wilderness."

"But your uncle! You must think of him, Miss Yardely. You have now been away an afternoon and a night. He will be very anxious."

"Yes!" she said, "that's the pity of it. If it were not for that——" She broke off suddenly, gave a little laugh, and for no apparent reason her face flushed rosily. "But you must restore me to the bosom of my family soon!"

"More's the pity!" said Stane to himself under his breath; his heart-beats quickening as he looked at her radiant face and laughing eyes; whilst openly he

said: "I will do my best. You will be able to help me to paddle against the current, and no doubt in a little time we shall meet a search-party coming to look for you."

"Then my little jaunt will be over! But you must not surrender me until you have seen my uncle, Mr. Stane."

Stane laughed. "I will hold you against the world until then, Miss Yardely."

"And perhaps you will see Gerald Ainley, as you wish," she said, glancing at him to watch the effect of her words.

The laughter died swiftly from his face, and a stern light came into his eyes. "Yes," he said grimly, "perhaps I shall. Indeed that is my hope."

Helen Yardely did not pursue the matter further. Again she glimpsed depths that she did not understand, and as she ate her breakfast, she glanced from time to time at her companion, wondering what was between him and Ainley, and wondering in vain.

Breakfast finished, they struck camp, launched the canoe and began to paddle upstream. The current was strong, and their progress slow, but after some three hours they arrived at the junction of the two rivers. Then Stane asked a question.

"Which way did you come, Miss Yardely? Down the main stream or the other one?"

The girl looked towards the meeting of the waters doubtfully. "I do not know," she said. "I certainly do not remember coming through that rough water."

"Your uncle's party had of course travelled some way since I left Fort Malsun?"

"Oh yes; we had made long journeys each day and we were well on our way to—wait a moment. I shall remember the name—to—to old Fort Winagog."

"Winagog?" said Stane.

"Yes! That is the name. I remember my uncle mentioning it yesterday."

"Then you came down the main stream for a certainty, for the old fort stands on a lake that finds an outlet into this river, though it is rather a long way from here. We will keep straight on. No doubt we shall strike either your uncle's camp or some search party presently."

As it happened the conclusion he reached was based on a miscalculation. The only waterway to old Fort Winagog that he knew was from the main river and up the stream that formed the outlet for the lake. But there was another that was reached by a short portage through the woods from the subsidiary stream from which he turned aside, a waterway which fed the lake, and which cut off at least a hundred and twenty miles. Knowing nothing of this shorter route he naturally concluded that Helen Yardely's canoe had come down the main stream, and took the wrong course in the perfect assurance that it was the right one.

So hugging the left bank they passed the junction of the rivers, and a little further on crossed to the other side to seek shelter from a rising wind, under the high bank. And less than an hour later the canoe, carrying Gerald Ainley and his Indian, swept out of the tributary stream into the broader current, and they drove downstream, unconscious that every stroke of the paddle was taking them further from the girl whom they sought.

CHAPTER VII

STRANDED

It was high noon when Hubert Stane directed the nose of the canoe towards a landing-place in the lee of a sand-bar, on the upperside of which was a pile of dry driftwood suitable for firing.

"We will take an hour's rest, Miss Yardely; and possibly whilst we are waiting your friends may show up."

He lit a fire, prepared a wilderness meal of bacon and beans (the latter already half-cooked) and biscuit and coffee, and as they consumed it, he watched the river, a long stretch of which was visible.

"I thought we should have encountered your friends before now, Miss Yardely," he remarked thoughtfully.

The girl smiled. "Are you anxious to get rid of me?" she asked. "Believe me, I am enjoying myself amazingly, and if it were not for the anxiety my uncle and the others will be feeling, I should not trouble at all. This——" she waved a hand towards the canoe and the river—"is so different from my uncle's specially conducted tour."

"Oh, I am not at all anxious to be rid of you," laughed Stane, "but I cannot help wondering whether we have not taken the wrong turn. You see, if we have, every yard takes us further from your uncle's camp."

"But this is the way to Fort Winagog?" asked the girl.

"It is the only way I know."

"Then we must be going right, for I distinctly heard my uncle say we were within a day's journey of the place."

"The thing that worries me is that we have met no one looking for you."

"No doubt they will thoroughly search the neighbourhood of the camp and the beaver-dam before going further afield. Also, you must remember that it might be dinner-time last night before I was missed."

"Yes," he agreed, "that is very likely. On which bank of the river was the camp?"

"This bank—the left coming down."

"Then we will hug the shore this afternoon, and no doubt we shall find it before supper-time."

But in that anticipation he was mistaken. The long day drew to its close and the camp they sought had not appeared; nor had any search-party materialized. As they pitched camp for the night, the doubt which all day had been in Stane's mind became a certainty.

"I am afraid we have made a mistake, Miss Yardely. You must have come down the other river. It is impossible that we can have missed the camp; and we must have seen any boat coming down this empty water."

"But we are going towards Fort Winagog?"

"Yes. On the other hand you must remember that a paddle-driven canoe travels much faster than a merely drifting one; and that we ourselves, assuming that we are on the right way, all day have been shortening the distance that a search-party would have to travel. We ought to have met some time ago. I think we shall have to turn back in the morning."

"Must we?" asked the girl. "Can't we go on to Fort Winagog? I can wait there till my uncle appears, and I shall not be taking you further out of your way. I am afraid I am putting you to a good deal of trouble, and wasting your time."

"Time is not of much account to me," laughed Stane shortly. "And what you suggest is impossible."

"Why?" demanded Helen.

"Because old Fort Winagog is a fort no longer. It is a mere ruin like old Fort Selkirk. There may be an Indian or two in the neighbourhood. There is certainly no one else."

"Then we shall have to go back?" said the girl.

"It seems to be the only way," was the reply. "If we are wrong, as I am convinced we are, every yard we go takes us further from your people."

"I am sorry to give you all this trouble," said the girl contritely.

"Please—please!" he answered in quick protest. "Believe me it is a pleasure to serve you, and with me a few days do not matter. I shall have enough of my own company before long."

"You live alone?" asked Helen.

"I have an old Indian for companion."

"And what do you do, if you will permit me to be so curious?"

"Oh," he laughed. "I hunt, I pursue the elusive nugget, and I experiment with vegetables. And this winter I am going to start a trapping line."

"But you are rich!" she cried. "You have no need to live in exile."

"Yes," he answered with sudden bitterness. "I am rich. I suppose Ainley told you that. But exile is the only thing for me. You see a sojourn in Dartmoor spoils one for county society."

"Oh," she cried protestingly, "I cannot believe that you—that you——"

"Thank you," he said as the girl broke off in confusion. "I cannot believe it myself. But twelve good men and true believed it; an expert in handwriting was most convincing, and if you had heard the judge——"

"But you did not do it, Mr. Stane, I am sure of that."

"No," he answered, "I did not do the thing for which I suffered. But to prove

my innocence is another matter."

"You have not given up the endeavour, I hope."

"No! I have a man at work in England, and I myself make small endeavours. Only the other day I thought that I——" Apparently he remembered something, for he broke off sharply. "But why discuss the affair? It is only one of the world's small injustices which shows that the law, usually right, may go wrong occasionally."

But Helen Yardely was not so easily to be turned aside. Whilst he had been speaking a thought had occurred to her, and now took the form of a question.

"I suppose that the other night when you were waiting for Mr. Ainley, it was on this particular matter that you wished to see him?"

"What makes you think that?" Stane asked quickly.

Helen Yardely smiled. "It is not difficult to guess. You told me last night that you wished to question him on a matter that was important to you. And this matter—Well! it needs no argument."

"It might be something else, Miss Yardely," was the evasive reply.

"Yes, it might be," answered the girl, "but I do not think it is."

Stane made no reply, but sat looking in the fire, and the girl watching him, drew her own conclusion from his silence, a conclusion that was far from favourable to Gerald Ainley. She wondered what were the questions Stane had wished to ask her uncle's secretary; and which, as she was convinced, he had been at such pains to avoid. Was it possible that her rescuer believed that his one-time friend had it in his power to prove his innocence of the crime for which he had suffered? All the indications seemed to point that way; and as she looked at the grave, thoughtful face, and the greying hair of the man who had saved her from death, she resolved that on the morrow, when she reached her uncle's camp, she would herself question Gerald Ainley upon the matter.

But, as events befell, the opportunity that the morrow was to bring was not given. For that night, whilst she slept in the little tent, and Stane, wrapped in a

blanket, slumbered on a bed of spruce-boughs, perhaps half-a-dozen yards away, a man crept cautiously between the trees in the rear of the encampment, and stood looking at it with covetous eyes. He was a half-breed of evil countenance, and he carried an old trade gun, which he held ready for action whilst he surveyed the silent camp. His dark eyes fell on Stane sleeping in the open, and then looked towards the tent with a question in them. Evidently he was wondering how many travellers there were; and found the thought a deterrent one; for though once he lifted his gun and pointed it to the sleeping man, he lowered it again, his eyes turning to the tent anew.

After a period of indecision, the intruder left the shadow of the trees, and crept quietly down to the camp, his gun still at the ready, and with his eyes fixed on the unconscious Stane. Moving very cautiously he reached the place where the canoe was beached, and looked down into it. A gleam of satisfaction came into his dark eyes as he saw a small sack of beans reposing in the stern, then again a covetous look came into them as their gaze shifted to the stores about the camp. But these were very near the sleeping man, and as the latter stirred in his sleep, the half-breed relinquished any thought of acquiring them. Stealthily he conveyed the canoe down to the water's edge, launched it, and then with a grin on his evil face as he gave a last look at the man in the blanket, he paddled away.

A full three-quarters of an hour later Stane awoke, and kicking aside the blankets, replenished the fire, and then went a little way upstream to bathe. At the end of half an hour he returned. His first glance was towards the tent, the fly of which was still closed, then he looked round the camp and a puzzled look came on his face. There was something a little unfamiliar, something not present which——

"Great Scott! The canoe!"

As the words shot from him he hurried forward. Quite distinctly he remembered carrying it up the bank the night before, and now——. Inside half a minute he found himself looking at the place where it had lain. The impression of it was quite clear on the dewy grass, and there were other impressions also—impressions of moccasined-feet going down to the edge of the water. For a moment he stared unbelievingly; then as a thought occurred to him he glanced at the tent again. Had the girl in his absence taken the canoe and——

The thought died as soon as it was born, and he began to follow the tracks on the damp grass, backward. They skirted the camp in a small semi-circle, and led to the forest behind, where on the dry pine needles they were not quite so easy to follow. But follow them he did, and in a couple of minutes reached a place where it was evident some one had stood for a considerable time. This spot was in the shadow of a great spruce, and standing behind the trunk he looked towards the camp. The fire and the white tent were plain to be seen. Then he understood what had happened. Some one had seen the encampment and had waited in the place where he now stood, probably to reconnoitre, and then had made off with the canoe. A thought leaped into his mind at that moment, and brought with it a surge of fear.

"The stores. If——"

At a run he covered the space between him and the camp, and as he looked round and saw that most of the stores reposed where he had placed them the previous night, relief surged in his heart.

"Thank heaven!"

"Mr. Stane, what is the matter? You look as if something had startled you."

He swung round instantly. Helen Yardely was standing at the tent door with a smile on her face.

"The matter is serious enough," he explained quickly. "Some one has stolen the canoe in the night."

"Stolen the canoe!" echoed the girl.

"Yes! You can see his tracks in the grass, going up to the place where he stood and watched us. He must have come down whilst we slept."

"But who can have done such a thing?"

Stane shook his head. "I cannot think. A wandering Indian most likely.... Hard put to it, I expect. He has taken a sack of beans with him."

"Then we are stranded?" asked the girl quickly.

"In a way—yes," he agreed. "But we are not in a desperate case. We have food, I have my rifle, and it will be possible to make a raft and float down the river until we meet your uncle's people."

The girl looked at the river doubtfully. "What sort of control shall we have over a raft?"

"Well," he said, "I should make a steering oar."

"And if the current took control, Mr. Stane? Please believe me when I say I am not afraid—but I cannot help thinking of those falls you mentioned."

Stane looked thoughtful. For the moment he had forgotten the falls, and as he remembered the quickening of the current at the meeting of the rivers he recognized there was reason in the girl's question.

"There are risks, of course," he said. "The alternative to the river is to tramp through the wood."

"Then I vote for the alternative," replied Helen with a little laugh. "I've had my full of drifting like a fly caught in an eddy."

Stane looked down the river and from the river to the woods which lined its banks.

"It will be difficult," he said. "This is virgin forest."

"Pooh," retorted the girl lightly. "You can't make me afraid, Mr. Stane. Ever since I left Edmonton with my uncle's party I've wanted to rough it—to know what the wilderness really is. Now's my chance—if you don't deprive me of it."

In spite of the seriousness of the situation, Stane laughed.

"Oh, I won't deprive you of it, Miss Yardely. We'll start after breakfast; but I warn you, you don't know what you are in for."

"Job's comforter!" she mocked him laughingly. "I'm going to fill the kettle. A cup of tea will cheer you up and make you take a rosier view of things."

She said no more, but taking the kettle, walked down to the river, humming to herself a gay little chanson.

"Qui va là! There's someone in the orchard,
    There's a robber in the apple-trees,
Qui va là! He is creeping through the doorway.
    Ah, allez-vous-en! va-t'-en!"

He watched her go, with a soft light gleaming in his hard blue eyes, then he turned and began to busy himself with preparations for breakfast. When the meal was finished, he went through the stores and his personal possessions.

"We can't take them all," he explained. "I know my limit, and sixty pounds is as much as I can carry along if I am to travel steadily, without too many rests. We shall have to cache a goodish bit."

"You are forgetting me, aren't you?" asked the girl, quietly. "I'm fairly strong, you know."

"But——"

"I think I must insist," she interrupted with a smile. "You are doing all this for me; and quite apart from that, I shall be glad to know what the trail is like under real conditions."

Stane argued further, but in vain, and in the end the girl had her way, and took the trail with a pack of perhaps five and twenty pounds, partly made up of the clothes she had changed into after her rescue. Stane knew the woods; he guessed what havoc the trail would make of skirts and for that reason he included the clothing in her pack, foreseeing that there would be further need of them.

As they started the girl began to hum:

"Some talk of Alexander
And some of Hercules."

Stane laughed over his shoulder.

"I'm afraid a quick step will be out of keeping soon, Miss Yardely."

"Why?" she asked interrupting her song.

"Well—packing on trail is necessarily a slow business; and there's rough country between these two rivers."

"You are trying to scare me because I'm a tenderfoot," she retorted with a laugh that was like music in Stane's ears; "but I won't be scared."

She resumed her song with a gay air of bravado; passing from one chanty to another in a voice fluty as a blackbird. Stane smiled to himself. He liked her spirit, and he knew that that would carry her through the difficulties that lay before them, even when the flesh was inclined to failure. But presently the springs of song dried up, and when the silence had lasted a little time he looked round. The girl's face was flushed, and the sweat was dropping in her eyes.

"Nothing the matter, I hope, Miss Yardely?"

"No, thank you," she answered with a little attempt to laugh; "but one can't sing, you know, with mosquitoes and other winged beasts popping into one's mouth."

"They are rather a nuisance," he agreed and plodded on.

Packing one's worldly possessions through the pathless wilderness is a slow, grinding misery. The lightest pack soon becomes a burden. At the beginning of a march it may seem a mere nothing, in an hour it is an oppression; in three a millstone is a feather compared with it; and before night the inexperienced packer feels that, like Atlas, he bears the world upon his shoulders. It was therefore little wonder that Helen Yardely ceased to sing after they had marched but a very little way; and indeed the trail, apart from the apparently growing weight of the pack, was not favourable to song. There was no sort of path whatever after they had left the river bank; nothing but the primeval forest, with an undergrowth that was so dense that the branches of one bush were often interwoven with its neighbours. Through this they had to force their way, head down, hands and clothes suffering badly in the process. Then would come a patch of Jack-pine, where trees seven to ten feet high grew in such profusion that it was well-nigh impossible to find a passage between them; and on the heels of this would follow a stretch of muskeg, quaking underfoot, and full of boggy traps for the unwary. In the larger timber also, the deadfalls presented an immense difficulty. Trees, with their span of life exhausted, year after year, had

dropped where they stood, and dragging others down in their fall, cumbered the ground in all directions, sometimes presenting tangled barriers which it was necessary to climb over, a method not unaccompanied by danger, since in the criss-cross of the branches and trunks a fall would almost inevitably have meant a broken limb.

The ground they travelled over was uneven, intersected here and there by gullies, which were only to be skirted by great expense of time and energy, and the crossing of which was sometimes dangerous, but had perforce to be accomplished, and by noon, when they reached the bank of a small stream, the girl was exhausted and her face wore a strained look. Stane saw it, and halting, took off his pack.

"Time for grub," he said.

Then unstrapping his pack he stretched a blanket on the sloping ground. The girl watched him with interest.

"Why——" she began, only to be promptly interrupted.

"For you," he explained briefly. "Lie down and relax your limbs. Pull this other blanket over you, then you won't chill."

"But I want to help," she protested. "I don't like to feel that you are working and I——"

"You will help best by obeying orders," he said smilingly. "We shall have to push on after an hour, and if you don't rest you will be too done up to keep the trail till evening."

"Then I must obey," she said.

He turned to look for wood with which to make a fire, and when he returned she was lying on the blanket with another drawn over her, and her eyes smiled at him as he appeared. The next minute they were closed, and two minutes later she was fast asleep. Stane, as he realized the fact, smiled a little to himself.

"Of spirit compact," he murmured to himself, and went forward with preparations for a meal.

It was two hours later when the girl awoke, and the meal was ready—a quite substantial one.

"Have I slept long?" inquired Helen, moving towards the fire.

"Two hours. But don't worry about that. We have lost no time really, for I have done a little exploring. There's a stretch of high ground in front of us, a kind of height of land between the river we have left and the one we are making for. Once we are well across that we shall find the going easier. We'll tackle it this afternoon. I've found something, like a path, an old trapping-line I should think by the way the trees have been blazed."

When the meal was finished they put out the fire and started anew, and, by evening, had passed the crest of the high land between the rivers, and were moving down the wooded slopes on the further side looking for a camping place. The timber thickened, and they suddenly encountered a tremendous barrier of deadfall ten or eleven feet high, with the fallen trunks criss-crossing in all directions. From the further side of it came the ripple of running water proclaiming a stream and the water they were seeking.

"It is exasperating," said Stane, with a little laugh. "But we must climb the beastly thing. If we try to go round it, we shall probably only encounter others. I'll go first and have a look at the other side."

He began to climb the obstruction and when he reached the top looked down at the tangle of trunks below.

"It's pretty bad," he shouted to the watching girl. "You had better wait until I find a way down."

He began to crawl gingerly along the monarch tree at the crown of the pile. Its branches were twisted in all directions and dangerous snags were frequent. Suddenly his foot slipped. He made a wild attempt to regain his balance but the heavy pack prevented him, and a second later with a shout he plunged into the tangled pile below, vanishing from the girl's sight on the further side. With a swift cry of alarm, Helen, who had been seated on a fallen trunk, leaped to her feet. She called out to him, her voice shaking with fear:

"Mr. Stane! Mr. Stane!"

There came no answering hail from the other side of the deadfall, and with dismay manifesting itself in her beautiful face, the girl faced the barrier and began to climb with reckless, desperate haste.

CHAPTER VIII

A MEETING IN THE FOREST

Gerald Ainley's canoe had almost reached the junction of the rivers, on the return journey, and he and his companion were battling hard against the acceleration of the current, when the Indian gave a grunt and looked round.

"What is it, Joe?" asked Ainley quickly.

"Man with canoe," answered the Indian laconically. "He make a portage."

"Where?"

"Up river," replied the Indian with a jerk of his head. Ainley craned his neck a little and, as he did so, just caught sight of a man moving across an open place between the trees a quarter of a mile away, the canoe over his head and shoulder like a huge cowl.

"We must speak to him, Joe! Perhaps he has news," said Ainley quickly, and a second later shouted at the top of his voice. "Hal—lo—o—o!"

That the man heard the hail was sure for both of them saw him halt and turn to look downstream, but the next moment he turned, and, continuing his journey, was instantly lost in the thick of the trees.

"That was queer," said Ainley. "He heard me, but whoever he is he doesn't want to speak to us."

"We catch him," replied the Indian. "Make land below the meeting of the waters, and portage through woods to other river. Meet him there."

As he spoke the native began to make a course across the river, and Ainley asked for information.

"I don't understand, Joe. If we land below the junction how can we meet a man who lands above?"

"Both go the same way," grunted the Indian. "Walk to meet the man. We make short portage, and wait for him across the water. He come and we meet him."

Ainley still was in a fog, but when they had landed and had started to follow a well-defined path through the forest, he understood. The direction they were following would bring them to the bank of the tributary river, perhaps a mile and a half from the meeting of the waters; and the path which the stranger was following would bring him out on the opposite side of the river. If Joe were right the lower portage was the shorter, and, notwithstanding that the other man had the start, they could reach the river first and would be able to force a meeting on him however much he wished to avoid them.

After half an hour's steady trudging through the woods, they came in sight of the water once more, and set their burdens down behind a screen of bushes.

"We first," said the Indian after a cautious survey of the empty river. "Wait! He come."

Seated behind the screening bushes they waited, watching the other side of the river. Half an hour passed and the man for whom they watched did not appear. Then the Indian spoke.

"The man know," he said. "He wait till we go."

"But why should he be afraid?" asked Ainley sharply.

"I not know! But he wait."

"Then if the mountain won't come to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain."

"What that?" asked the Indian.

"We will cross the river," said Ainley. "We will go look for him."

"Good!" said the Indian.

Five minutes later they were afloat once more, and in a few minutes had landed on the further side.

"You stop here with the canoe, Joe," said Ainley picking up his rifle. "I'll go and hunt up the fellow. If you hear me call, come along at once."

The Indian nodded and proceeded to fill a pipe, whilst the white man, following the track made by many feet portaging from one river to the other, moved into the woods. He made no attempt at concealment, nor did he move with caution, for he was assured that in the dense wood a man burdened with a canoe could not turn aside from the path without disaster overtaking him. If he kept straight on he was bound to meet the man whom he sought.

That conviction proved to be well-grounded. He had been walking less than ten minutes when he caught sight of the canoe lying directly in his way, with the man who had been carrying it, seated on the ground with his back against a tree, smoking. As the man caught sight of him he started to his feet and stretched his hand towards a gun reposing against a trunk. Holding his own rifle ready for action, Ainley shouted reassuring words to the man, and then moved quickly forward. The man, a half-breed, the same man who had stolen Stane's canoe, gave one keen glance at him and then dropping his hand from the gun, awaited his coming.

"Why did you run away when I shouted a while back?" asked Ainley sharply.

"I not run," answered the half-breed, insolently. "I carry the canoe, an' I tink I not wait. Dat is all."

Ainley looked at the man thoughtfully. There was something furtive about the fellow, and he was sure that the reason given was not the real one.

"Then why are you waiting here?" he asked with a directness that in no way nonplussed the other.

"I take what you call a breather," answered the man stolidly. "What matter to you?"

Ainley looked at him. He was sure the man was lying, but it was no affair of his, and after a moment he turned to his main purpose.

"I wanted to ask you something," he said. "A white girl has been lost on the river—she is a niece of a great man in the Company, and I am looking for her. Have you seen her?"

"What she like?" asked the half-breed with a sudden quickening of interest.

Ainley described Helen Yardely to the best of his ability, watching the other's evil face whilst he did so, and before he had ended guessed that the man knew something of the girl he was seeking.

"You have seen her?" he cried abruptly.

"Oui!" replied the half-breed. "I haf seen her, one, two, tree days ago. She is in canoe on zee river," he pointed towards the water as he spoke, and waved his hand towards the south. "She is ver' beautiful; an' I watch her for zee pleasure, vous comprenez? And anoder man he watched also. I see him, an' I see him shoot with zee gun—once, twice he shoot."

"You saw him shoot?" Ainley's face had gone suddenly white, and there was a tremor in his voice as he asked his questions. "Do you mean he shot the girl?"

"No! No! Not zee girl. He very bad shot if he try. Non! It was zee paddle he try for, an' he get it zee second shot. I in the woods this side zee river an' I see him, as he stand behind a tree to watch what zee girl she will do."

"You saw him?" asked Ainley, in a faltering voice. "Who was he?"

"I not know," answered the half-breed quickly, "but I tink I see heem again since."

"You think——"

"Oui! I tink I talk with heem, now."

There was a look of malicious triumph on the half-breed's face, and an alert look in his furtive eyes as he made the accusation. For a moment stark fear looked out of Ainley's eyes and he visibly flinched, then he recovered himself and broke into harsh laughter.

"You think? Then you think wrong, and I wouldn't say that again if I were you. It might lead to sudden trouble. If I were the man who fired those shots why should I be spending my time looking for her as I am?"

"I not know," said the half-breed sullenly.

"No, I should think not; so you had better put that nonsense out of your head, now, once for all; for if you go about telling that mad tale you'll surely be taken for a madman and the mounted police——" He broke off as a flash of fear manifested itself in the half-breed's face, then he smiled maliciously. "I see you do not like the police, though I daresay they would like to meet you, hey?"

The man stood before him dumb, and Ainley, convinced that he had stumbled on the truth, laughed harshly. "Stoney Mountain Penitentiary is not a nice place. The silent places of the North are better; but if I hear of you breathing a word of that rot you were talking just now, I will send word to the nearest police-post of your whereabouts, and once the mounters start after a man, as I daresay you know, they follow the trail to a finish."

"Oui, I know," assented the man quickly.

"Then unless you want to land in their hands in double quick time you'll tell no one of the silly mistake you made just now, or—well you understand."

The half-breed nodded, and thinking that he had gone far enough, Ainley changed the subject.

"And now tell me, have you seen that girl I asked you about since you saw her three days back?"

A thoughtful look came in the half-breed's face, and his unsteady eyes sought the canoe lying at his feet. He thought of the white tent on the river bank and of the man sleeping outside of it, and instantly guessed who had occupied the tent.

"Oui!" he replied laconically.

"You have?" Sudden excitement blazed in Ainley's face as he asked the question. "When? Where?"

The half-breed visioned the sleeping camp once more, and with another glance at the stolen canoe, gave a calculated answer. "Yesterday. She go up zee oder river in a canoe with a white man."

"Up the other river?"

"Oui! I pass her and heem, both paddling. It seems likely dat dey go to Fort Winagog. Dey paddle quick."

"Fort Winagog!" As he echoed the words, a look of thought came into Ainley's eyes. Helen would have heard that name as the next destination of the party, and if the man who had saved her from the river was in a hurry and travelling that way it was just possible that she had decided to accompany him there. He nodded his head at the thought, and then a new question shot into his mind, a question to which he gave utterance.

"Who was the man—I mean the man who was with the girl in the canoe?"

"I not know," answered the half-breed, trying to recall the features of the sleeping man whose canoe he had stolen. "Heem tall man, with hair that curl like shavings."

"Tell me more," demanded Ainley sharply, as an unpleasant suspicion shot into his mind.

"I not know more," protested the half-breed. "I see heem not ver' close; an' I travel fast. I give heem an' girl one look, cry bonjour! an' then he is past. Vous comprenez?"

"Yes," replied the white man standing there with a look of abstraction on his face. For a full two minutes he did not speak again, but stood as if resolving some plan in his mind, then he looked at the half-breed again.

"You are going up the river?" he asked.

"Oui!"

"Then I want you to do something for me. A day's journey or so further on you will find a camp, it is the camp of a great man of the Company——"

"I know it," interrupted the half-breed, "I haf seen it."

"Of course, I had forgotten you had been in the neighbourhood of it! Well, I want you to go there as fast as you can and to take a note for me. There will be a reward."

"I will take zee note."

"Then you must wait whilst I write it."

Seating himself upon a fallen tree he scribbled a hasty note to Sir James Yardely, telling him that he had news of Helen and that he hoped very shortly to return to camp with her, and having addressed it gave it to the half-breed.

"There is need for haste," he said. "I will reward you now, and the great man whose niece the girl is, will reward you further when you take the news of her that is in the letter. But you will remember not to talk. I should say nothing about what you saw up the river a few days back. Sir James is a suspicious man and he might think that you fired those shots yourself—in which case——" He shrugged his shoulders, then taking out a ten-dollar note, handed it to the half-breed, whose eyes gleamed as he took it. "Now," he continued, "shoulder your canoe, and come along to the river. I should like to see you start. I'll carry your gun, and that sack of yours."

He took the half-breed's gun, picked up the beans, and in single file they marched through the wood back to where the Indian sat patiently waiting. On their appearance he looked round, and as his eyes fell on the half-breed's face a momentary flash came into them, and then as it passed he continued to look at the new-comer curiously.

Ainley rapidly explained the situation and the Indian listened without comment. He waited until the half-breed was actually afloat and out of earshot, and then he spoke.

"Bad man!" he said. "No good. Heem liar. I have seen heem b'fore."

"Maybe," answered Ainley lightly. "So much the better—for one thing! But there's no reason why he should lie about this matter, and I think he was telling the truth about that meeting up the other river. We'll follow the trail anyway; and

we will start at once. Will the portage or the river be the better way?"

"Portage," said the Indian, following the half-breed with his eyes.

"Then we had better get going. We've no time to lose, and you needn't worry yourself about that fellow. He'll do what I've asked him, for the sake of himself. He can have no reason for doing otherwise."

But in that, as in his statement that the half-breed could have no reason for lying, Ainley was mistaken. The stolen canoe was a very ample reason, and so little inclined was the thief to seek the presence of Sir James Yardely, that when he reached a creek three miles or so up the river, he deliberately turned aside, and at his first camp he used Ainley's note to light his pipe, tossing what was left of it into the fire without the least compunction. Then, as he smoked, a look of malice came on his face.

"No, I not meestake. Dat man fire zee shots. I sure of dat; an' by Gar! I get heem one of dese days, an' I make heem pay for it, good an' plenty. Mais—I wonder—why he shoot? I wonder eef zee white mees, she knew?"

And whilst he sat wondering, Gerald Ainley and his Indian companion, travelling late, toiled on, following the river trail to Fort Winagog on a vain quest.

CHAPTER IX

UNDER THE GREENWOOD TREE

Slowly, and with the pungent taste of raw brandy in his mouth, Hubert Stane came to himself. The first thing he saw was Helen Yardely's white face bending over him, and the first sound he heard was a cry of sobbing gladness.

"Thank God! Thank God!"

He did not understand, and at her cry made an attempt to move. As he did so, sharp pains assailed him, and forced a groan from his lips.

"Oh!" cried the girl. "You must lie still, Mr. Stane. I am afraid you are rather badly hurt, indeed I thought you were killed. I am going to do what I can for you, now that I know that you are not. Your leg is broken, I think, and you have other injuries, but that is most serious, and I must manage to set it, somehow."

"To set it——" he began, and broke off.

"Yes! I am afraid I shall not prove a very efficient surgeon; but I will do my best. I hold the St. John's Ambulance medal, so you might be worse off," she said, with a wan smile.

"Much," he agreed.

"Now that you are conscious I am going to leave you for a few minutes. I must find something that will serve for splints."

Without more ado she departed, taking with her an ax, and presently through the stillness of the forest there reached him the sound of chopping. In spite of his pain he smiled to himself, then after listening for awhile, he began to try and ascertain the extent of his injuries for himself. There was a warm trickle on his face and he guessed that there was a gash somewhere; his body seemed to be one great sore, from which he deducted that he was badly bruised; whilst his leg

pained him intolerably. Lying as he was on the flat of his back, he couldn't see the leg, and desiring to do so he made a great effort and sat up. As he did so, he groaned heavily, and incontinently fainted.

He was still unconscious when the girl returned, and after one quick look of alarm she nodded to herself. "A faint," she whispered. "Perhaps it is just as well."

With a knife she ripped the breeches leg right up the seam, then with the aid of moss and a blanket, together with the rough splints she had cut, she made a shift to set the broken leg. Twice during the operation Stane opened his eyes, groaned heavily, and passed into unconsciousness again.

Helen did not allow these manifestations of suffering to deflect her from her task. She knew that her unskilled surgery was bound to pain him severely, and she welcomed the lapses into unconsciousness, since they made her task easier. At last she gave a sob of relief and stood up to survey her handiwork. The splicing and the binding looked terribly rough, but she was confident that the fractured ends of bone were in position, and in any case she had done her best.

After that she busied herself with building a fire, and after heating water, washed the wound on Stane's forehead, and carefully examined him for other injuries. There were bruises in plenty, but so far as she could discover no broken bones, and when she had satisfied herself on that point, she turned to other tasks.

Cutting a quantity of young spruce-boughs she fashioned them into a bed close beside where he lay, and filled all the interstices with springy moss, laying over all a blanket. That done, she turned once more to Stane, to find him with eyes wide open, watching her.

"I have set your leg," she said, in a matter-of-fact voice. "I've done the best I could, though I am afraid it is rather a rough piece of work."

He raised his head slightly, and glanced down at the bandaged limb, then he smiled a trifle wanly.

"It has a most workmanlike look," he said in a faint voice.

"Now I want to get you on this bed. I ought to have done so before I set your

leg. I had forgotten that there was no one to help me lift you on to it. But perhaps we shall be able to manage, though I am afraid it will be a very painful ordeal for you. Still it must be done—we can't have you lie upon the ground."

The ordeal was certainly a painful one, but by no means so difficult as the girl had anticipated. Making a sling out of the pack ropes, Helen held the injured leg clear of the ground, whilst Stane, using his arms and his other leg, managed to lift himself backward on to his improvised couch.

The strain of the effort tried him severely, and he lay for a long time in an exhausted condition, with his eyes closed. This was no more than Helen had expected, and she did not let the fact trouble her unduly. Working methodically she erected the little tent in such a position that it covered the injured man's bed; and then prepared a meal of such things as their resources afforded, lacing the coffee she had made with a little brandy.

Stane was too done up to eat much, but he swallowed a fair quantity of coffee, whilst the girl forced herself to eat, having already realized that the welfare of both of them for the time being depended upon her and upon her strength. When the meal was ended, she found his pipe, charged it for him, and procured him a light, and with a murmur of thanks, Stane began to smoke.

From where he lay, through the open tent-fly, he could see a portion of the windfall barrier which had been the cause of the disaster.

"I thought I was done for," he said as he looked towards the tangled trunks. "I slipped and plunged right into a sort of crevasse, didn't I?"

"Yes," answered Helen quietly. "It was a little time before I could find you. There was a kind of den made by crossed trunks, and you had slipped between them into it."

"How did you manage to get me out?" he asked, his eyes on the amazing jumble of trunks and branches.

"Well," was the reply, given with a little laugh, "as I told you this morning I am fairly strong. But it was a hard task for all that. I had to cut away quite a number of interlacing branches, and hoist you out of the crevasse with the pack

ropes, then slide you down the deadfall as best I could. It took me a full hour to get you clear of the trees and safely to the ground, and all the time I was oppressed with the thought that you were dead, or would die before I could do anything to recover you. When I got you to the ground, I went through your pack and found the brandy which I saw you place there this morning. The rest you know."

Stane looked at her with eyes that glowed with admiration. "You make it a little thing," he said gratefully, "but I know what it means. You have saved my life, Miss Yardely."

The girl flushed crimson, and then laughed a little to hide her embarrassment. "Oh, as to that—we are quits, Mr. Stane."

"Not quite," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?" she asked quickly.

"Well," he answered, speaking slowly and considering every word, "I am tied here for some time—for weeks certainly. I can't move and I can't be moved. You ____"

"I!" she interrupted sharply. "I shall remain here. I shall nurse you. There is nothing else to be done. I could not go forward a mile in this wilderness of trees without being lost; and I certainly couldn't find my way back to the river—even if I wanted to."

"But your uncle and friends. They will be looking for you, they will think you are lost."

"There's no help for that," she answered resolutely. "You will be able to do nothing for yourself. As you said just now you are tied here for weeks; and I am tied with you. There is simply nothing else for it. You were at my service when I needed you, and I am at your service now that you need me. I think that is all that need be said."

"Perhaps some wandering Indian may show up," he said meditatively. "Then ____"

"I shall refuse to leave you before you are well," replied Helen with a little laugh. "You are my patient, Mr. Stane—the very first that I have had the chance of practising on; and you don't suppose I am going to surrender the privilege that fate has given me? No! If my uncle himself showed up at this moment, I should refuse to leave you until I saw how my amateur bone-setting turned out. So there! That is my ultimatum, sir."

There was an almost merry note in her voice, but there was a note of resolve also; and Stane's gratitude and admiration increased. He looked at her with grateful eyes. Her face was rosy, her eyes were bright with laughter, though they turned away in some confusion as they met his.

"You are a very noble——"

"Oh," she interrupted quickly, her face taking a deeper hue. "You do not know me yet. You haven't seen me at my worst. You don't know how catty I can feel sometimes. Wait until you do, and then you can deliver judgment."

She ended with laughter, and rose from her seat as if to leave the tent; seeing which Stane spoke quickly.

"Whatever the worst or best of you may be, I am happy to be in your hands!"

"Just wait until I have shown my claws," she said over her shoulder, as she passed outside.

Stane lay quite still with a very thoughtful look in his eyes. Outside he could hear her moving about, singing softly to herself. He caught a line or two, and his memory instantly supplied the rest.

"Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither;
Here shall we see
No enemy,
But winter and rough weather."

He smiled to himself, and a soft look came into his eyes. The girl was making a jest of a situation that would have appalled multitudes of her over-civilized sisters, and he marvelled at her courage. The glow in his eyes grew brighter as he stared into vacancy. Some day-dream softened the stern lines in his face, and for a few minutes the spell of it held him. Then suddenly he frowned, and a little harsh laugh broke from his lips.

"You fool!" he whispered to himself. "You fool!"

A moment later the girl entered the tent again. In her hand she carried a rather decrepit hussif and a hank of strong linen thread. She held them down for him to see.

"I am making free with your possessions, Mr. Stane, but there's no help for it. I simply must repair these rags of mine."

He looked at her and noticed for the first time that her blouse was badly torn. Half of one sleeve was ripped away, and there was a long tear through which he caught the gleam of a white shoulder. Her skirt he saw was in no better case. She caught his glance and laughed.

"I'm a perfect Cinderella! It will take me hours to sew up these rents."

"Do you think it is worth while?" he asked with a faint smile. "I'm not much of a tailor myself; and I should look at that job as wasted effort."

"But what else can I do?" she demanded. "I can't get in a taxi and run down to Bond Street on a shopping expedition."

"No," he answered slowly, "but you might look in the pack you carried today. There's a habit there that is better suited to the woods than the one you have."

"Oh!" she cried, her grey eyes alight with laughter, and a little flush in her cheeks. "You brought it along then?"

"I put it in your pack, because I knew that two days of trail in the forest would reduce your present costume to shreds."

She eyed the hussif distastefully. "I hate sewing," she said. "I think I will leave

the repairs till morning. There is no immediate hurry that I know of."

"Not at all," he answered with a little smile, and divining that his advice would be accepted he turned to a fresh subject. "Where are you going to sleep? You ought not to have given me the tent."

She waved a hand airily. "Outside. There isn't much room here. Like R. L. S. sleeping out with his donkey I shall discover a new pleasure for myself."

A quick light leaped in Stane's eyes and a smile came on his wan face.

"What are you smiling at?" demanded the girl laughingly. But he did not tell her how his mind had recalled the context of the passage she had referred to, a passage which declared that to live out of doors with the woman a man loves is of all lives the most complete and free. His reply was a mere evasion.

"I am afraid you will find it an exaggerated pleasure, Miss Yardely."

"Then it will be strictly for one night only," she said. "Tomorrow I shall build a shack of boughs and bark like one I watched an Indian building, down on the Peace river. It will be exhilarating to be architect and builder and tenant all in one! But for tonight it is 'God's green caravanserai' for me, and I hope there won't be any trespassers, wolves or bears and such-like beasts."

"There may be mice!" laughed Stane.

"Mice!" A look of mock-horror came on her face. "I'm mortally afraid of mice!"

"And Meeko may pay you a visit."

"The Lord have mercy on me! Who is Meeko?"

"Meeko is the red squirrel. He abounds in these woods and his Indian name means the mischief-maker."

"I adore squirrels," laughed Helen.

"Upweekis will be away just now, so he won't disturb you with his

screeching."

"And who may Upweekis be?"

"The lynx! He will have gone to the burned lands after the rabbits for the summer-hunting."

"Anything else on the forest visiting-list?" asked the girl merrily.

"Kookooskoss, the owl may hail you."

"Pooh! Who's afraid of owls?"

She laughed again, and then grew suddenly grave. "But we are talking too much," she said quickly. "There is a little-too-bright colour in your face. I think you had better try to sleep. I shall be just outside the tent, and if there is anything you need you must call me. Good night, Mr. Stane. In spite of the forest folk, I expect I shall sleep like a top."

"Good night, Miss Yardely."

The girl went outside, and after sitting for quite a long time looking in the fire, retired to the couch of spruce which she had prepared for herself, and almost instantly fell asleep.

Four hours afterwards she awakened suddenly and looked around her. A rosy glow through the trees proclaimed the dawn. The forest was wonderfully still, and there seemed no reason whatever for the sudden awakening. Then a stream of meaningless babble came through the canvas wall of the tent. She sat up instantly, and listened. Plainly, the patient was delirious, and the sound of his delirious babble must have broken through her sleep. Three minutes later she was inside the tent, her brow puckered with anxiety.

Stane lay there with flushed face, and wide-open eyes that glittered with a feverish light. He took absolutely no notice of her entrance and it was clear that for the present he was beyond all recognition of her. She looked at him in dismay. For the moment he was quiet, but whilst she still stood wondering what she should do, the delirium broke out again, a mere babble of words without meaning, some English, some Indian, in which she found only two that for her

had any significance. One was Gerald Ainley's name, and the other the name of the beautiful Indian girl whom she had seen talking with the sick man down at Fort Malsun—Miskodeed.

Her face flushed as she recognized it, and a little look of resentment came in her eyes. She remembered what Ainley had hinted at about Stane and Miskodeed, and what others had plainly thought; and as she stood there it seemed almost an offence to her that the name should be mentioned to her even in the unconsciousness of delirium. Then she gave a hard little laugh at herself, and going outside once more, presently returned with water and with a couple of handkerchiefs taken from the sick man's pack.

She poured a few drops between his lips, and then after laving his face, she laid one of the wet handkerchiefs on his brow, renewing it, from time to time, in order to cool his head. After a little time the babble ceased, the restlessness passed away, and his eyes closed in natural slumber. Seated on the ground, she still watched him, her face the index of troublesome thoughts; but after a little time, she began to nod, her chin dropped to her chest, and she fell into a profound sleep.

"Miss Yardely! Miss Yardely!"

Stane's voice awakened her two hours and a half later. She looked round in some bewilderment, and as her eyes saw his tired, white face, she started up.

"I am afraid I must have fallen asleep," she began hurriedly. "I——"

"Have you been watching me all night?" he asked in a rather weak voice.

"No, not all night," she protested. "I awoke outside a little time ago, and heard you talking deliriously. I came in the tent to do what I could, and then seated myself to watch. I must have been very tired or——"

"Please, please, Miss Yardely. You must not reproach yourself. I cannot allow it! I blame myself for giving you so much trouble."

"How do you feel?" asked Helen, changing the subject.

"Rather groggy," he replied with a poor attempt at gaiety.

She stretched a hand and took his. The palm was moist.

"Ah," she said. "You feel weak no doubt, but the fever has left you. I will go and attend to the fire and prepare breakfast."

She turned a little abruptly and left the tent, and Stane looked after her with frowning eyes. Something had gone wrong. There was an air of aloofness and austerity about her that had not been there yesterday, and she had spoken in formal terms that had nothing of the camaraderie which had characterized their acquaintance until now. He could not understand it; in no way could he account for it; and he lay there puzzling over the matter and listening to the sound of her movements outside. Never for a single moment did it enter his mind that the daughter of civilization was jealous of that daughter of the wilds whose name he had uttered in the unconsciousness of delirious hours. Nor did it enter the mind of Helen herself. As she recalled the name she had heard on his lips in the night, whilst she busied herself with unaccustomed tasks, the feeling of resentment that was strong within her, to her appeared a natural feeling due to a sense of outraged *convenances* when in reality it had its origin in the strongest and deepest of primal passions.

CHAPTER X

A CANOE COMES AND GOES

Lying on his back, his head pillowed on a rolled-up blanket, Hubert Stane became aware that the sound of the girl's movements had ceased. He wondered where she had gone to, for it seemed clear to him that she had left the camp, and as the time passed without any sound indicating her presence he began to feel alarmed. She was unused to the woods, it would be easy for her to lose herself and if she did——

Before the thought was completed he heard the sound of a snapping stick, and knew that she had returned. He smiled with relief and waited for her appearance, but a few minutes passed before she entered the tent, bearing in her hand a tin cup. He looked at her inquiringly.

"What have you there, Miss Yardely?"

"Balsam," was the reply, "for the cut upon your head. It is rather a bad one, and balsam is good for healing."

"But where did you get it?"

"From I forget how many trees. There are quite a number of them hereabouts."

"I didn't know you knew so much of wood lore," he said smilingly.

"I don't," she retorted, quickly. "I am very ignorant of the things that really matter up here. I suppose that balsam would have been the very first thing an Indian girl would have thought of, and would have searched for and applied at once, but I only thought of it this morning. You see one of my uncle's men had a little accident, and an Indian went out to gather the gum. I happened to see him pricking the blisters on the trees and gathering the gum in a dish and I inquired why he was doing it. He explained to me, and this morning when I saw the cut, it suddenly came to me that if I could find balsam in the neighbourhood it would

be helpful. And here it is, and now with your permission I will apply it."

"I wonder I never thought of it myself," he answered with a smile. "It is a very healing ungent. Apply to your heart's content, Miss Yardely."

Deftly, with gentle fingers, the girl applied the balsam and then bound the wound with a strip of linen torn from a handkerchief. When the operation was finished, still kneeling beside him, she leaned back on her heels to survey the result.

"It looks quite professional," she said; "there isn't an Indian girl in the North could have done it better."

"There isn't one who could have done it half as well," he answered with a laugh.

"Are you sure?" she asked quickly. "How about Miskodeed?"

"Miskodeed?" he looked at her wonderingly.

"Yes, that beautiful Indian girl I saw you talking with up at Fort Malsun."

Stane laughed easily. "I know nothing whatever about her capacity as a healer," he said. "I have only spoken to her on two occasions, and on neither of them did we discuss wounds or the healing of them."

"Then——" she began, and broke off in sudden confusion.

He looked at her in some surprise. There was a look on her face that he could not understand, a look of mingled gladness and relief.

"Yes?" he asked inquiringly. "You were about to say—what?"

"I was about to say the girl was a comparative stranger to you!"

"Quite correct," he replied. "Though she proved herself a friend on the night I was kidnapped, for I saw her running through the bushes towards my tent, and she cried out to warn me, just as I was struck."

"If she knew that you were to be attacked she ought to have warned you before," commented Helen severely.

"Perhaps she had only just made the discovery or possibly she had not been able to find an opportunity."

"She ought to have made one," was the answer in uncompromising tones. "Any proper-spirited girl would have done."

Stane did not pursue the argument, and a moment later his companion asked: "Do you think her pretty?"

"That is hardly the word for Miskodeed," answered Stane. "'Pretty' has an ineffective sort of sound, and doesn't describe her quality. She is beautiful with the wild beauty of the wilds. I never saw an Indian girl approaching her before."

Helen Yardely frowned at the frank enthusiasm with which he spoke.

"Wild? Yes," she said disparagingly. "That is the word. She is just a savage, with, I suppose, a savage's mind. Her beauty is—well, the beauty of the wilds as you say. It is barbaric. There are other forms of beauty that——"

She broke off abruptly, and the blood ran rosily in her face. Stane saw it and smiled.

"Yes," he answered gaily. "That is true. And I think that, however beautiful Miskodeed may be, or others like her, their beauty cannot compare with that of English women."

"You think that?" she cried, and then laughed with sudden gaiety as she rose to her feet. "But this is not a debating class, and I've work to do—a house to build, a meal to cook—a hundred tasks appealing to an amateur. I must go, Mr. Stane, and if you are a wise man you will sleep."

She left the tent immediately, and as he lay there thinking over the conversation, Stane caught the sound of her voice. She was singing again. He gave a little smile at her sudden gaiety. Evidently she had recovered from the mood of the early morning, and as he listened to the song, his eyes glowed with admiration. She was, he told himself, in unstinted praise, a girl of a thousand,

accepting a rather desperate situation with light heart; and facing the difficulties of it with a courage altogether admirable. She was no helpless bread-and-butter miss to fall into despair when jerked out of her accustomed groove. Thank Heaven for that! As he looked down at his injured leg he shuddered to think what would have been the situation if she had been, for he knew that for the time being he was completely in her hands; and rejoiced that they were hands so evidently capable.

Then he fell to thinking over the situation. They would be tied down where they were for some weeks, and if care was not exercised the problem of food would grow acute. He must warn her to ration the food and to eke it out. His thought was interrupted by her appearance at the tent door. She held in her hand a fishing line that he had purchased at the Post and a packet of hooks.

"I go a-fishing," she cried gaily. "Wish me luck?"

"Good hunting!" he laughed back. "I hope there is fish in the stream."

"Herds! Flocks! Coveys! Schools! What you like. I saw them when I was hunting for the balsam."

"That is fortunate," he said quietly. "You know, Miss Yardely, we may have to depend on fin and feather for food. The stores I brought were only meant to last until I could deliver you to your uncle. We shall have to economize."

"I have thought of that," she said with a little nod. "I have been carefully through the provisions. But we will make them last, never fear! You don't know what a Diana I am." She smiled again, and withdrew, and an hour later returned with a string of fish which she exhibited with pride. "The water is full of them," she said. "And I've discovered something. A little way from here the stream empties into a small lake which simply swarms with wild fowl. There is no fear of us starving!"

"Can you shoot?" he inquired.

"I have killed driven grouse in Scotland," she answered with a smile. "But I suppose ammunition is valuable up here, and I'm going to try the poacher's way."

"The poacher's way?"

"Yes. Snares! There is a roll of copper wire in your pack. I've watched a warrener at home making rabbit snares, and as there's no particular mystery about the art, and those birds are so unsophisticated, I shall be sure to get some. You see if I don't. But first I must build my house. The open sky is all very well, but it might come on to rain, and then the roofless caravanserai would not be very comfortable. It is a good thing we brought an ax along."

She turned away, and after perhaps half an hour he caught the sound of an ax at work in the wood a little way from the tent. The sound reached him intermittently for some time, and then ceased; and after a few minutes there came a further sound of burdened steps, followed by that of poles tossed on the ground close to the tent. Then the girl looked in on him. Her face was flushed with her exertions, her forehead was bedewed with a fine sweat, her hair was tumbled and awry, and he noticed instantly that she had changed her torn blouse and skirt for the clothing which his foresight had burdened her pack with. The grey flannel shirt was a little open at the neck, revealing the beautiful roundness of her throat, the sleeves of it were rolled up above the elbows after the workman-like fashion of a lumberman, and showed a pair of forearms, white and strong. His eyes kindled as he looked on her.

She was radiantly beautiful and strong, he thought to himself, a fit mate for any man who loved strength and beauty in a woman, rather than prettiness and softness, and his admiration found sudden vent in words.

"Miss Yardely, you are wonderful!"

The colour in her face deepened suddenly, and there was a quick brightening in her grey eyes.

"You think so?" she cried laughing in some confusion.

"I certainly do!" he answered fervently.

"Why?" she demanded.

"Well," he replied quickly, and not uttering what had been in her mind, "you adapt yourself to difficult circumstances so easily. I don't know another girl in the world who would so cheerfully do what you are doing."

"Oh," she retorted gaily, "needs must when the devil drives! But was that all you were thinking?"

She knew it was not, for she had seen the look in his eyes, and her question was recklessly provocative and challenging. She knew it was such as she had flung it at him; and Hubert Stane knew too. His face flushed, his heart pounded wildly; and for a moment there was a surging desire to tell her what he really had been thinking. The next moment he put the temptation from him.

"No," he answered with an attempt at laughter, "but the rest is not for publication."

There was a little tremor in his voice as he spoke which Helen Yardely did not fail to notice. For a moment she stood there undecided. She was conscious of an uplift of spirit for which there appeared no valid reason, and she visioned opening out before her a way of life that a week ago she had never even dreamed of. Three days in the solitude of the wilderness with Hubert Stane had brought her closer to him than an acquaintance of years could have done, and she was aware of wild impulses in her heart. As she stood there she was half-inclined then and there to challenge fate, and to force from him the words that he withheld. Then, with a great effort, she checked the surging impulses, and gave a tremulous laugh.

"That is too bad of you," she cried. "The unpublished thoughts are always the most interesting ones.... But I must away to my house-building or I shall have to spend another night under the stars."

She turned and walked abruptly away. In her eyes as she went was a joyous light, and her heart was gay. As she swung the ax upon her shoulder and moved towards the trees she broke into song, the words of which reached Stane:

"It was a lover and his lass
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,
That o'er the green cornfield did pass
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding,
Sweet lovers love the Spring."

He lay there beating out the melody with his fingers. A musing look came in his eyes that remained there when once more the sound of her ax came through the forest stillness. Then it died away and his face grew grim.

"It's nonsense, the merest madness!" he whispered to himself. "And even if it were not—a man can't take advantage of such circumstances. It would be too caddish for words——"

For a long time he lay there listening to the sound of her movements, which told him when she was near and when further away, and presently he heard her fixing the lean-to of her improvised hut. She worked steadily, sometimes singing to herself, but she did not enter the tent again until noon, when she came in to inquire if he were comfortable and to say that a meal would be ready shortly.

"How does the hut go?" he asked.

"Oh, finely!" she cried with enthusiasm. "The framework is up, though I've used all the pack-ropes over the job. I wish I had some nails. I'm sure I could drive them straight."

"I'm sure you could," he replied laughingly.

"Girls are not nearly so incapable as they let men make them out to be. I never built a house before, but I am sure this one of mine is going to be a success. After we have eaten I am going to look for birch-bark to make the covering, but there's one thing that is worrying me."

"What is that?" he asked.

"I am wondering how to fasten the bark together. I shall have to get it in strips, I know, and the strips will have to be sewn together. I know that, but the question

is—how? If I had stout twine and a packing needle it would be easy, but——"

"It is still easy," he interrupted. "You will have to get the roots of the white spruce, and sew with that, as a cobbler sews, using a knife for awl."

"Oh," she laughed, "I never thought of that, and it is so simple. I shall manage all right now."

After the meal of fish and beans and coffee, she disappeared once more, and later he heard her busy outside again. From the sounds he judged that she had found the bark and the other materials that she needed, and was busy sewing the covering for her tepee, and presently he heard her fixing it. The operation seemed to take quite a long time and was evidently troublesome, for once or twice sounds of vexation reached him and once he heard her cry roundly: "Confound the thing!"

He laughed silently to himself at the heartiness of her expression, then wished that he could go out and help her; but as he could not, and as she did not come to him in her difficulty he refrained from asking what the difficulty was, and from offering advice. Half an hour later she stood in the tent doorway, flushed but triumphant.

"Finished," she cried, "and Sir Christopher Wren was never more proud than I am."

"I should like to see your castle," laughed Stane.

"You shall, sir," she cried gaily. "You shall. I will lift the canvas of the tent that you may feast your eyes on my handiwork."

A moment later she was busy rolling up the canvas at one side of the tent, and presently he found himself looking out on a very fair imitation of an Indian hunting tepee. He gave the work his ungrudging admiration.

"It is a very creditable piece of work, Miss Yardely."

"Yes," she responded lightly, "and I'm not going to pretend that I'm not proud of it. I am, and having done that, I don't think Robinson Crusoe was so very wonderful after all! I think that I could have managed as well as he did on his

desert island. But here's a fanfare on my own trumpet! And I've work yet to do, and I must do it before my doll's house goes completely to my head."

She dropped the canvas of the tent, fastened it into its place, and then proceeded to arrange a bed of young spruce boughs for herself. That done to her satisfaction, she prepared the last meal of the day and then in the stillness of the bright Northland evening, she went off towards the lake she had discovered in the morning, with the intention of setting the snare that she had spoken of.

But she did not do so that night, for before she came in sight of it she was aware of an alarmed clamour of the water-fowl, and wondering what was the cause of it, she made her approach with caution. The stream, which she had followed fell over a small cliff to the shore of the lake and as she reached the head of the fall she became aware of two men beaching a canoe. Instantly she slipped behind a tree, and from this point of vantage looked again. The men had lifted the canoe clear of the water and were now standing upright with their faces to her not twenty-five yards from the place of her concealment. On this second glance she recognized them instantly. One of the men was Gerald Ainley and the other was the Indian, Joe.

For a moment she stood there without moving, then very cautiously she drew back into the wood behind her, and gradually worked her way to a place along the lakeside where the undergrowth was very thick, and where she could watch without fear of discovery. She was less than a quarter of a mile away from the place where the two had landed, and as she watched them making camp, the smell of their fire was blown across to her. Neither of the two travellers showed any disposition to leave the lakeside, and she watched them for quite a long time, a look of deep perplexity on her face.

They were friends! She had no doubt that they were looking for herself. They represented ease and safety, and a quick return to the amenities of civilization, but she had no desire to discover herself to them. She thought of the injured man lying in the tent a mile away. It was possible that the coming of these two, if she made her presence known, might prove to be beneficial for him. She weighed that side of the matter very carefully, and her eyes turned to the canoe in which the men travelled. It was, she recognized, too small to carry four people, one of whom would have to lie at length in it; and she knew instinctively that Ainley would propose to leave the Indian behind to look after Stane whilst he took her

back to her uncle. And she was conscious of a surprising aversion to any such course; aware that she was satisfied with things as they were. She crouched there for quite a long time, then a whimsical smile came on her face, and without a regret she crept quietly away through the forest, leaving the two searchers unaware of her presence.

When she reached the encampment she looked into the hut and found that Stane was fast asleep. She smiled to herself, and instead of replenishing the failing fire, carefully extinguished it with earth, that neither the glare nor the smoke of it might reach the two searchers and so lead to the discovery of the camp. Then, having done all she could to ensure Stane and herself remaining undisturbed in their wilderness seclusion, she looked in the tent again, smiled once more, and dropping the fly of the tent, went to her own tepee. Though she lay long awake, she was up betimes next morning, and after one glance into the tent to assure herself that her patient was yet sleeping, she moved off in the direction of the lake. When she came in sight of it she looked towards the foot of the waterfall for Ainley's camp. It was no longer there, but a mile and a half away she descried the canoe making down the lake. As she did so, she laughed with sudden relief and gladness, and hurried back to the camp to light the fire and prepare breakfast.

CHAPTER XI

A FOREST FIRE

Sir James Yardely sat in the shelter of his tent looking anxiously at Gerald Ainley.

"Then you have not found my niece, Ainley?"

"No, Sir James! But I have news of her, and I am assured she is alive."

"Tell me what gives you that assurance."

Ainley thereupon described the search he had made, and produced the swastiki brooch, explaining the circumstances under which he had found it, and then gave an account of the meeting with the half-breed and of the latter's declaration that he had seen Helen going up the main river in a canoe with a white man.

"But why on earth should Helen go up there?" asked Sir James wonderingly.

"I cannot say, Sir James! I can only guess, and that is that Miss Yardely knew that we were making for the old Fort Winagog, and mentioned it to her rescuer who was probably journeying that way. Anyhow I went up to the Fort. The Indians there had not seen nor heard of any white girl in the neighbourhood, but I gave them instructions to look for her, promising a reward if she were found, then I hurried back here by the shorter route in the hope that possibly Miss Yardely might have returned in the meantime."

Sir James stared through the tent-door at the wild landscape before him. His face showed a lightening of his anxiety, though it was clear that the turn of events puzzled him.

"I can't understand it," he said. "Why shouldn't Helen have made her way straight back here?"

"Can't say, Sir James! Possibly the man who helped her doesn't know the country, and of course Miss Yardely is quite ignorant of it."

"And here she is, lost in the wilderness, careering round the compass with heaven knows what come-by-chance fellow!" commented Sir James, adding quickly, "Ainley, she has got to be found!"

"Yes, Sir James!"

"This unfortunate affair has upset me. It has quite disarranged my plans. We have lost five days here, and I shall be compelled to curtail my journey. I have decided to cut out the visits to the posts north of this, and to work across to the Peace River, and so southward."

"You are going back?" cried Ainley in some consternation. "You are going to leave Miss Yardely——"

"No, my dear fellow," interrupted Sir James, anticipating the conclusion of his subordinate's sentence. "I am not going to leave her to her fate. I am going to leave you to find her. I have thought the matter out very carefully. I shall leave four Indians with you, and shall establish a camp at this point, so that in the event of Helen returning here you will not miss her by any chance. I shall send a messenger to Rodwell, at Fort Malsun, instructing him to send you down an outfit that will last the winter if necessary, and you will have *carte blanche* to follow your own plans, only you must understand, Ainley, my niece must be found. Even though you have to comb this country through with a dust-comb she must be found."

"She shall be, Sir James," answered Ainley with conviction.

"It is, of course, just possible that the man with whom your half-breed saw her was making north to the post at Lobstick Creek, and it will be as well to make an early inquiry there."

"Yes, Sir James, I have thought of that."

"By the way, did you get any description of the man whom my niece was with?"

"Yes. You remember that man who was at Fort Malsun, and who departed quietly one night?"

"You mean that fellow whom you knew at Oxford, and who has since gone under?"

"That is the man, Sir James; I am convinced of it, from the half-breed's description."

A look of anxiety came on the great man's face. "A discharged convict, wasn't he, Ainley?"

"Yes, Sir James. He is of good family, and I fancy he is wealthy, for he succeeded to the estate whilst he was in prison, and came out here I imagine, because the old country was impossible to him."

"What was the crime that knocked him out of things?"

"Forgery!"

"Um!" was the reply. "Things might have been worse. Possibly the fellow will remember that he used to be a gentleman."

"Possibly," agreed the younger man.

"Anyhow, you know exactly who you have to look for and that ought to make your task much easier. Rodwell will instruct all the Indians who show up at Fort Malsun to keep a bright look-out and no doubt in a few days you will get track of her. But as I said just now, she must be found, at all costs she must be found!"

"Yes, Sir James! I shall spare no effort to that end, and I may say that, if possible, I am even more anxious about her than you."

A half-smile came on the great man's face, as he nodded: "I understand, Ainley; I am not blind. It was for that reason I decided that you should have charge of the search-party, seeing that you have—er—extra inducements. Find my niece, bring her back to me, and then we can talk over the matter. And now you had better go and think out your plans carefully. I shall have to leave here in the morning, but now that I know Helen is alive, I shall go with a comparatively

easy heart."

Gerald Ainley went to his own tent with a smile on his face. For the furtherance of his ultimate plans things could scarcely have fallen out better. It was true that Helen yet remained to be found; but he was to be left to find her, and was to have a free hand in the matter. After a week or two in the wilderness Helen would be glad enough to meet with an old friend bringing deliverance, and the intimacy of daily travel together would inevitably bring her to his arms. His brow darkened a little as he thought of her present protector. Then it cleared again. Helen was very proud. Circumstances for the present had thrown her into Stane's company, but she was the last person in the world to forget that Stane was an ex-convict, and as he thought of that, all apprehension of possible complications in that quarter vanished instantly.

Had he known all, or had he even at that moment been granted a vision of the camp by the great deadfall, he would scarcely have been so complacent of mind. For at the very time when he was congratulating himself on the opportunity opening out before him, Helen Yardely was seated on a log by the side of the man whom he hated. There was a high colour in her face and she was laughing a little nervously as she looked at the astonished face of the sick man who had been her rescuer and was now her patient.

"Miss Yardely," cried Stane, "do you really mean what you say?"

"Of course I do," replied the girl lightly.

"And Gerald Ainley with another man camped within two miles of here two nights ago?"

"I should say the distance to the lake is even less than that," replied Helen with a little laugh.

"And you let them go without a sign."

"I hid myself in the bushes," replied the girl, gaily.

"But do you realize that they were probably, searching for you?"

"Yes! And I was afraid that they might find me. I even put out the fire that

they should not discover our camp and come up to investigate. When I saw them going away yestermorning I could have clapped my hands for gladness."

Stane looked at her incredulously. Here was something that was beyond him.

"Why—why did you let them go?" he cried sharply.

"You wish I had revealed myself?" she asked with compunction, misunderstanding his question. "You think I ought to have brought them up here?"

"That was for yourself to decide," he answered quietly, adding with a little laugh. "I am well content with things as they are. But I am curious to know why you let deliverance from the hardships of this situation pass by on the other side."

"Oh," replied Helen in some confusion, "I remembered that you did not like Gerald Ainley!"

"But," he protested, "there was yourself to think of."

"Yes," was the reply, given with laughter, "and I was doing so—if you only knew it."

"How? I cannot see it."

"You forget my pride as amateur surgeon and nurse," she retorted. "I like to see the end of things that I begin, and if I had brought Mr. Ainley up here he would have wanted to take me away, and leave you with the Indian." She broke off, and looked at him with a gay smile. "Perhaps you would have preferred ——"

"No! No!" he interrupted protestingly.

"And there is another reason—quite as selfish as the last. You see, Mr. Stane, I have been delicately reared; boarding-school, Newnham—the usual round you know! London in the season, Scotland in the autumn, and the shires for the hunting months. It is an inane sort of life, as I have always felt, pleasant enough at first, but inane for all that, and after a time rather a bore. Can you understand

that?"

"Yes," he said, with a nod, "I think I can."

"Most of the men of our set have something to do! Either they are in the army, or in Parliament, or managing estates, but the women—well, they live a butterfly life. There seems to me no escape for them. Do what they will, unless they become suffragettes and smash windows or smack fat policemen, their life drifts one way. Charity?—it ends in a charity ball. Politics?—it means just garden-parties or stodgy week-ends at country houses, with a little absurd canvassing of rural labourers at election times. Sometimes I used to consider it, and with that bus-driver of Stevenson's who drove to the station and then drove back, cry 'My God is this life!' There was nothing real anywhere. Nobody ever expected a woman in our set to do anything worth doing." She broke off, and gave a little laugh, then continued: "Now I have my chance to prove I'm something better than a doll, and I'm not going to be robbed of it by Gerald Ainley, my uncle, or any one else! This camp depends on me for a time at least, and I'm going to make good; and prove myself for my own satisfaction. Do you understand?"

"Yes," answered Stane, his eyes shining with admiration.

"That is what I meant when I said that if you only knew it, I was thinking of myself. It would strike some people as a little mad. I know some women who in a situation like this would have sat down and just cried themselves to death."

"So do I. Lots of them."

"I don't feel that way. I feel rather like a man I know at home who was brought up on the sheltered life system, nursery governess, private tutor, etc., who when he came of age just ran amok, drank, fought with the colliers on his own estate, and then enlisted in an irregular corps and went to fight the Spaniards in Cuba, just to prove to himself that he wasn't the ninny his father had tried to make him. He shocked his neighbours thoroughly, but he's a man today, listened to when he speaks and just adored by the miners on his estate.... I want to make good, and though Mrs. Grundy would chatter if she knew that I had deliberately chosen to remain and nurse a sick man in such conditions, I don't care a jot."

"You needn't worry about Mrs. Grundy," he laughed. "She died up here about 1898, and was buried on the road to the Klondyke."

Helen Yardely joined in his laughter. "May she never be resurrected—though I am afraid she will be. Where there are half-a-dozen conventional women Mrs. Grundy is always in the midst. But I'm free of her for the time, and I'm just going to live the primitive life whilst I'm here. I feel that I have got it in me to enjoy the life of the woods, and to endure hardships like any daughter of the land, and I'm going to do it. Not that there is much hardship about it now! It is just an extended pic-nic, and I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

Stane smiled. "I am very glad you feel like that," he said. "I myself shall be much happier in mind and I count myself lucky to have fallen in such capable hands!"

"Capable!" she looked at her scratched and rather grimy hands. "A kitchen-maid's are more capable! But I can learn, and I will, however much I bungle. Now, as the universal provider, I am going out to look at my snares."

She rose, and left the tent, and he heard her pass into the wood singing to herself. A thoughtful look came on Stane's face, and presently gave place to a smile. "Happy in these circumstances!" he murmured to himself. "What a treasure of a girl!"

And there was no question that Helen Yardely was happy. She radiated gladness as she made her way towards the lake carrying an express rifle in the crook of her arm. Except for the barking of squirrels, and the distant cry of waterfowl the land was very still, the silence that of an immense solitude. But it affected her not at all, she was not even conscious of loneliness, and she hummed gaily to herself as she went along the path which now was beginning to define itself.

As she reached the lakeside, however, her song was suddenly checked, and she looked round sniffing the air thoughtfully. There was a fire somewhere, for there was the smell of burning spruce in the atmosphere. She thought of her own camp-fire, and looked back in the direction of it. Never before had the aromatic odour reached her so far away, and she was a little puzzled that it should do so now. There was little movement in the air, and in order to discover the direction

of it she wet her hand and held it up, and as one side grew cooler than the other, looked southward. The slight wind was blowing from that quarter towards the camp and not away from it, so it could not be her own fire, which thus filled the air with odour. There was another encampment somewhere in the neighbourhood.

Having reached that conclusion, she looked about her carefully for any revealing column of smoke, and found none. She examined the shore of the lake expecting to discover a canoe or canoes beached there, but there was nothing of the sort to be seen. For a time she stood there frankly puzzled, wondering what was the explanation of the smell of fire which was in the air, but the reason for which did not appear. Then, after searching the lake bank once more, she gave up the problem and addressed herself to the task which had brought her from the camp. There was nothing in her snares, but as she approached a large patch of water-reeds, a flock of wild geese rose into the air, "honking" in alarm.

Instantly the rifle was at her shoulder, and as she fired, a gander jerked in the air, and then fell like a stone back into the reeds. It took her some time to retrieve it, and when she had done so, she looked round again. The sound of her rifle in that great stillness would travel a long way, and if there had been any traveller camped in the neighbourhood he must have heard it! But there was no one to be seen anywhere, though the smell of fire was as strong as ever. Puzzled, she returned to the camp, looked at her own fire which was burning low and which could not possibly be the explanation of that which was perplexing her, and without saying anything to her companion about it, turned in for the night.

She awoke early to find a wind humming in the tree-tops and immediately there impinged upon her nostrils the odour of burning wood. She rose instantly and dressing hastily went to the tent and looked in. Stane was still sleeping, and without awakening him she hurried down to the lakeside, very conscious that the smell of fire was much stronger than on the previous night. When she reached the shore she looked southward in the direction from which the wind was blowing. As she did so, for one brief moment her heart seemed to stop and a great fear leaped up within her.

Up the lake-side the shore was hidden under rolling clouds of smoke, the dark green of the woods was shrouded by the same bluish veil, and the air seemed full of distant crackling. Out of the veil of smoke as she watched broke a long

leaping tongue of yellow flame, and the air blowing towards her seemed hot as a furnace. Her face paled before the terror in front. Though she had never seen the like before, on the way up to Fort Malsun, she had seen the blackened patches where such fires had been. She had heard stories of men surprised by them, and she knew that the forest full of dry deadfall and resinous trees, was on fire. Her first thought was for the sick man who was in her care. The camp was directly in the line of fire, and, if the wind kept up, must inevitably burn. She would have to get him away. But how?

The question was beating in her brain as she hurried back, and through the reiteration of it she became conscious of moving life about her. A weasel almost crossed her foot without a glance at her, and she saw others moving in front of her. Small wood-mice swarmed, fleeing from the terror they could not see; and a great timber-wolf followed by a couple of cubs fled by without more than a sidelong look. The squirrel in the trees screeched alarm and once she caught sight of a big, dark lumbering body crashing through the undergrowth to the left of her, and divined that it was a bear. All the creatures of the wood had taken the alarm and were fleeing before the fiery horror against which none could stand.

When she reached the camp she went straight to the tent. Stane was awake, lifted up on one elbow, an anxious look upon his face. As his eyes saw her pallor, he knew that a fear which in the last few moments had come to him was not groundless.

"Ah!" he cried, "the timber is on fire! I thought I could smell it."

"Yes," she answered, "and the wind is driving the fire this way."

"How far away?" he inquired calmly.

"Two or three miles."

"You will have to go, Miss Yardely," he answered quickly. "The fire travels quickly in such timber as this. You must not mind me——"

"You want me to run away and leave you to die," cried the girl. "I shall do nothing of the kind. I would sooner die myself! I could never respect myself again. There must be some way out of this difficulty, only I don't know it. But

you are used to the ways of this wilderness. You must tell me what to do, and quickly, and I will do it. Oh—if we only had a canoe!"

"We haven't," he answered thoughtfully, "but the next best thing, we could make, and——"

"What is that?"

"A raft!"

"A raft?" she echoed, hope lighting her face.

"Yes. If by any means you could get me down to the lake-side, I could instruct you in the construction. But how you are going to do that——"

"I shall carry you," interrupted the girl. "It will be very painful for you, but there is no other way."

"But how——?"

"On my back! I am strong, thank Heaven! And as we have no time to waste I will make arrangements at once. I'll take our things down to the shore, and then come back for you. You don't mind being left for a little while?"

"Of course not."

"There'll be no breakfast this morning, but I can't help that. A forest fire is no help to housekeeping."

She forced a little laugh as she spoke the words, but once outside the tent, a look of deepest anxiety clouded her beautiful face.

CHAPTER XII

THE RAFT

Never in her life had Helen Yardely worked so hard as she worked in the next two hours. She made two journeys to the lake with their possessions, and on the way back the second time she arranged several resting places in preparation for the hardest task of all—the carrying of her injured companion down to the shore.

That, as she knew, was bound to be a terribly painful thing for him, but there was no other way, and harsh necessity made her ruthless. She did what she could with an improvised sling, and helped him to stand on his uninjured leg. The pain he endured was shown in his white face, and in the bitten under lip, which trickled red. She was afraid that he was about to faint, but he recovered himself and three-quarters of a minute later, she was carrying him pick-a-back to the lakeside.

Twice she heard a groan torn from him, but she set her teeth, and pointed on to the first resting place, where, as gently as she could, she set him on the trunk of a fallen tree which, supported by its under branches, lay waist high. Then she turned round and looked at Stane. He was in a state verging on collapse. Instantly she felt for his service water-bottle which she had previously filled with brandy and water, and pouring out some of the liquid she held it towards him.

"Drink," she said, "all of it."

He did so, and when they had rested five minutes, they started again and, after halting twice more, reached the shore, where she set him down on a convenient rock, below which she had piled blankets to support his injured leg. Then for the moment quite overdone, she collapsed on the sand, one hand on her jumping heart, the other on her throbbing head. It was a little time before either of them could speak, and it was the man who did so first.

"Miss Yardely, take a little brandy. I implore you!"

Helen looked up, nodded without speaking, and with shaking hands poured out a little of the spirit for herself. After a time her breath came back, and she rose to her feet.

"You are mortal heavy," she said with an attempt at gaiety. "You were like the old man of the sea on my back.... I hope your leg is all right?"

"Painful! But that is to be expected, and it can't be helped." A drift of smoke came down in the wind and made him cough, and he looked round to mark the progress of the fire. "We haven't much of a margin, Miss Yardely."

"No," she answered, "I must get busy. Now tell me what to do!"

Whilst waiting for her to recover he had noted numerous sun-dried poles scattered about the beach, and those he pointed to.

"Get about seven of those, Miss Yardely, as near equal length as you can. Gather them as close to the water's edge as possible, and then get some saplings for cross pieces. Lash the poles well together with the tent and pack-ropes, and put a little spruce on the top to help us keep dry. We haven't time to build a Noah's Ark, and it will be no end of a job for you to get the thing afloat by yourself."

The girl looked round and pointed to a little creek where the water was very still.

"I could build it afloat there. There's a gravelly bottom and it's not deep."

"Yes!" he said quickly. "That would be better!"

For an hour he sat there watching her work, and marking the swift progress of the fire. The heat grew tremendous, the roar of the flames and of crackling trees filled the air to the exclusion of all other sounds, and the pungent smoke made it difficult to breathe. He had begun to think that after all her endeavours had been in vain, when she approached him, sweat running down her flushed face, and drenched well above the knees.

"You will have to set your teeth," she said, "I shall have to carry you out to the raft."

It was no easy task to get him on to it, but she had pushed the raft well in the reeds so that it could not give, and though it was a painful operation for him, he was presently lying on a pile made of the tent canvas and blankets. Ten minutes later when he opened his eyes, they were afloat, and she was poling the raft into deeper water. She looked at him as his eyes opened.

"This raft is not quite so good as a punt—but it might be worse!"

"They're always awkward things," he said. "You ought to have had a sweep."

"No time," she answered, with a nod towards the shore.

"You will have to pole us out, as far as you can, and then we must drift."

"It is the only way," she agreed. "Fortunately this lake seems very shallow."

Ten minutes later the pole failed to touch bottom, and a current of water setting across the lake began to drift them well from the shore. As he saw that, Stane gave a sigh of relief.

"You can sit down and rest now, Miss Yardely. There is nothing further to be done for the present. It is a case of time and tide now, but I think we are perfectly safe."

Helen glanced towards the shore, and gave an involuntary shudder. The fire was running through the forest like a wild beast. Clouds of smoke, black or leaden-coloured rolled in front, the vanguard of the destroyer, and out of them leaped spouts of fiery sparks, or long tongues of yellow flame, and behind this, the forest under the fan of the wind was a glowing furnace. She looked at the belching smoke and the rocketing flames and listened to the roar of it all, fascinated.

"How terrible," she cried, "and how beautiful."

"The Inferno!" said Stane. "I've seen it before."

"And you wanted me to leave you to that?" she cried.

"Pardon me, no! I did not want you to be caught in it, that is all! Listen!"

Across the water came what might have been the sound of a fusillade of rifles, and with it mingled another sound as of shrieking.

"What is it?" asked the girl.

"Branches bursting in the heat, trees falling."

"How long will it last?"

"Don't know. Weeks maybe! The fire might travel a hundred miles."

Helen shuddered again. "If we had not been near the water——"

"Finis!" he said with a little laugh, and they fell silent again watching the awful thing from which they had so narrowly escaped.

The raft drifted slowly along, borne by a current towards the northern end of the lake and crossing it obliquely, and the girl crouched in her place apparently absorbed in the spectacle the fire afforded. An hour passed, and then glancing at her Stane saw that she had fallen asleep. A little smile came on his face, and was followed by an ardent look of admiration as he continued to stare at her. She was flushed with sleep, and grimy with sweat and smoke and dirt. The grey shirt-sleeves, rolled up above the elbows, showed her scratched forearms, and on one hand, hanging across her knee in the abandon of sleep, with startling incongruity gleamed a diamond ring. The beautiful chestnut hair had escaped from its fastenings, and hung in tumbled masses, and there were ragged tears here and there in the borrowed raiment. Never, thought Stane to himself, had he seen a lady more dishevelled or more beautiful, and as he watched her sleeping, worn out with her herculean labours, his heart warmed to her in gratitude and love.

She slept for quite a long time, and when she opened her eyes, she looked round in surprise. The fire still roared on its way through the woods on the distant shore, over which hung a huge pall of smoke, but the raft was now a long way from the zone of destruction and drifting slowly but surely towards the northern end of the lake. She measured with her eyes the distance they had drifted, and looked towards the shore which they were steadily approaching, then she spoke.

"I must have slept for a long time."

"Three hours, I should say," answered Stane with a smile.

"And you? How is your leg?"

"Fairly comfortable," he answered.

"I am glad of that, I was terribly afraid that it might have suffered some new injury—how hungry I am!"

"Naturally!" was the reply. "It is now past noon and we have not yet had breakfast."

"There is some cold bacon somewhere, left over from yesterday, and that small box of biscuits. I will find them. We must eat. Fortunately we're not likely to be short of water." She laughed a little as she spoke, then rising, began to look for the food, which, when she had found it, she divided between them. "There is not much bacon, but there are biscuits galore for present needs," she said as she put the food before him. "Fall to, sir!"

She herself ate the simple meal with a relish that surprised herself, and then looked round once more. They had drifted nearer the shore, and looking overside she could see the bottom of the lake. At that she clapped her hands.

"The water is shallowing," she cried, "I believe I can resume my punting."

She took up her pole and finding that she could touch bottom, began to pole the raft inshore, and in twenty minutes she was looking for a place to land. She found it in a quiet little bay beyond a tree-crowned bluff, and in a little time she had beached the clumsy craft, and jumped ashore. She anchored the raft to a tree, and then looked around. Just where she had landed, there was a level patch of sward, backed by massive firs and, after considering its possibilities for a moment she spoke:

"We will make our new camp here! It will do as well as anywhere else, and in case the fire travels round we can easily take to the lake again."

Her first action was to gather kindling wood for a fire, and to set the kettle over it, and that done, once more she pitched the tent and made a bed for her

patient; then with great trouble and some pain for him, she got him from the raft to the spruce couch; after which she examined the rough splints and bandages. They were in place and hoping that the leg had suffered no harm through the enforced removal, she prepared hot tea and such a meal as their resources allowed.

"I shall have to build a new house for myself, tomorrow," she laughed as she sipped the tea. "And I shall insure it against fire. I shall be quite an expert architect and builder by the time I reach civilization."

"If you ever do!" he laughed.

She looked round the wild landscape, then she also laughed.

"I should not care much if I never did. This sort of life has its attractions, and it offers real interests and real excitements. There are worse things than the wilderness."

"You have not been up here in winter, have you, Miss Yardely?"

"No," she replied, "but I should like to have the experience."

He puffed meditatively at his pipe and made a calculation, then he said rather enigmatically, "You may yet have the chance, Miss Yardely, if you remain to look after me."

"I certainly shall remain," was the uncompromising reply. "But what do you mean, Mr. Stane?"

"Well," he explained, "it will be some weeks at least before I can face the trail, and that means that autumn will be on us before we can move. And you have had a little experience of what trailing and packing one's goods in this country means. Even when we are able to start we shall not be able to travel fast, and the nearest point of civilization is Fort Malsun."

"How long will it take us to reach the fort?"

"I do not know," he replied, shaking his head thoughtfully. "I have only been there on the one occasion you know of—and then by water. Much will depend

on the sort of country that lies between here and there, but I am afraid we shall have hard work to make it before winter overtakes us."

"Then we shall have to make the best of things," answered the girl lightly.

"There is, of course, the chance that we may be found by some search-party sent out by your uncle; and there is the further possibility that we may stumble on some Indian camp; but apart from these contingencies, I am afraid we can expect no help but what we can find in ourselves, and it will be very necessary to husband our resources, as I warned you two days ago."

The girl refused to be daunted. "This is a game country," she replied cheerfully. "We shall not starve. Tomorrow I shall go hunting—and you will see, Mr. Stane, oh, you will see! After all it was not for nothing that I went to Scotland every autumn. I will fill the pot, never fear."

He looked at her smiling face, remembered what she had already done, and then spoke enthusiastically.

"I believe you will, Miss Yardely."

No more was said upon the matter until next day, when whilst she was engaged in building a new tepee for herself she hurried into the camp, and picked up the rifle.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Meat," she whispered laughingly, "on four legs and with horns. I don't know the precise name of it, but I think it is a woodland caribou. It has come down to the water just the other side of the bluff. I am going to stalk it."

She hurried away from the camp. Ten minutes passed and Stane still listened for her shot. Then it came, and sharp and clear on the heels of it came a cry of triumph. The injured man smiled with pleasure.

A few minutes later, when Helen returned, there was a gleeful look upon her face. "Got it!" she cried. "We'll have a change of diet today."

"You have still plenty of work before you," said Stane, after congratulating

her. "The beast will need skinning and——"

"Ugh!" she interrupted with a little grimace. "I know, and that will be messy work for me, since I know nothing at all about it."

"It is an inevitable part of the work in trailing through the wilds," said Stane with a smile. "But I wish I could take the work over——"

"You can't," she interrupted cheerfully enough, "and if you could I am not sure I should let you now. I've an ambition to complete my wilderness education, and though I'm no butcher, I'll manage this piece of work somehow. You will have to give me instructions, and though I may botch the business, I'll save the meat. Now just give me a lecture in the art of skinning and cleaning and quartering."

As well as he could he gave her instructions, and armed with his long hunting knife, she presently departed. It was two hours before she returned, carrying with her a junk of meat wrapped in a portion of the skin. There was a humiliated look on her face.

"Ask me no questions," she cried with a little laugh of vexation. "I am down in the dust, but I've got most of the meat and that is the essential thing, though what we are going to do with all of it I don't know. We can't possibly eat it whilst it is fresh."

"We will dry, and smoke some of it, or turn it into pemmican."

"Pemmican!" As she echoed the word, her face brightened. "I have read of that," she laughed, "in novels and tales of adventure. It has a romantic sound."

"It isn't romantic eating," he laughed back. "As you will find if we come down to it. But if the worst comes to the worst it will save us from starvation."

"Then we will make pemmican," she said smiling, "or rather I shall. It will be another thing towards the completion of my education, and when this pilgrimage is over I shall demand a certificate from you, and set up as a guide for specially conducted parties to the wilds."

"I think I shall be able to give you one, quite conscientiously," Stane retorted laughingly. "You certainly are a very apt pupil."

"Ah! you haven't seen that hideous mess on the other side of the bluff. The fact is I shudder at the thought of viewing it again. But we must have the meat, I suppose."

Having rested a little, she turned and left the camp again and the man followed her with eyes that glowed with admiration. As he lay there he thought to himself that however she might shudder at the thought of a vilely unpleasant task, she would not shirk it, and as he reflected on the events of the past few days, there was in his heart a surge of feeling that he could not repress. He loved this delicately-nurtured girl who adapted herself to the harsh ways of the wilderness with so gay a spirit; and though a look of bitterness came on his face as he reflected that circumstances must seal his lips, in his heart he was glad that they should have met, and that she should be his pupil in the ways of the wild.

CHAPTER XIII

A LODGE IN THE WILDERNESS

It was six weeks later. The dawn came less early, and nightfall perceptibly sooner.

There was a new crispness in the air, and the leaves on the trees were losing their greenness and taking on every possible shade, from pale yellow to old gold, and from that to dusky red. Both Stane and Helen Yardely noticed the signs. Autumn was upon them and they were still in their camp by the lake, though now Stane was able to hobble about with a pair of crutches made from a couple of forked sticks, padded with moss at the forks for his arms, and covered with caribou skin. Helen herself was busy from dawn to sunset. From words that he had dropped she knew that they had lost in the race with the seasons, and that winter would be on them before he would be able to take the trail. She faced the dreary prospect light-heartedly, but under his instruction omitted no precautions that would make a winter sojourn in the wild land tolerable. Fish were caught and dried, rabbits and hares snared, not merely for meat, but for their skins, which when a sufficient number had been accumulated were fashioned into parkas and blankets against the Arctic cold which was surely marching on them.

The leaves began to fall, light frosts were succeeded by heavier ones, and one morning they awoke to find a thin film of ice on the surface of the still water of the little bay where their camp was located. Stane viewed the ice with ominous eyes. He was incapable of any heavy physical exertion as yet, and knowing the North in all its inimical aspects, he was afraid for his companion, and though he rejoiced in her frank comradeship, he regretted that she had let Ainley and the Indian depart without knowledge of her presence. Guessing that the lake was some sort of waterway between two points, daily, almost hourly, in the frequent absences of the girl, he scanned it for any sign of human presences, but in vain. The lake's surface was unbroken by the movement of canoe or boat; its shores showed no tell-tale column of smoke. They were indeed alone in the wilderness.

But one afternoon the girl returned from a hunting expedition with excitement shining in her grey eyes.

"I have found something," she announced abruptly.

"What is it?"

"There is a cabin up the lake, about three miles away."

"A cabin?"

"Yes, and a very nice one, logs with a stone chimney and a parchment window. There was no one about, and the door was only held by a hasp and a wooden peg, so I ventured to look in. It has a stove, a rough table, a bunk and a couple of logs plainly meant for chairs."

Stane considered her news for a moment and then gave an obvious explanation. "It is some trapper's hut. He is away, and will probably return for the trapping season."

"Yes," she answered with a nod. "I thought that was the explanation. But there is nothing to prevent us taking possession until the owner returns, if he ever does, is there?"

"No," he answered slowly.

"Then tomorrow we will remove house," she said with a little laugh. "It's the only sensible thing to do. The place is clean and warm and comfortable; and if we take possession of it we shall be under no temptation to take the trail before you are really fit."

"But——"

"But me no buts," she cried in mock reproval. "You know that it is the really wise thing to do, for if the weather turns bad, where are we—with a canvas tent and a rather leaky birch-bark tepee? It would be the very rankest folly not to take advantage of my discovery and you know it."

Stane was compelled to admit that she was right, and said so.

"Then tomorrow I will raft you up to our new abode," she answered cheerfully. "There is no wind, and has been none for days. It will be easy to pole the raft along the shore."

Having announced this decision she began to busy herself about the camp, singing softly to herself; and Stane watched her with appreciative eyes. She was thinner than when they had first met, her face was bronzed, her chestnut hair in its outer folds bleached almost golden by the strong sunlight of the past summer. She radiated health and vitality, and though she was dressed masculinely, femininity was the dominant note about her. In the weeks that had passed since he had saved her from the river she had developed amazingly. Apparently there was nothing of the softness of the over-civilized left in her. That had been eliminated by the harsh necessity of labour which circumstances had thrust upon her; and the life of the wilderness had developed in her elemental powers. She was now the strong mate-woman, quick in judgment, resourceful in action, and of swift courage in danger. His eyes glowed as he watched her, and a soft look came on his face. As it happened Helen turned and saw it.

"What is it?" she asked quickly, a look of expectancy in her eyes.

He hesitated. That look challenged him. He knew that if he said all that he felt she would respond. But the unfairness of such action prevented him from doing so, and though he was strongly tempted he turned aside.

"Nothing that I can tell you," he said in answer to her question.

"Oh!" she retorted, "you are a most tantalizing person. Why cannot you tell me? If the matter is secret you have no cause to be afraid. To whom could I whisper it in this wilderness?"

She waved a hand half-round the compass as she spoke, and stood there looking at him, still with the look of expectancy in her eyes, and with a little dash of colour in her bronzed cheeks.

"I am not afraid of your whispering it to any one," replied Stane, with a poor attempt at laughter.

"Then why not tell me?" she urged.

"Because——" began the man, and then stopped. The temptation surged up anew within him, the stress of it almost broke down his resolution. Then he cried, almost violently, "No! I cannot tell you—now."

"Now!" she said, in tremulous laughter. "Now! 'Behold now is the accepted time and now is the day of salvation.' Unless the religious education of your youth was sadly neglected you ought to know that. The present is the only time. But if you will not tell me this tantalizing secret now, you will some time?"

"Some time!" he answered.

"It is a promise," she insisted and now there was no laughing note in her voice, and her face was very serious.

"Yes," he answered, "it is a promise."

"Then I write it on the tablets of my mind. I shall hold you to it, and some day I shall demand its fulfilment."

She turned and resumed her work and singing at the same time, and Stane lay there looking at her with the love shining plainly in his eyes. He had no doubt that she divined that which he would not speak; that indeed it was no secret to her, and that she was glad in the knowledge he could hardly question. Her bearing as well as her singing told him that; and he knew that in the last few minutes they had travelled a very long way towards full revelation of each other; and that the day when he should speak would bring to her nothing that was not already within the sphere of her knowledge.

The next day was spent in removal to the cabin further up the lake, both of them working at poling the raft with all their stores. The cabin was well situated on a small bay, where a fair-sized stream emptied into the lake, and behind it stretched the forest, dark and impenetrable. As he hobbled through the open door, Stane looked round, and under the bunk discovered a number of steel-traps which the girl on her first visit had overlooked. Also on a peg in a dark corner he found a set of dogs' harness hung just as the owner had left it, probably months before. He pointed the traps out to the girl.

"As I guessed, it is a trapper's cabin, Miss Yardely. Any day may bring the

owner back."

"Possession is nine points of the law," she laughed. "What is the term the gold-seekers use, Jump?—yes, we will jump the claim, for the present at any rate."

"The owner may come back while there is open water, or he may wait for the ice."

"But we are tenants of the furnished cabin meanwhile," she answered cheerfully, "and may as well make ourselves at home. I'm going to light the stove."

Inside the cabin there was a little wood-pile, and with a few well-chosen logs and dried sticks she soon had the stove roaring, and then began to bestow their possessions tidily. By the time that was accomplished the shadows were creeping across the lake and deepening in the woods, and it was time for the evening meal, and when it was ready they ate it at the rough table, with a sense of safety and comfort that had long been lacking. "This place is quite cosy," said Helen, looking round the firelit cabin. "Tomorrow I shall make a curtain for the doorway out of caribous skins."

"Tomorrow," laughed Stane, "the owner may return."

"But he will not turn us out," cried Helen. "The men of the wilds are all hospitable."

"That is true," agreed Stane, "and I have no doubt that we should be allowed to winter here if we chose. But if the man comes there is a better way. We shall be able to engage him to take us to Fort Malsun, and so to safety and civilization."

"Oh!" laughed the girl, "are you so anxious to go back to civilization?"

Stane's face suddenly clouded, and the old hardness came back to it.

"There is no going back for me—yet," he answered bitterly.

"But you will return, some day," she answered quietly. "I have no doubt of that

at all. But I was not thinking of that when I spoke, I was wondering whether you were tired of this primitive life. For my part I quite enjoy it. It is really exhilarating to know that one has to depend upon one's self, and to find unexpected qualities revealing themselves at the call of circumstances. I think I shall never be the same again, my old life seems contemptibly poor and tame when I look back upon it."

"I can understand that," he answered, turning from his bitterness. "The wilderness gets into one's blood."

"Particularly if it is a little wild to start with," she replied cheerfully, "as I really believe mine is."

"There are men who have lived up here for years, enduring hunger and every kind of hardship, hazarding life almost daily, who having stumbled suddenly upon a fortune, have hurried southward to enjoy their luck. They have been away a year, two years, and then have drifted back to the bleak life and hazard of the North."

"It is not difficult to believe that," answered Helen. "The life itself is the attraction up here."

Stane permitted himself to smile at her enthusiasm and then spoke. "But if you had to live it day by day, year in and year out, Miss Yardely, then——"

"Oh then," she interrupted lightly, "it might be different. But——" She broke off suddenly and a sparkle of interest came in her eyes. Pointing to the pile of wood in the corner she cried: "Mr. Stane, I am sure there is something hidden under that wood."

Stane started and stared at the stacked-up logs, a slight look of apprehension on his face. The girl laughed as she caught the look. "It is nothing to be alarmed at; but those logs are misleading I am sure, for at one place I can see something gleaming. What it is I don't know, but I am going to find out."

Rising quickly, she began to throw down the logs and presently uncovered a large square tin that at some time or another had contained biscuits. Pursuing her investigations she uncovered two similar tins and for a moment stood regarding

them with curious eyes. Then she lifted one.

"It is heavy," she exclaimed. "What do you think it is—gold?"

Stane laughed. "Judging by the ease with which you lift it, I should say not."

"I'm going to learn," she replied, and promptly began to operate on a close-fitting lid. It took her a little time, but at last, with the aid of Stane's knife, she managed to remove it. Then she gave an exclamation of disappointment.

"What is it?" asked Stane.

"I don't know. It looks like—wait a minute!" she took a small pinch of the contents and lifting it to her mouth, tasted it. "Flour!"

"Flour! You don't say?"

There was a joyous exalting note in the man's voice that made the girl swing round and look at him in surprise.

"You seem delighted!" she said wonderingly.

"I am," he replied.

"But—well I don't exactly see why! If it were gold, I could understand. One always finds gold in these deserted cabins, according to the story-books. And we find flour—and you rejoice!"

"I do," answered Stane joyfully. "Miss Yardely, that flour is a godsend. We were very short, as you told me, only a pound or two left, and I was afraid that we might have to live on meat and fish alone, and you don't know what that means. I do! I lived for three weeks on moose-meat last winter and I haven't forgotten it yet. For Heaven's sake open the other tins."

The girl obeyed him, and presently the remaining tins revealed their contents. One held about nine pounds of rice and the other was three parts filled with beans.

"We're in luck, great luck!" cried Stane. "Just the things we need. Any time

during the last fortnight I would have given a thousand pounds for those stores."

"I expect the owner, if he returns, will be glad to sell them you for a good deal less," she retorted with mock petulance. "It was treasure trove I was hoping for."

"You can't live on gold," laughed Stane, "and you can on the contents of these tins. We must annex them. If the owner has deserted the cabin it won't matter; and if he returns he will bring fresh stores with him, those being but the surplus of his last winter's stock. Nothing could have been more fortunate."

"But flour, and rice and beans!" protested Helen in simulated disgust. "They are so unromantic! It will sound so poor if ever I tell the story in a drawing-room!"

Stane laughed again. "There's nothing romantic about straight meat without change. Those cereals are the best of treasure trove for us."

"Well," conceded the girl laughing with him. "You ought to know, and if you are satisfied I must be. If these stores will carry us through the time until we start for civilization I won't grumble."

To Stane the discovery of the stores was a great relief, far greater than the girl knew. Of starvation he had had no fear, for they were in a good game country, but he knew the danger of a meat diet alone, and now that for the time being that danger was eliminated, he was correspondingly relieved; the more so when, two mornings later, the door of the hut being opened they beheld a thin powdering of shot-like snow.

"Winter is here!" said Helen, a little sobered at the sight of the white pall.

"Yes," he answered. "You found this hut just in time."

No more snow fell for over a fortnight, and during that time, despite the cold, Stane spent many hours practising walking without crutches. The fracture had quite knit together, and though his muscles were still weak, he gained strength rapidly, and as far as possible relieved the girl of heavier tasks. He chopped a great deal of wood, in preparation for the bitter cold that was bound to come and stored much of it in the hut itself. He was indefatigable in setting snares, and one day, limping in the wood with a rifle, he surprised a young moose-bull and killed

it, and cached the meat where neither the wolves nor the lynxes could reach it. Then at the close of a dull, dark day the wind began to blow across the lake, whistling and howling in the trees behind, and the cold it brought with it penetrated the cabin, driving them closer to the stove. All night it blew, and once, waking behind the tent canvas with which the bunk where she slept was screened, the girl caught a rattle on the wooden walls of the cabin, that sounded as if it were being peppered with innumerable pellets. In the morning the wind had fallen, but the cabin was unusually dark, and investigation revealed that in a single night the snow had drifted to the height of the parchment window. The cold was intense, and there was no stirring abroad; indeed, there was no reason for it, since all the wild life of the forest that they might have hunted, was hidden and still. Seated by the stove after breakfast, Helen was startled by a brace of cracks like those of a pistol. She started up.

"What was that? Some one fired——"

"No!" answered Stane quickly. "Just a couple of trees whose hearts have burst with the cold. There will be no one abroad this weather."

But in that, as events proved, he was mistaken. For when, in the early afternoon, wrapped in the fur garments which the girl had manufactured at their old camp, they ventured forth, not twenty yards away from the hut Stane came suddenly upon a broad snow-shoe trail. At the sight of it he stopped dead.

"What is it?" asked the girl quickly.

"Some one has been here," he said, in a curious voice. Without saying anything further he began to follow the trail, and within a few minutes realized that whoever had made it had come down the lake and had been so interested in the cabin as to walk all around it. The tracks of the great webbed-shoes spoke for themselves and even Helen could read the signs plainly.

"Whoever is it?" she asked in a hushed voice, looking first at the sombre woods and then out on the frozen snow-wreathed lake.

Stane shook his head. "I haven't the slightest notion, but whoever it was watched the cabin for a little time. He stood there on the edge of the wood, as the deeper impression in the snow shows."

"Perhaps the owner whose palace we have usurped has returned."

Stane again shook his head. "No! He would have made himself known, and besides he would most certainly have had a team of dogs with him. Whoever the visitor was he came down the lake and he went back that way."

"It is very mysterious," said Helen, looking up the frozen waste of the lake.

"Yes," answered Stane, "but rather reassuring. We are not quite alone in this wilderness. There must be a camp somewhere in the neighbourhood, but whether of white men or of Indians one can only guess."

"And which do you guess?" asked Helen quickly.

"Indians, I should say, for a white man would have given us a call."

"And if Indians, they may be friendly or otherwise?"

"Yes."

"Then," she said, with a little laugh, "we shall have to keep our eyes lifting and bolt the door o' nights!"

"It will be as well," agreed Stane, as he began to circle round the cabin again. "Indians are not always law-abiding, particularly in the North here. In any case we must try and find out where this one comes from, for if he is friendly we may be able to get dogs, and with dogs our journey to civilization will be easy."

He spoke lightly, but there was a grave look on his face, and as she watched him following the snow-shoe tracks to the edge of the ice-bound lake, Helen Yardely knew that he was much disturbed by the mysterious visit of the unknown man.

CHAPTER XIV

MYSTERIOUS VISITORS

It was snowing again, driving across the lake in the hard wind and drifting in a wonderful wreath about the cabin. To go out of doors would have been the uttermost folly, and Stane busied himself in the fashioning of snow-shoes which now would be necessary before they could venture far afield. The girl was engaged in preparing a meal, and the cabin had an air of domesticity that would probably have utterly misled any stranger who had chanced to look in. Stane, as he worked, was very conscious of the girl's presence, and conscious also that from time to time his companion glanced at him, whilst he bent over the tamarack frames, weaving in and out the webbing of caribou raw-hide. Those glances made his heart leap, though he strove hard to appear unconscious of them. He knew that in her, as in him, the weeks of intimate companionship so dramatically begun had borne its inevitable fruit. The promise she had forced from him but a few days ago came to his mind as he stooped lower over the half-finished snow-shoe. Would he ever be able to redeem it? Would he ever be able to tell her what was in his heart, what indeed had been there since the moment of their first meeting at Fort Malsun?

Between him and the desire of his heart rose those bitter years in prison. Until the stain upon his name was removed and the judgment of the court expurged, he felt he could not tell her what he wished, what indeed he was sure she would not be averse to hearing. Of Helen herself he had no doubt. She already had declared her faith in his innocence, and the generosity of her nature in all its depth and breadth had been revealed to him. To her, the years of his prison life were as though they had never been, or at the most were an injustice which he had suffered, and his name in her eyes had suffered no soiling. That if he spoke she would respond, finely, generously, with all the fulness of her splendid womanhood, he had no doubt. And yet, he told himself, he must never speak until he could do so without blame; for whilst to her the past was nothing, the people among whom she ordinarily moved would remember, and if she united her life with his she would, like himself, become a social exile. And there was a

further reason for silence. If he allowed the girl to commit herself to him whilst they were alive in the wilderness, it would be said that he had taken advantage of a rather delicate situation—using it for his selfish ends, and his pride as a man revolted against that. He clenched his teeth at the thought, and unconsciously frowned. No it should never be said that he——

"Why that dark scowl?" asked the girl laughingly. "Is my lord displeased with the odours of the dinner that his servant prepares?"

Stane joined in her laughter. "I was not aware that I was frowning. The dinner has a most appetising smell."

"If only I had a Mrs. Beeton!" sighed Helen. "Though I daresay she wouldn't give any recipe for frozen moose and rice and beans, without even an onion to flavour. The civilized cookery books don't deal with the essentials. When I return to the polite world the first thing I shall do will be to publish a pocket cookery book for happy people stranded in the wilds!"

"Happy!" he echoed, smilingly.

"I speak for myself," she retorted lightly. "You don't suppose that I regret these weeks away from civilization. I never was happier in my life. I have, you will agree, proved myself. I can face an unprecedented situation without fainting. I can cook a dinner without killing a man who eats it. I have set a leg successfully, and built a raft that floated safely, and reared two lodges in the wilderness. I have no nerves, whilst nearly every woman I know is just a quivering bundle of them. Yesterday, when I went out to the wood-pile a big lynx came round the corner of it. His eyes simply blazed at me. Six months ago, I should have run indoors. As it was, I threw a chunk of wood at him and he bolted."

"You never told me," began Stane.

"What need?" interrupted the girl. "You don't inform me every time you see a lynx!"

"But you must be careful," replied Stane anxiously. "At this season of the year, if he is very hungry, the lynx can be a dangerous beast. Remember his claws are like knives and he has ten of them."

"Oh, I will remember," answered Helen cheerfully. She stooped over the pan, and then, announced: "I think this mess of savoury venison is ready, and I don't believe our cook at home could have done it half so well. If my lord and cobbler will put away the snow-shoe we will dine, and after the washing up I will sleep."

It was in this spirit of lightness that she faced all the hardships incidental to their present life, and it was little wonder that at times, between her gaiety and her challenging presence, Stane had much ado to keep his resolve. Half a dozen times a day his resolution was tested, and one of the severest trials came on the afternoon of that very day.

The snow had ceased and the night had fallen, and desiring exercise they left the cabin together to walk in an open glade in the wood which the strong wind had swept almost clear of snow. Except themselves there was nothing moving. The vast stillness of the North was everywhere about them, and a little oppressed by the silence they walked briskly to and fro, Stane using his injured leg with a freedom that showed that it was returning to its normal strength. Suddenly the girl laid a mittened hand on his arm.

"What is it?" he asked quickly.

"Listen!" she said.

He stood there, her hand still on his arm, and a second or two later caught the sound which she had previously heard. Faintly and thinned by long distance it came, a long curdling cry.

"What——" she broke off as the cry sounded afresh, and he answered the unfinished question.

"The hunt-cry of a wolf calling up the pack. There is nothing to fear. It is miles away."

"Oh," she said, "I am not afraid, I was only wondering what it was."

Her hand was still on his arm, and suddenly their eyes met. Something in the grey of hers pierced him like a stab of flame. A fierce joy sprang up within him, filling him with a wild intoxication. His own eyes burned. He saw the girl's gladness glow in her glance, beheld the warm blood surge in her face, and fervent words leaped to his lips, clamouring for utterance. Almost he was overcome, then Helen removed her hand, and turned as the blood cry of gathering wolves broke through the stillness. He did not speak, and Helen herself was silent as they turned towards the cabin, but each had seen deep into the other's heart, and had felt the call that is the strongest call on earth, the call of kind to kind, or mate to mate.

Back in the cabin, the man turned feverishly to the task of snow-shoe making on which he had been engaged. Through his mind with monotonous reiteration beat a phrase that he had read long ago, where, he had forgotten. "My salvation is in work, my salvation is in work!" He worked like a man possessed, without looking up, whilst the girl busied herself with unnecessary tasks. She also knew what he knew, and she held him in a new respect for his silence, understanding the reason therefor, and presently when her leaping heart had steadied a little she began to talk, on indifferent topics, desiring to break a silence that was full of constraint.

"I saw you looking at the traps there, this morning. Are you thinking of using them?"

"Yes," he answered, "I am going to start a trapping line. It will give me something to do; and the walk will excercise my leg. If the owner of the cabin returns we shall be able to pay him rent with the pelts I take."

"Isn't it time he was here now, if he is coming?"

"Yes! But he may be delayed."

"Or he may not intend to return. He may have found a new locality for his operations."

"When he went away he meant to return, or why did he leave his traps here?"

"You think he will come back then?"

"I hope so!"

"And when he comes you will lure him to take us to Fort Malsun?"

"That is my idea," replied Stane, bending over the webbing.

"You are anxious to get away from here, then?"

"I am thinking of you," he answered quickly. "I know what a full winter in the North means."

"And if I get to Fort Malsun, do you think I shall escape the winter?"

"No, but you will have company."

"I have company now," she retorted smilingly, "and believe me I do not feel at all lonely."

"I was thinking you would have the factor's wife for——"

"Pooh!" was the challenging reply. "Do you think a woman cannot live without women?"

He offered no answer to the question, feeling that they were in the danger zone again; and after a moment deliberately turned the conversation backward.

"If I have luck with the traps, you may be able to have a set of furs for a memento of your sojourn here!"

"Oh!" she laughed back, "if that is the only memento I am to have——"

"Yes?" he asked.

For a moment she did not speak, and when she did there was provocation in her voice. "Well, I shall be disappointed, that is all."

He did not ask why. He knew; and his very silence told Helen that he knew,

and for a moment both of them were conscious of the surging of that elemental force which had made itself felt out in the forest.

Then the stillness was broken by a sound outside. Both of them heard it, and listened carefully.

"Crunch! crunch! crunch!"

Some one on snow-shoes was walking round the cabin. Whoever it was had halted by the door. Was he coming in? Half a minute passed during which they waited without moving, then Stane flashed a look at his companion. She was leaning forward, a look of curiosity and expectancy on her face, but not a single sign of fear.

He rose slowly from his seat, put the unfinished snow-shoe on the table, and crept towards the door. Whoever the intruder was he had not moved, and Stane had an odd fancy that he was listening there on the other side of the rough timbers. He meant to surprise him, but was disappointed in his purpose, for when he reached the door it was to find that the wooden bar had been dropped in position by Helen when they had re-entered the cabin. The bar fitted tightly across the door, and though he tried his best to move it without noise he failed. The bar stuck, and when at last he threw the door open, and stepped outside he knew that he was too late. He looked into the gathering night. His first swift glance was towards the dark shadows under the trees. There was no one there. He swung round towards the lake, and dimly through the darkness descried a figure retreating rapidly northwards. He looked closely, then suffering something of a surprise, gave a quick hail.

The retreating figure never paused, and never looked round, but kept on in a bee-line over the untrodden snow. Stane knew that it was useless to follow, and the bitter cold was already pinching his face and hands and chilling him to the bone. He turned and hurried into the hut, flinging the door to behind him, and as he did so, Helen rose to her feet.

"You saw him?" she cried in some excitement.

"No. I saw her!" answered Stane. "It was a woman."

Helen's surprise was as complete as his own had been. "A woman! Are you sure?"

"I do not think that I can possibly have been mistaken."

"But who—and why should she come here only to run away?"

"I do not know. I cannot guess, but when I went to the door, I had no idea that whoever was outside was standing there listening."

"It is very mysterious," said Helen thoughtfully, then suddenly something occurred to her, and she looked quickly at Stane as if she were going to speak. He caught the glance.

"You were about to say something?"

"Yes," answered Helen giving a curt little laugh. "But I think I will keep it to myself. It was only a quite silly idea that occurred to me."

Something in her manner, the curtness of her laugh, her way of speaking, puzzled Stane, and moved him to press for an answer. "Never mind the silliness," he said. "Tell me?"

"It really is not worth while," she answered with a little laugh, and notwithstanding the laughter, Stane knew that it was useless to press her further, and desisted from doing so.

For a little time he sat silent, staring into the stove, wondering what was in his companion's mind, whilst the girl herself followed the odd thought which had occurred to her. Was the woman who had twice ventured into the neighbourhood of the cabin without revealing herself, Miskodeed? It was very possible, for what other woman was there likely to be in the locality who could have sufficient interest in them as to visit them in such fashion? As she pursued the idea Ainley's suggestions came back to her with hateful force, and she remembered the Indian girl's attitude after Stane's departure. Other things she remembered and her mind echoed the words which had awakened the man's anger at the time they were uttered.

"Behold an idyll of the land!"

She remembered the girl's wild beauty, her manifest interest in Stane, and once again she was conscious of the hot flame of jealousy in her heart. It stung her to think that possibly this man, whom she had learned to love, had an interest in this girl, who though no better than a savage was rarely beautiful. She laughed in sudden bitterness and scorn of herself, and at the laugh Stane turned quickly towards her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Just a thought!" she answered easily, though her face flushed.

Stane did not ask her what the thought was. He was conscious of something enigmatic in her attitude, and her evident reserve for a second time prevented him from pursuing the matter further. He waited a moment, then he uttered the thought which had been in his own mind.

"When the storm is over and there is a crust on the snow we will go exploring together. We may find the camp from which this woman comes. If the air keeps still through the night, it will be quite easy to follow her trail in the snow."

Helen looked at him with eyes half-veiled under her long lashes. Did he suspect who the intruder was?

"You are very anxious to find this woman of mystery?" she asked.

"Not particularly so," he laughed in reply, "but I shall be very glad to find out who our neighbours are, and to learn whether we can secure any help from them."

The girl was reassured by the unconcerned answer. It seemed clear now that Miskodeed had not even occurred to his mind, and the reserve in her manner disappeared.

"You think we shall be dependent on their help?" she asked. "You are afraid that we shall not weather through by ourselves?"

Stane laughed again. "Oh no! I have no fears on that score; but it will depend on their possession of dogs whether we have to camp here all winter or not; for we could not possibly make Fort Malsun without them, particularly as I do not

know the overland trail. Not that the knowledge is really essential now, since judging from the fact that Ainley went down the lake it seems likely that there is a way to Malsun river in that direction. But we simply must have dogs."

"Then in the morning we follow the mysterious one's trail?"

"Yes, if there is no wind or snow in the night."

But in the night there was both wind and snow and on the morrow the woman's trail was quite obliterated and the snow on the lake made travelling impossible. Helen Yardely noted the fact without regret.

"There will be no exploring party today," she said, "so I will go and look at my rabbit snares."

"And I will accompany you," answered Stane, "the walk in the snow will help to take the stiffness out of my leg."

They set out together, but had gone but a little way when the girl gave a sharp "Hist!"

"What is it?" he asked quietly, thinking that she had seen game of some kind.

"There is a man in those bushes in front of us," she answered in a whisper.

"A man. Are you sure?"

"I am quite sure. I saw him slip across that open space there. He has a gun."

The bushes she had indicated were about three hundred yards away, and Stane examined them keenly. He could see nothing, however, and at the conclusion of his scrutiny he said: "I will go forward. You remain here, Miss Yardely."

"No," she answered. "I will go with you, I would rather."

They advanced together, Stane with his rifle ready for action, since a presence that avoided them might well prove to be an inimical one. He watched the bushes steadily as they advanced but saw nothing and when they reached them, thinking that the girl had been mistaken, he thrust his way through them. Then

he stood quite still with an anxious look upon his face. There was no one behind the bushes, but there were the marks of moccasined feet in the snow. He looked down at them, then followed the direction of them with his eyes, and stared into the forest, and as he did so, in its dim recesses, thought he saw the figure of a man slip behind a tree. He still waited and watched, but the figure did not re-appear, then Helen who had walked round the bushes spoke.

"There *was* some one here!"

"Yes," he answered, "and whoever it was did not wish to encounter us. He has made his way into the wood."

"What do you think it means?"

"I do not know," he answered, "but I am afraid that there are hostile Indians about us."

"You think they are watching the cabin—watching us, for a chance to attack?"

"It has that appearance," answered Stane quietly.

The girl was silent for a moment, then she gave a little laugh that had in it a ring of courage. "I am not afraid, but I wish we had another rifle."

Stane flashed at her a glance of admiration, then gave another long look into the silent wood which now seemed full of menace.

"Perhaps we had better return to the cabin."

"No," answered the girl stubbornly. "We will look at the snares first. I'm not going to be frightened from my dinner by a wandering Indian."

And they went forward together.

CHAPTER XV

A FACE AT THE TENT-DOOR

"Look," cried Helen. "Look!"

They had almost reached the cabin on the return journey and were full in view of the lake. As she cried the words she pointed over its snow-laden surface, and Stane, looking in the direction indicated, saw that which made his heart leap. A dog-team was coming up the lake, with a man on snow-shoes packing the trail in front.

"Who can it be?" asked the girl in some excitement.

"The owner of the cabin—for a certainty!" answered Stane, conscious of a sudden relief from the anxiety which the morning had brought.

"Then," answered the girl quietly, "you wait to welcome him, whilst I go and prepare a meal."

She passed into the cabin, whilst Stane walked down to the shore of the lake. The traveller whoever he was, was making directly for the cabin, and watching, Stane saw that he walked wearily as if he had come far, or was suffering from some weakness. It was quite an appreciable time before he saw Stane standing to welcome him, and when he did so, he gave a joyous shout. Stane answered the hail, and a few minutes later when the man halted his dogs he saw that he was mistaken in concluding the new-comer was the owner of the cabin, for he was garbed in the winter dress of the Nor-west Mounted Police.

"Cheero," said the policeman in greeting. "Where's Jean Bènard?"

Stane shook his head. "Don't know. Is Jean Bènard the owner of the cabin?"

At this question the policeman glanced at him sharply.

"Don't you know that? Who in thunder—Stane! By Christopher!" As he made the recognition the new-comer held out his mittened hand. "Well this is a pleasure. Don't you know me, old man?"

Stane looked at him as he shook his hand. "I think I do," he said. "Your Dandy Anderton, aren't you?"

"Used to be," laughed the other. "Now I'm Trooper Richard Alland Anderton of the R.N.W.M.P., and no more a dandy. But I'm mortal glad to see you, Stane, particularly as I'm a little knocked. I hurt my shoulder this morning, as——" He broke off suddenly as the sound of movement came from the cabin, and asked quickly. "You've got a mate?"

"Yes," answered Stane, with a short laugh, "as good a mate as a man could have, a mate that happens to be a lady!"

"A lady!" Anderton whistled. "Up here! By Jove! you've both got pluck."

"Well, you see, Anderton, it's not exactly a matter of choice. We were stranded together, and this cabin happened to offer itself. But loose your dogs, and come and be introduced!"

"Right-o!" replied the policeman. "I'll be with you in two jiffs."

Stane entered the cabin to prepare Helen. As he did so the girl looked up from the stove. "Is he the owner of our palace?"

"No; he is an old Oxford acquaintance of mine, who is now in the Mounted Police."

"Then we shall not suffer eviction?" she laughed, and to Stane it seemed there was an odd note of relief in her voice.

"No; but he spells deliverance. You see if he can't do anything for us himself he can carry the news of our whereabouts to Fort Malsun, and——"

At that moment a whip-stock hammered at the cabin-door, and a second later Trooper Anderton entered. For a moment he was a little taken aback by the girl's appearance, then Stane made the introduction.

"Miss Yardely; Mr. Anderton!"

"Miss Yardely!" the policeman cried. "Are you Sir James Yardely's niece, who was lost a few months ago?"

"The very same," answered Helen smilingly.

"There's a reward out for your discovery—five thousand dollars, no less."

"I didn't know I was worth so much," laughed the girl.

"Your uncle makes it; and half the trappers in the north are keeping a look-out for you; for it is known that you were found by some one——"

"There is my saviour," interrupted Helen, nodding towards Stane.

"Lucky fellow," laughed the policeman. "How did it happen?"

"Perhaps Mr. Stane will tell you later," answered the girl, "and if he doesn't, I will. But I don't want this moose steak to spoil. I take a pride in my cookery."

She laughed and turned again to the stove. Both the men watched her admiringly for a moment, and then Anderton asked: "Been up here long, Stane?"

Stane gave him an approximate date, and explained the situation by recounting his accident. The other nodded sympathetically. "You were lucky to have Miss Yardely with you. I had a narrow shave myself this morning. Just as I was starting from my last camp, a tree that two minutes before looked as stable as a pyramid, collapsed. It caught me on the shoulder and knocked me flying. Lucky thing I fell clear; but it gave me a nasty jar, and my left arm is a little out of action, with the soreness. I oughtn't to have taken the trail this morning, and wouldn't, only I'm in a tremendous hurry—a running quarry you know."

"Who is it?" asked Stane.

"A breed, wanted for murder. He's been running for months, making this way and there's an idea that he's sought sanctuary with his mother's tribe at the top end of this lake."

"Ah, then there is an encampment up here?"

"Yes. Didn't you know?"

Stane gave an account of the mysterious visit of the previous night and of the stranger they had seen in the wood that morning and the policeman listened carefully.

"The girl's a puzzler," he said, "but the stranger may be my man. He knows his life is forfeit, and he's ripe for any sort of crime. I guess I'll move on after him when I've had a rest."

"We'll go with you," answered Stane thoughtfully, "we may be able to get dogs from the camp."

"It's just possible," agreed Anderton, "if the Indians will sell. If not, then I'll carry the news of you back to Fort Malsun, and the factor there will send for you like a shot." He was silent for a moment, watching Helen as she laid the table; then he said hesitatingly. "By the by, Stane, did you ever get to the bottom of that unfortunate affair of yours in England?"

"No," was the reply, given with some bitterness, "but the jury did."

"Oh rot!" exclaimed the other. "Nobody who knew you really believes that."

"I have met one man up here who apparently does!"

"Who is that?"

"Ainley! You remember——"

"Ainley! Why, man, he——" He broke off suddenly, with a look at the girl.

"Yes?" said Stane, "you need not mind Miss Yardely. She knows I have been in prison."

"Yes!" answered Helen quickly, "and I am very sure he ought not to have been."

"It was a damnable shame!" broke out the policeman. "But the facts were against you at the time, Stane. The hand-writing experts——"

"Oh the likenesses were there, right enough," interrupted Stane, "and I certainly had been in Harcroft's rooms, alone, and I suppose in company with his cheque book. Also I had lost rather a pot of money on the boat-race, and I am bound to admit all the other incriminating circumstances."

"Yes, but you don't know everything. Long after you—er—went down, Jarlock, who was in our set, told me something about Ainley."

"What was that?" asked Stane quickly.

"Well, it was that just at that time, Ainley was broke and borrowing money right and left, and that he had forged Jarlock's name to a bill. Jarlock became aware of the fact through the bill being presented to him for payment, and he tackled Ainley about the business. Ainley owned up, and Jarlock let the thing go, for old acquaintance' sake. But just about the time of your trouble he left the 'Varsity and went on a trip to the Cape, and it was a full year after before he even heard what had befallen you. It made him think of his own affair with Ainley, and when he met me months afterwards he took me into his confidence. We talked the matter over carefully, and knowing you as we both did, we reached the conclusion that you were innocent and that Ainley was the guilty man."

"Any evidence?"

"No, nothing beyond that matter of the bill. We judged by general principles. Ainley always was something of a rotter, you know."

Stane laughed a trifle bitterly. "He's by way of becoming a personage of importance today. But I think you're right, the more so since I encountered him up here."

He gave a brief account of his meeting with Ainley, told how he had waited for him on two successive nights, and how on the second night he had been kidnapped without any apparent reason. The policeman listened carefully and at the end nodded his head.

"Looks fishy!" he commented. "The fellow was afraid of you." Then after a

moment he asked, "Your question? The question you wanted to ask Ainley, I mean. What was it?"

"It was about a sheet of paper with some writing on it. You shall see it."

He felt in his hip-pocket, and producing a small letter-case, took out a thin packet wrapped in oiled silk. Opening it, he unfolded a sheet of foolscap and handed it to the other.

It was covered with writing, and as Anderton looked at it, he saw that the writing was made up of two names, written over and over again, the names being those of Hubert Stane and Eric Harcroft. At first the character of the handwriting of the two names was widely different, but presently the separate characteristics were blended with a distinct leaning towards those of Harcroft, though some of the characteristics of the earlier writing of Stane's name still survived, though at the bottom of the sheet only Harcroft's name was written, and that a dozen times. The policeman whistled as he studied it.

"Where did you get this, Stane?"

"I found it in a copy of Plato which Ainley had borrowed from me. It was returned before the forgery turned up, and that paper slipped out when I was going through my possessions after my release from Dartmoor. What do you make of it?"

"It is perfectly plain what the meaning of it is," answered Anderton with conviction. "Whoever did this was blending two handwritings for some purpose or other, and the purpose is not difficult to guess."

"That is what I felt when I saw it, and when the significance of it dawned on me, I set out to find Ainley that I might ask him the meaning of it. He had left England, and no one whom I could ask knew his whereabouts. Things were very difficult for me at home and so I came out here, stumbled on Ainley—and you know the rest."

Helen Yardely had listened to the talk of the two men without speaking, but now she broke in. "I do not wonder Gerald Ainley did not keep his promise to see you at Fort Malsun. I only wonder that when he arranged for your

deportation, as he surely did, he did not arrange for your death."

"He does not know I have this paper," answered Stane with a grateful look towards her. "But when I do meet him——"

He did not finish the sentence, and after a moment the girl announced that the meal was ready. As they ate, Anderton glanced from time to time at the man whom he had known as a careless youth at Oxford. He noted the hardness of the eyes, the greying hair, the deep lines of the face, and was moved to a sudden burst of indignation.

"Confound the man, Stane! If I were in your place I should be tempted to shoot him! But that's too good for him."

"I will do that which will be worse for him," answered Stane quietly, "I will make him own up."

The two who heard him, looking at his resolute face, had no doubt that he would keep his word, and as each reflected what he must have been through, neither was sorry for Gerald Ainley or had any compunction at the thought of what might happen to him.

The meal was finished without any further reference to the past, and after a smoke, Anderton threw on his furs and went outside. Presently he returned and announced his intention of going up the lake to the Indian encampment.

"The weather is going to hold, and it really is of the utmost importance for me to find out whether my man is here or not. I'm not in the best form after my accident this morning, but there's nothing else for it, and if the fellow has left, I shall have to follow at his heels, and wear him down. It is the only way. Duty is duty in my force, I can assure you."

Stane looked at Helen, then he said: "We will accompany you, Anderton. You represent the law, and in your company we are much more likely to receive attention and get what we want than if we go alone, whilst further, if the mysterious visits we have had were hostile in intention, the fact that we are known to you will tend to check them."

"Something in that!" agreed the policeman.

When Anderton had harnessed his dogs they started off, making directly up the lake, and within two hours sighted about half a score of winter tepees pitched near the store, and with sheltering woods on three sides of them. As they came into view, with the smoke of the fires curling upward in the still air, the policeman nodded.

"The end of a journey of two hundred miles; or the beginning of one that may take me into the Barrens, and up to the Arctic. Lord, what a life this is!"

He laughed as he spoke, and both those who heard him, knew that he found the life a good one, and was without regret for the choice he had made.

As they drew nearer the camp, two or three men, and perhaps a dozen women, with twice that number of children came from the tepees to look at them, and when the dogs came to a halt, one of the men stepped forward. He was an old man, and withered-looking, but with a light of cunning in his bleared eyes.

"What want," he asked. "Me, Chief George."

The policeman looked at the bent figure clothed in mangy-looking furs, with a dirty capote over all, and then gave a swift glance at his companions, the eyelid nearest to them fluttering down in a slow wink. A second later he was addressing the chief in his own tongue.

"I come," he said, "from the Great White Chief, to take away one who is a slayer of women. It is said that he has refuge in thy lodges."

The Indian's dirty face gave no sign of any resentment. "There is no such man in my lodges."

"But I have heard there is, a man who is the son of thy sister, with a white father."

The old Indian looked as if considering the matter for a moment, then he said slowly. "My sister's son was here, but he departed four days ago."

"Whither went he?"

The Indian waved his hand northward. "Towards the Great Barrens. He took with him all our dogs."

"Done!" said the policeman with a quick glance at Stane. "It is certain there are no dogs here, or we should have heard or seen them."

He turned to the Indian again, whilst Stane looked at Helen. "You heard that, Miss Yardely? Our exile is not yet over."

"Apparently not," agreed Helen smilingly.

Stane again gave his attention to the conversation between his friend and the Indian, but half a minute later, happening to glance at the girl, he surprised a look of intense interest on her face. She was looking towards a tepee that stood a little apart from the rest, and wondering what it was that interested her, Stane asked, "What is it, Miss Yardely? You seem to have found something very interesting."

Helen laughed a little confusedly. "It was only a girl's face at a tent-door. I was wondering whether the curiosity of my sex would bring her into the open or not."

Stane himself glanced at the tepee in question, the moose-hide flap of which was down. Apparently the girl inside had overcome her curiosity, and preferred the warmth of the tepee to the external cold. He grew absorbed in the conversation again, but Helen still watched the tepee; for the face she had seen was that of Miskodeed, and she knew that the thought she had entertained as to the identity of the woman of mystery, who had fled from the neighbourhood of the cabin, was the right one. Presently a mittened hand drew aside the tent-flap ever so small a way; and Helen smiled to herself.

Though she could see nothing through the tiny aperture so made, she knew, as certainly as if she herself had been standing in the tepee, that Miskodeed was watching them with interested eyes. Unconsciously she drew herself upright, and flashed a challenging glance towards the invisible spectator, visioning the Indian girl's wild beauty and matching it, as a jealous woman will, against her own. Not till Stane addressed her did she take her eyes from the tepee.

"Anderton's through," he said. "His man has gone northward; and as you heard there are no dogs here. We shall have to go back to the cabin. Anderton tried to persuade the chief to send a couple of his young men with a message down to Fort Malsun, but the fellow says it is impossible in this weather to make the journey without dogs, which I dare say is true enough."

"Then," said the girl with a gay laugh, "we have a further respite."

"Respite?" he said wonderingly.

"Yes—from civilization. I am not absolutely yearning for it yet."

She laughed again as she spoke, and Stane laughed with her, though he did not notice the glance she flashed at the closed tepee. Then Anderton turned abruptly from Chief George.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I have done what I could for you two, but this noble red man either won't or can't help you. I shall have to push on, but the first chance I get I'll send word on to Factor Rodwell. If only I could turn back——"

"Please don't worry about us, Mr. Anderton," interrupted Helen cheerfully. "We shall be all right."

"'Pon my word, I believe you will, Miss Yardely," answered the policeman in admiration. He looked down the lake, and then added: "No use my going back. It will only be time wasted. I will say good-bye here. Keep cheerful, old man," he said to Stane. "You'll work clear of that rotten business at Oxford yet. I feel it in my bones."

Helen moved a little away, and the policeman lowered his voice, "Lucky beggar! You'll ask me to be best man, won't you?"

"Best man!"

"Pooh, man! I've got eyes in my head, haven't I?" Without giving Stane a chance to reply, he walked towards Helen.

"Keep cheerful, Miss Yardely, and don't let Stane get dumpy about the past."

"I think you have effectually saved him from that," she answered quietly.

"Jolly glad if I have! He's a good fellow, is Hubert. Till our next meeting! Au revoir, Miss Yardely! So long, Stane!" The next moment he turned to his dogs. "Moosh! Moosh—Michele!"

The leading dog gave a little yelp. The harness tightened, and the sled began to move. Ten seconds later the man who carried the law through the frozen North was ahead of his sled, breaking the trail, and Stane and Helen had turned in the direction of their cabin, the girl with one last glance over her shoulder at the tepee, at the opening of which Miskodeed's beautiful face had now revealed itself, her eyes following the man whom once she had done her best to help.

CHAPTER XVI

AN ARROW OUT OF THE NIGHT

The short Northland day was drawing to a close, when Stane and Helen came in sight of the cabin again. For the first time since he had known it, the man felt that the place had a desolate look; and the feeling was accentuated by the sombre woods that formed the background of the cabin. Whilst yet a hundred yards from it he gave expression to his feeling.

"The cabin has a most forlorn look," he said, half-pausing to view it.

Helen, who was very tired, replied, "It certainly looks cheerless in the darkness, but that is because there is no light. A few sticks in the stove and the glare of the fire shining through the parchment window would make it seem cheerful and homey enough."

"But——" he broke off suddenly. "Hark. What was that?"

"I heard nothing," answered Helen.

"Listen," he said.

For perhaps twenty seconds they stood perfectly still, then somewhere in the wood some unseen creature barked. Stane laughed at himself.

"A fox! I believe I am getting nervous," he said, beginning to move forward. Helen moved with him, and they entered the cabin together. Striking a match and lighting a slush lamp which he had devised, Stane looked round. Things were just as they had left them on their departure, and he drew a little breath of relief. Why he should do so he could not have explained, any more than he could have explained the feeling of apprehension which had overtaken him. A few minutes passed, and soon the stove was roaring, filling the cabin with a cheerful glow. Then whilst the girl busied herself with preparations for supper, he went outside to bring in more wood. On the return journey, as he kicked open the cabin-door,

for a second his slightly stooping form was outlined against the light and in that second he caught sounds which caused him to drop the logs and to jump forward, suddenly. He threw the door to hurriedly and as hurriedly dropped the bar in place. Helen looked round in surprise.

"What is it?" she asked quickly.

"There is some one about," he answered. "I heard the twang of a bowstring and the swish of an arrow over my head. Some one aimed—Ah, there it is!"

He pointed to the wall of the cabin, where an arrow had struck, and still quivered. Going to the wall he dragged it out, and looked at it. It was ivory tipped, and must have been sent with great force. The girl looked at it with eyes that betrayed no alarm, though her face had grown pale.

"An Indian!" she said.

"Yes," he answered. "And more than one I should fancy. That fox-bark was a signal. No doubt it gave notice of our return."

"What shall we do?" asked Helen quietly.

"Do!" he answered with a short laugh. "We will have our supper and wait developments. We can do nothing else. We shall have to wait until daylight—then we may learn something."

Helen nodded. "Yes, I suppose there is nothing else to do; and a hostile force outside is no reason why we should die of hunger within."

Calmly, as if hostile Indians were part of the daily program, she continued the preparations for supper, whilst Stane fixed a blanket over the parchment window, which was the one vulnerable point in the cabin. This he wedged with the top of a packing case, which the owner of the cabin had improvised for a shelf, and by the time he had finished, supper was almost ready. As they seated themselves at the table, the girl laughed suddenly.

"I suppose we are in a state of siege?"

"I don't know, but I should not be surprised. It is very likely."

"I feel quite excited," she said. "Do you think we shall have to fight?"

"It depends what the intentions of our friends outside may be. We shall certainly have to be on the alert."

"You mean we shall have to keep watch."

"That I think will be necessary. They might try to rush the cabin, though I do not think they will. It is pretty solidly built."

"Why should Indians attack us?"

"I do not know. They may think that we are interfering with their hunting-rights."

"Perhaps this hostility explains why the owner of the cabin has not returned."

"That is possible. This is a good fur country; but he may have felt that the furs were not worth the risk."

"Yes!" answered Helen, and after a moment's silence asked: "Do you think those Indians up the lake have anything to do with it?"

"That is more than possible, indeed, it is very likely. I did not like that old chief. There was a very cunning look in his eyes and it is very possible that he designs to get rid of both us and Anderton. The mysterious visitants we have had, and the man in the wood this morning have a rather ominous look."

"But we shall fight them?"

"Of course! If they are going to fight, we shall fight; though for your sake I hope that won't be necessary."

"Oh, you must not mind me," was the reply, given with a little laugh. "The truth is that I think I should rather enjoy a fight."

Stane gave her a quick look of admiration. "I know you will not be afraid," he said, "and if Anderton gets through it may not be long before help arrives. Also it must be remembered that we may be disturbing ourselves unnecessarily. That,"

he nodded towards the arrow—"may be no more than the malicious freak of some hunter returning home, and meant to scare us."

"But you do not think so?" asked Helen, looking at his grave face.

"Well——" he began, but the girl interrupted him.

"You don't," she cried. "I know you don't. You have already admitted that you think the matter is serious, as I do myself, though I don't pretend to know anything about Indians. In a situation of this sort the truth is the best, and I know, we both know, that there is some occasion for concern. Is not that so?"

"Well," he agreed, "we can't be too careful."

"Then tell me what we must do," she said a little reproachfully, "and don't make me feel that I am a child."

He considered a moment, then he replied: "We must keep watch and watch through the night. Not that I think there will be any attack. These Northern Indians are wonderfully patient. They will play a waiting game, and in the end make a surprise attack. They will know that now we are on the alert, and I should not be surprised if for the present they have withdrawn altogether."

"You really believe that?"

"Honestly and truly!"

"Then for the moment we are safe."

"Yes! I think so; and you can go to rest with a quiet mind."

"Rest!" laughed the girl. "Do you think I can rest with my heart jumping with excitement? I shall keep the first watch, perhaps after that I shall be sufficiently tired—and bored—to go to sleep."

Stane smiled at her words, and admiration of her courage glowed in his eyes, but what she suggested fitted in well enough with his own desires, and he let her have her way, and himself lay down on his couch of spruce-boughs, and after a little time pretended to sleep. But in reality sleep was far from his eyes. From

where he lay, he could see the girl's face, as she sat in the glowing light of the stove. There was a thoughtful, musing look upon it, but no sign of fear whatever, and he knew that her courageous demeanour was not an assumed one, but was the true index of the gay courage of her heart.

Helen was thinking of the face of Miskodeed as she had seen it over her shoulder, when they were departing from the encampment up the lake. She had read there a love for the man who was her own companion, and in the dark, wildly beautiful eyes she had seen the jealousy of an undisciplined nature. And as she sat in the glowing light of the stove, she was conscious of a feeling of antagonism to this rare daughter of the wilds who dared to love the man whom she herself loved. She understood, from the feelings she herself was conscious of, what must be the Indian girl's attitude towards herself, and was inclined to trace the hostility which had suddenly manifested itself to that source. The girl had been in the neighbourhood of the cabin once, she was sure of that, and might have come again, probably by some short path through the woods, her hand, possibly, had drawn the bow and sent the arrow which had awakened their apprehensions. But in that case, she asked herself, why had the arrow been directed against her companion rather than herself?

That she could not understand, and after a time her thoughts passed to the story which Stane had related to the policeman, and the account of the forged bill that the latter had given. The two together seemed absolutely conclusive. What a man had done once on the way of crime, he could do again, and as her conviction of Gerald Ainley's guilt grew, she was quite sure that somehow he was the moving spirit in her companion's deportation from Fort Malsun. He had not expected to see Hubert Stane, and when the latter had demanded an interview he had been afraid, and in his fear had taken steps for his removal. Ainley loved her; but now, if he were the last man left in the world, she would never——

A sound of movement interrupted her reverie, and she half-turned as Stane rose from his spruce-couch.

"You have heard nothing?" he asked.

"Nothing!" she replied.

"I will take the watch now, Miss Yardely, and do you lie down and rest."

"I will lie down," she said with a little laugh, "but I am afraid sleep will be another matter. My mind is in a ferment."

"You can try at any rate," he said. "I will call you if any untoward thing occurs."

"You promise?" she asked. "I wouldn't miss one bit of anything that is happening—not for worlds."

"I promise," he answered with a smile.

"Though I devoutly hope there will be no need for me to keep the promise."

"I'm not at all sure I do," laughed Helen, and obediently retired to her screened bunk.

Stane lit his pipe, and seated himself near the stove. He had, as he had previously told the girl, little fear of any attack developing that night, and this anticipation proved to be the correct one. The still, dead hours passed in quietness, and when the grey day broke, he cautiously opened the cabin-door and looked out. Nothing stirred anywhere, either in the forest or lakewards. He turned and looked at his companion who had just emerged from her sleeping place.

"I think we have our little world to ourselves again."

"Whoever made the attack may be lurking in the woods!" said Helen.

"That of course is more than possible, but I do not think it is likely. It is extremely cold and a night in the open would be anything but desirable. The attacker or attackers, if from the Indian encampment, probably returned there. They must know that we can't leave here, and they will probably try to lull us into a feeling of security, and then attempt a surprise. Anyway after breakfast we'll beat the neighbouring coverts, I don't fancy being kept indoors by an enemy who may prove to be very contemptible."

When breakfast was finished and the necessary morning tasks finished, Stane,

who had been in and out of the hut frequently and had kept a careful watch on the wood and lake, looked at Helen.

"Do you feel equal to facing the possible danger, Miss Yardely?"

"I am not afraid," answered Helen quickly, "and if I were I wouldn't own it—or show it, I hope."

"I don't believe you would," replied Stane with a smile. "We will go out, first on the lake where we can survey the shore; and then along the path in the woods where we saw that man yesterday."

"About that man," said Helen slowly. "There was something that I meant to tell you yesterday, but I forgot it again in the excitement of Mr. Anderton's arrival."

"What was that?" asked Stane pausing in the act of slipping on his fur parka.

"Well, I had an odd fancy that he was not an Indian."

"You thought he was a white man?"

"Yes," answered Helen, "that idea occurred to me when you spoke of Indians. The man may have been a native, but in the fleeting glimpse I had of him he did not give me that impression. Of course I may be utterly mistaken."

"But what white man would run away from us?" asked Stane, thoughtfully. "What could possibly be his reason for avoiding us?"

"I don't know," answered Helen, with a quick laugh. "And as it may be no more than my fancy, the question of the man's racial identity is not worth worrying over. I merely thought I would tell you what my impression was."

Stane nodded. "Anyway, white or red he is not going to keep us from our walk. Are you ready?"

"Quite," she answered, and going outside they slipped on their snow-shoes, and then made a bee-line out on the lake.

They walked forward for perhaps half-a-mile and halted at a point whence they got a wide view of the shore. Stane looked up and down the lake. Its smooth white surface was absolutely without life but for his companion and himself. Then he scrutinized the shore, point by point, creek by creek, and Helen also looked carefully.

"No sign of any one," he commented at last. "No camp or fire, we might be alone in the world. If there is any one he is hidden in the deep woods, and for the present invisible. I think instead of going back to the cabin we will make a detour to the point where we surprised the stranger yesterday."

Stane leading, to break the track in the untrodden snow, they made their way shorewards and struck it well to the north of the cabin, then began to work through the woods, keeping a sharp look out as they went. They saw nothing, however, and when they reached the bushes behind which the stranger had slipped the previous day, there were no fresh tracks to awaken alarm. They stood there looking down between the serried lines of trees. Nothing save the trees was visible, and there was no sound of movement anywhere. The silence was the silence of primeval places, and somehow, possibly because of the tenseness of nerve induced by the circumstances of the walk, the girl was more conscious of it than ever she had been before.

"There is something inimical in the silence up here," she said in a whisper, as she gave a little shudder. "One has a feeling as if all the world of nature were lying in wait to ambush one."

"Nature red in tooth and claw," Stane quoted lightly, "only up here her teeth are white, and her claws also. And when she bares them a man has little chance. But I understand your feeling, one has the sense of a besetting menace. I felt it often last winter when I was new to the country, and it is a very nasty feeling—as if malign gods were at work to destroy one, or as if fate were about to snip with her scissors."

"Yes," answered the girl, still whisperingly, then she smiled. "I have never felt quite like this before. I suppose it rises out of the real menace that may be hidden in the woods, the menace of some one watching and waiting to strike."

"Very possible," answered Stane, flashing a quick look at her. He was looking

for the sign of fear, but found none, and a second later he said abruptly: "Miss Yardely, I think you are very brave."

"Oh," laughed the girl in some confusion, "I don't know that, but I hope I am not below the general average of my sex."

"You are above it," he said with emphasis. "And I know that this, even for the bravest of women, must be rather a nerve-breaking walk."

"I won't deny that I find it so," was the reply. "But I am sustained by an ideal."

"Indeed?" he asked inquiringly.

"Yes! Years ago I read about some English women in India who were at a military station when the Mutiny broke out. The regiments in the neighbourhood were suspected of disloyalty and any sign of fear or panic would have precipitated a catastrophe. If the women had left, the Sepoys would have known that they were suspected, so they remained where they were, attending to their households, paying their ordinary calls, riding about the district as if the volcano were not bubbling under their feet, and they even got up a ball in defiance of the danger. Some people would call the latter mere bravado, but I am sure it was just a picturesque kind of courage, and in any case it impressed the Sepoys. Those particular regiments remained loyal—and it was the behaviour of the white women which saved the situation. And their courage is my ideal. I have always felt that if I were placed in a similar situation I would at least try to live up to it."

"You are doing so," answered Stane with conviction. "This situation is not quite the same, but——" He broke off and looked round the silent woods, which might well be the hiding-place of implacable enemies, then added: "Well, it is a test of character and courage!"

"Oh," laughed the girl a little nervously, "you do not know how I am quaking inwardly."

"I am not to blame for that," he answered laughingly, "you conceal the fact so well."

In due time they reached the cabin without mishap. They had found no sign of the enemy of the previous night. If he still lurked in the wood he kept himself

hidden and Stane hoped that he had withdrawn for good. But he determined to take no chances, and busied himself in the next few hours with cutting a good store of wood which he stacked in the cabin. He also chopped a considerable amount of ice which he stored as far away from the stove as possible. Some cached moose-meat, which was frozen solid as a board, he hung on the rafters of the cabin, which themselves were white with frost.

The short day had almost ended when he had completed these tasks, and he was about to enter the cabin, when through the dusk he caught sight of a figure, standing among the trees openly watching him. The garb proclaimed the figure to be that of a woman, and for a moment he was utterly startled. Then, acting on impulse, he started to walk towards the watcher, his unmittened hand on the butt of the pistol at his hip.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ATTACK

The watching woman made no attempt to escape, but somewhat to Stane's surprise, awaited his coming. As he drew nearer he was again startled to find that it was the girl whom he had talked with at Fort Malsun.

"Miskodeed," he cried in surprise. "You! What are you doing here?"

"I come to warn thee," said the girl in her own dialect. "Once before I did that, and I was too late. But now I am in time."

"To warn me?" he echoed, still too surprised to say more.

"Yes," answered Miskodeed. "There are those who will seek to kill thee tonight."

"Tonight! But why?"

"I do not know, fully. The thing is hidden from me, but there is some one who means to slay."

"Who is it?" asked Stane in sudden curiosity.

"It is the son of Chief George's sister—the man for whom the officer came to the encampment yesterday."

"Then he is at the camp, after all?"

"He was there when the officer came. The story which Chief George told about his departure to the Great Barrens was a lie."

"But why should he seek to kill me?"

"Have I not said I do not know fully? But he promises big things if thou are

slain: rifles and the water that burns and makes men sing, and tea and molasses, and blankets for the women."

"But," protested Stane, "I have but one rifle and little spirit and tea. I am not worth plundering, and Chief George must know that the law will take account of his doings, and that the grip of the law reaches right up to the Frozen Sea."

"He knows," answered the girl quietly, "but Chigmok—that is his sister's son—has filled him with a lying tale that the law will take no account of thee, and he believes, as Chigmok himself believes."

"But——" began Stane, and broke off as the girl lifted her hand.

"Chief George has seen the rifles, and the burning water, the box of tea and the bale of blankets, and his soul is hungry for them. He would kill more than thee to win them."

"And the—the man who is with me?"

A little flash came in the girl's dark eyes. "That man——" she said in a voice that had an edge like a knife, "tell me, is she thy squaw?"

"Then you know, Miskodeed?" he said, with a quick feeling of shame.

"I know that man is the bright-faced woman who came to Fort Malsun. Tell me, is she thy squaw?"

"No?" he answered sharply. "No!"

"Then what does she in thy lodge?"

"That is due to an accident. She drifted down to the great river, and I saved her from the water, and started to take her back to Fort Malsun. Our canoe was stolen in the night, and when we took the land-trail my leg was broken and we were delayed, and by the time I was fit for travel, winter was upon us, so we sought the cabin to wait for help. That is the explanation, and now tell me, Miskodeed, is the woman to die?"

"The bright-faced one is to be saved alive."

"Ah! That is an order?"

"It is necessary for the winning of the rifles, and the tea and the blankets."

Stane pursed his lips to whistle at the news. There was more behind it than appeared; and he knew that Chigmok the murderous half-breed was not the framer of the plot, however, he might be the instrument for its execution. He looked at the girl thoughtfully for a moment, and as he did so a soft look came in the wild, dark eyes that were regarding him intently.

"Canst thou not leave the bright-faced woman, and I will show thee a way through the woods. We will go together——"

"It is impossible! Quite impossible, Miskodeed," cried Stane almost violently.

He did not know that other ears than those to which they were addressed caught those words of repudiation. Helen Yardely, missing his presence about the cabin, had stepped out to look for him, and catching a murmur of voices in the still air, had stood listening. The words, coupled with the girl's name, reached her quite clearly, and struck her like a blow. She did not wait to hear more, but retreated to the cabin, her cheeks burning with shame, her grey eyes bright with fierce scorn. She did not know to what the words referred, but, in her haste and jealousy she utterly misinterpreted the situation, and her scorn was as much for herself as for Stane as she thought how she had grown to love a man who——

The thought was an intolerable one. She could not endure it, and she began fiercely to do a totally unnecessary task in the hope of driving it from her. That was impossible, and after a minute or two she seated herself in front of the stove and stared into its glow with eyes that flashed with mingled anger and pain, the while she awaited Stane's return.

Meanwhile, the interview which had kindled such fires within her had already come to an abrupt conclusion. For as Stane declined her suggestion Miskodeed lifted a warning finger.

"Hark!" she whispered.

Stane listened, as did the girl. Whatever sound had made her speak the word was hushed, and after a few seconds she spoke again. "Then thou wilt die for this

bright-faced woman?"

"A thousand times!" he answered with quiet vehemence. "Understand, Miskodeed——"

He got no further. In the recesses of the wood a fox barked sharply, and a second later the sound was repeated in two different directions.

"Ah," cried the Indian girl, "They come. Thou art too late. Thou wilt die for thy bright-faced woman now—once."

A second later she turned away, and began to walk rapidly between the trees. Stane did not stand to watch her go. Without an instant's delay he made for the cabin at a run, and as he entered it, breathing rather heavily, he flung to the door and dropped the wooden bar in place. Then without a word he walked to the window and barricaded it as he had done on the previous night. Helen still seated by the stove looked at him in some wonder, and he offered what to him appeared a sufficient explanation.

"Last night when we returned a fox barked in the wood, and a little after some one shot an arrow to kill me. Just now three foxes barked in quick succession in different directions, and as I have not seen a fox since we came here, I think it is as well to take precautions."

To his surprise Helen offered no comment, but sat there as if waiting for further explanations. He offered none. Being unaware of his companion's knowledge of his interview with Miskodeed he had decided to keep the incident to himself, and not to alarm her more than was necessary. Seating himself, he lit a pipe, and as his companion showed no inclination to talk, fell into thought. There was a rather strained, perplexed look on his face, and as the girl glanced at him once she wondered resentfully what thoughts accounted for it. His silence about the Indian girl told against him in her mind. If there had been nothing to be ashamed of in his relations with Miskodeed why had he not spoken openly of the incident in the wood? Jealousy, it was recorded of old, is as cruel as the grave, and as the hot flame of it grew in her heart, she almost hated the girl who was the occasion of it.

As a matter of sober fact, Stane was thinking little of Miskodeed herself, but

much of the information she had brought. Whilst he kept his ears open for any unusual sounds outside the cabin, his mind was trying to probe the mystery behind the attack that, as he was sure, was preparing. Who was the inspirer of it, and why should his death be designed, whilst his companion must be spared? Miskodeed had spoken of the price that was to be paid for the attack—rifles and spirit, tea, molasses and blankets. The nature of the bribe was such as would tempt any tribe in the North and was also such as implied a white man in the background. But who was the white man who so chose his instruments for a deed from which apparently he himself shrank? The question perplexed him, and a deep furrow manifested itself between his eyes as he strove to answer it. Ainley? He dallied with the thought for a little time, and then dismissed it. Ainley was afraid of him and shrank from meeting him, but he would hardly go to such lengths as Miskodeed's statement implied; nor would he involve Helen Yardely's life in the extreme risk incidental to an attack in force on the cabin. It was unthinkable!

His mind sought other explanations. Was there some other man, some white man who had seen Helen and by this means hoped to secure her for himself? The thought was preposterous. Then a new thought leaped up. The reward Sir James was offering for his niece's recovery! Had some man his eye on that—some unscrupulous adventurer, who fearing possibly that he himself might claim a share in it, proposed to get rid of him that there might be no division of the spoil? That seemed barely feasible, and——

His thought suffered a sudden interruption. From outside came the crunch of moccasined feet on the frozen snow. He started to his feet, and took up his rifle, glancing quickly at the girl as he did so. There was a flush of excitement in her face, but the eyes that met his chilled him with their unresponsiveness. He held out his machine pistol.

"You had better have this, for the present, Miss Yardely, for I believe the attack is coming. But don't use it unless I tell you."

She took the pistol without a word, and the austerity of her manner as she did so, even in that moment, set him wondering what was the cause of it. But he had little time to dwell upon the matter for more footsteps were audible, and a voice grunted words that he did not catch. He picked up an ax, put it ready to his hand close to the door and then extinguished the slush-lamp.

The cabin was now full of shadows, though he could still see the girl's face in the glare of the stove, and marked with satisfaction that it bore no sign of fear. The position where she stood, however, was not a safe one, and he was constrained to bid her change it.

"You had better come into the corner here, Miss Yardely. It is out of range of any chance arrow through the window. That barricade of mine cannot last long, and they are sure to try the window."

The girl did not answer, but she changed her position, moving to the corner he had indicated, and just as she did so, two or three blows of an ax (as he guessed) knocked out the parchment of the window, but the barricade stood firm. The attack however, continued, and as the improvised shutter began to yield, Stane raised his rifle.

"There is nothing else for it," he whispered.

The next moment the rifle cracked and the sound was followed by a cry of pain.

"First blood!" he said, a little grimly.

There was a short lull, then something heavy smashed against the shutter and it collapsed in the room. As it did so a gun barrel was thrust in the opening, and a shot was fired apparently at random. The bullet struck the cabin wall a full two yards from where Helen was standing. Stane turned to her quickly.

"As close in the corner as you can get, Miss Yardely; then there will be no danger except from a ricochet."

Helen obeyed him. The excitement of the moment banished her resentment, and as she watched him standing there, cool and imperturbable as he waited events, a frank admiration stirred within her. Whatever his sins, he was a man!

Then came a new form of attack. Arrows fired from different angles began to fly through the open space, making a vicious sound as they struck various parts of the cabin. Stane calculated the possible angles of their flight and gave a short laugh. "They're wasting labour now. That dodge won't work."

The flight of arrows, however, continued for a little time, then followed that which Stane had begun to fear. The space of the window suddenly grew plainer, outlined by a glow outside, and the next moment three blazing armfuls of combustible material were heaved in at the window. Stane fired twice during the operation, but whether he hit or not he did not know. One of the burning bundles fell in the bunk, which was soon ablaze, and the cabin began to fill with smoke. At the same time the besieged became aware of a fierce crackling outside, and the outlook in the snow-covered lake was illumined by a growing glow. Stane understood the meaning of the phenomenon at once, and looked at the girl.

"They are trying to burn down the cabin," he said. "I am afraid it is a choice of evils, Miss Yardely. We must either stay here, and die of suffocation or fire, or face the music outside."

"Then let us go outside," answered the girl resolutely.

"I do not believe they will injure you. I believe that they have orders to the contrary, but——"

"Did Miskodeed tell you so?"

For the moment he was utterly staggered by the question, then perceiving that she knew of his recent interview with the Indian girl, he answered frankly:

"Yes! You are to be taken alive, but I am to die, according to the program as arranged!"

"Oh, no! no!" she cried in sudden anguish. "You must not die. You must fight! You must live! live! I do not want you to die!"

In the growing light in the burning cabin he could see her face quite plainly, and the anguished concern in her eyes shook him as the dangers around him never could have done. Moved for a moment beyond himself, he stretched a hand towards her.

"My dear!" he stammered. "My dear——"

"Oh then you know that I am that?" she cried.

"I have known it for months!"

She made a little movement that brought her closer to him, and yielding to the surging impulse in his heart, he threw an arm round her.

"If you die——" she began, and broke off as a gust of smoke rolled over them.

"I think it is very likely," he answered. "But I am glad to have had this moment."

He stooped and kissed her, and a sob came from her.

"I shall die too!" she said. "We will die together—but it would have been splendid to live."

"But you will live," he said. "You must live. There is no need that you should die."

"But what shall I live for?" she cried. "And why am I to be spared? Have you thought of that?"

"Yes," he answered quickly, and gave her a hurried account of his own thought upon the matter. "If I am right no harm will befall you. And we must go. It is time. Look!"

A little tongue of flame was creeping through the joining of the logs at one end of the cabin, and the logs where the bunk had been were beginning to crackle and hiss ominously. The smoke had grown thicker, and the atmosphere was pungent and choking in its quality. He left her side for a moment, and returned with her furs.

"You must put them on," he said, "or you will freeze outside."

He himself had slipped on his own furs, and when he had helped her into hers, he took his rifle and nodded towards the pistol which she still held.

"You need not use it—outside," he said. "Keep it for—for eventualities. You understand?"

"I understand," she answered calmly, knowing that in the last resource she was to do what many women of her race had done before her.

"I will go first," he said. "And you must wait a full minute before emerging. I shall try and make for the woods at the back, and if I get clear you shall follow me—you understand?"

"Oh my man! my man!" she cried in a shaking voice, knowing that though he spoke lightly, he had little hope of escape.

Not knowing what to say, or how to comfort her, Stane took her in his arms again, and kissed her, then for a moment he stood listening. Outside all was still or whatever sounds there were were drowned by the increasing roar and crackle of the fire.

"Now!" he said. "Now!"

He slipped down the bar, threw the door open suddenly and plunged outside. A yell greeted his emergence and he was aware of a small group of men standing a little way from the cabin. As he ran he fired at them from the hip; and turned sharply to the left. The two men appeared suddenly from behind the trees to bar his way, so quickly that he had not time to fire the rifle before one of them grappled with him. The rifle fell from his hand, and for a moment they struggled, then whilst the second man was still running, a shadowy figure slipped from behind a broad trunk close to where the two men were locked together, and Stane caught the sudden gleam of a knife as the light from the fire glinted upon it. He was unable to help himself, and, held in his antagonist's arms, he waited for the impending stroke. Twice the knife descended, and his opponent's grip suddenly slackened and the man slid slowly to the ground. The running man had now reached the scene of the struggle. He carried a hatchet in his hand, and he struck first at the unknown one who had killed his companion, and the unknown one went down like a log. Before Stane had recovered from his surprise the ax was raised again. He leaped at the man just as the ax descended. An intervening bough turned the stroke, twisting the ax so that it caught the side of his head, knocking him senseless. As he fell to the ground, the Indian raised the ax once more. Before the blow could fall, a rifle cracked in the wood behind him, and the attacker leaped in the air, and pitched forward upon his face.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DEAD GIRL

"Ah! Dat better! By gar, but I think it was New Jerusalem for you dis time!"

The words penetrated Stane's consciousness as he opened his eyes, and were followed by others which he obeyed instinctively. "Tak' anoder drink. Zee whisky veel vake you proper."

He gulped from the tin pannikin which was held to his lips, and coughed as the raw, potent spirit burned his throat. Then he sat up and looked at the man who was befriending him.

"Who ... who are you?" he asked weakly.

"I am Jean Bènard. I come up zee lak' an' hear shots an' I see my cabin blaze like hell. I tink somethin' ver' badly wrong an' I turn to zee woods. Den I see you rush out an' I hear you shoot as you run. I see dat big man struggle with you, I see him keeled by anoder who go down, aussi, and when zee man with zee ax mak' for you I begin to shoot. I am in zee wood, an' zee divils they do not see me, an' I pick off un, deux, trois! Dey are dere still, after dey others grow afraid an' run like caribou with zee wolves at dere heels. It ees fine sport, an' I shoot as dey ran, an' presently I am left alone. I shovel snow wit' a snow-shoe on my burning cabin, for I love dat petite cabin like a child, an' den I tink I take a look at you. You not dead, so I pour hot whisky in your mouth an' you return from zee happy-huntin' grounds. Dere you have zee whole narrative."

"But Helen?" cried Stane, looking round. "Where——"

"I haf seen not any mees!" answered the trapper. "I did not know dat dere was ——"

"Then they have taken her," exclaimed Stane, staggering to his feet, and looking round.

Jean Bènard also looked round. Except for the figures lying prone in the snow they were quite alone. "Dey must haf done," he said, "eef dere was a mees!"

He looked at Stane, as if he doubted his sanity and Stane reassured him. "Oh I have not gone mad, Bènard. There was a white girl with me in your cabin, Miss Yardely. You must have heard——"

"Mees Yardely! She ees here?" cried the trapper in sudden excitement.

"She was here!" corrected Stane. "I think she has been carried off. We must follow!"

"Oui! Oui!" replied Bènard. "I haf heard of her. The factor at Fort Malsun, he tell me to keep a bright look-out. Dere ees a reward——"

"We must get her!" interrupted Stane. "You must help me and I will double the reward. You understand?"

"Oui, I understand, m'sieu. Dis girl she ees mooch to you?"

"She is all the world to me."

"Den we go, m'sieu. But first we feed an' rest zee dogs. We travel queeck, after, vous comprenez? I will a meal make, an' your head it will recover, den we travel lik' zee wind."

The trapper made his way into the still smouldering hut, and began to busy himself with preparations, whilst Stane looked round again. The darkness, and the figures lying in the snow gave the scene an indescribable air of desolation, and for a moment he stood without moving; then, as something occurred to him, he began to walk towards the place where he had been struck down. Three figures lay there huddled grotesquely in the snow, and to one of them he owed his life. Which of them was it? Two of the dead lay with their faces in the snow, but the third was on its back, face upward to the sky. He stood and looked into the face. It was that of the man whom he had grappled, and who had been struck down with the knife that he had expected to strike himself. He looked at the other two. An ax lay close to the hand of one, and he had no doubt that that one was the man who would have slain him. The third one was his saviour. He looked again, and as he noted the dress a cold fear gripped his heart, for it was

the dress of a woman. He fell on his knees and turned the body over, then he bent over the face. As he did so, he started back, and a sharp cry came from his lips. The cry brought Jean Bènard from the hut at a run.

"What ees it, m'sieu?" he asked as he reached Stane who knelt there as if turned to stone.

"It is a dead girl," answered Stane, brokenly—"a girl who gave her life for mine."

The trapper bent over the prostrate form, then he also cried out.

"Miskodeed!"

"Yes! Miskodeed. I did not know it was she! She killed one of them with her knife, and she was slain by the other."

"Whom I keel with the bullet!" For a moment Jean Bènard said no more, but when he spoke again there was a choking sound in his voice. "I am glad I keel dat man! eef I haf not done so, I follow heem across zee world till it was done." Something like a sob checked his utterance. "Ah, m'sieu, I love dat girl. I say to myself all zee way from Good Hope dat I weel her marry, an' I haf the price I pay her fader on zee sledge. I see her las' winter; but I not know den how it ees with me; but when I go away my heart cry out for her, an' my mind it ees make up.... An' now she ees dead! I never tink of dat! I tink only of zee happy years dat we weel haf togeder!"

He dropped suddenly in the snow, and bent over the face in its frozen beauty, sobbing as only a strong man can. He bent lower and kissed the ice-cold lips, whilst Stane staggered to his feet, and moved away. He could not endure to look on Jean Bènard's grief. As he stood staring into the darkness of the wood, he had a flashing memory of the Indian girl's face as she had whisperingly asked him if he could not leave Helen, the very note in her voice sounded in his ears, and, he knew what it was no harm for him to know then, that this child of the wilderness had given him her love, unsought. She had loved him, and she had died for him, whilst a man who had loved her, now wept over her poor body. The tragedy of it all shook him, and the irony of Jean Bènard's grief was almost beyond endurance. A great humility filled his heart, and whilst he acquitted himself of

blame, he regretted deeply his vehemence of repudiation. All her words came back to him in a flood. She must have guessed that he loved Helen; yet in the greatness of her love, she had risked her life without hope, and died for him without shrinking.

He began to walk to and fro, instinctively fighting the cold, with all his mind absorbed in Miskodeed's little tragedy; but presently the thought of Helen came to him, and he walked quickly to where Jean Bènard still knelt in the snow. The trapper's face was hidden in his mittened hands. For a moment Stane hesitated, then he placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Jean Bènard," he said quietly, "there is work to do."

Bènard rose slowly to his feet, and in the little light reflected from the snow Stane read the grief of the man's heart in his face.

"Oui! m'sieu! We must her bury; ma petite Miskodeed."

"That, yes! But there is other work."

"I could not endure to tink dat zee wolves get her——"

"I will help you, Jean. And then you will help me."

"Non! m'sieu. Help I do not need. I weel myself do zee las' duty for ma pauvre Miskodeed. My hands that would haf held an' fondled her, dey shall her prepare; an' I dat would haf died for her—I shall her bury. You, m'sieu, shall say zee prayer, for I haf not zee religion, but——"

"Call me when you are ready!" interrupted Stane, and turned away, finding the situation intolerably poignant.

He went to the hut, and busied himself with the meal which the trapper had been preparing, and presently Jean Bènard called him.

The man had swathed the dead girl in a blanket and had bent the tops of a couple of small spruce, growing close together, almost to the ground, holding them in position with a sled thong. To the trees he had lashed the corpse, and he was standing by with a knife in his hand.

"Zee ground," he said in a steady voice, "ees too frozen to dig. We bury Miskodeed in zee air; an' when zee spring winds blow an' the ground grow soft again, I dig a grave. Now eef m'sieu ees ready we will haf zee words of religion."

Stane, almost choked at the poignant irony of the thing, then shaped his lips to the great words that would have been strange if not unmeaning to the dead girl.

"I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in Me, though he were dead yet shall he live...."

For the comfort of the man, who stood by knife in hand, he recited every word that he could remember, and when he reached the words, "We therefore commit her body to the grave," the keen knife severed the moose-hide thong, and the trees, released, bent back, carrying the girl's body to its windy sepulchre, amid a shower of snow that scattered from the neighbouring trees. Stane pronounced the benediction, waited a few moments, then again he put a hand on the other's shoulder.

"Bènard, we have done what we can for the dead; now we must think of the living."

"Oui, m'sieu!"

"You must eat! I have prepared a meal. And when you have eaten and the dogs are ready we must start on the trail of Miss Yardely."

"Oui, m'sieu."

They returned to the hut together, and noting that some of the outer logs were still smouldering, the trapper shovelled snow against them with his snow-shoes, then they entered. The cabin was not so badly burned as Stane had expected to find it. The bunk had burned out, but the inner wall of the cabin had scarcely caught and the place was still tenable. Bènard blocked the window, and they sat down to eat. For a time the meal progressed in silence, Stane deliberately refraining from speech out of consideration for the feelings of his companion, though from time to time glancing at him he caught an expression of perplexity on the trapper's face. Suddenly Bènard spoke.

"But, m'sieu, I do not understand eet. You haf no quarrel with zee tribe?"

"None," answered Stane, and then told him the facts communicated to him by Miskodeed.

"Ah! then, m'sieu, dere ees a white man at zee back of things. Dat Chigmok, he ees no good, he what you call a rotter, but he not dare to do this ting heemself."

"That is how I feel," answered Stane. "But how we are to get at the truth of the matter, I do not know."

"We weel go to zee encampment. We weel mak' Chief George tell zee truth."

"If we can!" commented Stane dubiously.

"As you say, eef we can. But somethings we shall learn, m'sieu, dat ees certain."

"I hope so, Jean."

An hour afterwards they started, following the trail up the lake left by the fugitives, a broadly marked trail, which revealed that a sledge had been used, for there were the marks of the runners both coming and going. As they started, the trapper pointed this out.

"You see, m'sieu, dey come prepared. Dey know dat your Helen she weel not walk; therefore dey bring zee sled, an' lash her thereto."

"Yes! That seems likely," agreed Stane, his heart aflame with wrath at the thought of the possible indignities to which the girl might have been subjected. In silence they travelled up the lake, and after a time reached the place where the moose-hide tepees lifted their shadowy forms against the background of snow and trees. The camp was dark and silent as a place of the dead. For a moment the thought that the whole tribe had moved away, deserting their tents, held Stane's mind; but it was dispelled by the whisper of Jean Bènard.

"Do you stay here with zee dogs, m'sieu, whilst I go drag out Chief George. Have zee rifle ready; an' eef dere is trouble, be prompt at zee shootin'. Vous

comprenez?"

"Yes," answered Stane, "if there is trouble I will not hesitate."

He stood with the rifle ready, watching Bènard's progress across the snow. He saw him reach the chief's tepee, and throw open the moose-hide flap, then disappear inside. He waited for what seemed an intolerable time, and once heard a rustle from the nearest tepee, and divined that in spite of the stillness of the camp, quick eyes were watching the doings of his companion and himself. Then he caught a coughing grunt, and out of the tepee which the trapper had entered, emerged two forms, the first bent and shambling, the other that of Jean Bènard. They picked their way, walking close together, between the moose-hide tents, and as they drew near the sledge, Stane saw that the shambling form was that of Chief George, and that he walked with the muzzle of the trapper's pistol in the small of his back.

"We weel go forwards up zee lak' a leetle way, m'sieu, out of arrow-shot. Den Chief George he weel talk or die."

They marched up the lake five hundred yards or more, the camp behind them maintaining the silence of the dead, then Bènard halted.

"Now," he said, "we weel talk!"

Pointing his pistol at the Indian and speaking in the patois of the tribe, he addressed him.

"What means the attack upon my cabin?"

"I know nothing," mumbled the Indian, shaking with fear or cold. "It was Chigmok—my sister's son—who led the young men away."

"So! But thou hast seen the rifles and the burning water, the blankets, the tea and the molasses which are the price to be paid. I know that thou hast seen them." At the words the Chief started a little, then he made a mumbling admission:

"Yes, I have seen them. They are a great price."

"But who pays?"

"I know not. A white man, that is all I know. The rest is known to Chigmok alone."

Bènard considered the answer for a moment, and entertaining no doubt that it was the true one, wasted no further time in that direction.

"Whither has the white maiden been carried?"

Chief George waved his hand to the East. "Through the woods to the lake of Little Moose, there to meet the man who pays the price."

"These words are the words of truth?" asked the trapper, harshly. "If thou liest ——"

"Wherefore should I lie, since so much is already known to thee?" interrupted the Indian.

"It would be unwise," agreed Bènard, and then asked: "What is to be done to the white girl by the man who pays the price?"

"I know not; belike he will take her for his squaw, or wherefore should he pay so great a price?"

Bènard looked at Stane. "Dere ees nothing more dat he can tell. I sure of dat, an' we waste time."

"Yes! Let him go."

The trapper nodded and then addressed the Indian once more. "Thou wilt go back to thy lodge now, but this is not the end. For the evil that hath been done the price will have to be paid. Later the men of the law, the riders-of-the-plains, will come and thee they will take——"

"It is Chigmok, my sister's son, who planned——"

"But it is thee they will take for punishment and Chigmok also. Now go!"

Chief George waited for no second bidding, but began to shamble off across the snow towards his encampment. The two men watched him go, in silence for a little time, and then Stane spoke.

"This lake of the Little Moose, where is it?"

"About sixteen miles to zee East. It ees known to me. A leetle lak' desolate as hell, in zee midst of hills. We weel go there, an' find dis white man an' Mees Yardely."

"We must make speed or the man may be gone," responded Stane.

"Oui, I know! We weel travel through zee night. There be two ways thither, the one through zee woods an' zee oder between zee hills. Zee way of zee woods ees zee mos' easy, but dat of zee hills ees shorter. We weel take dat, an' maybe we give Chigmok and his white man one surprise."

Under the light of the stars, and helped by the occasional flashing light of the aurora, they travelled up the lake for some distance, then leaving its surface they turned abruptly eastward, following an unbroken trail through a country which began rapidly to alter in character. The great woods thinned out and the way they followed took an upward swing, whilst a steady wind with the knife-edge cold of the North began to blow in their faces. Stane at the gee-pole of the sledge, bent his head before the sharp particles of ice-like snow that it brought with it, and grew anxious lest they should be the vanguard of a storm. But looking up he saw the stars clear overhead, and guessing that the particles came from the trees and the high ground on either side of them, his fears left him.

Then a new and very real trouble assailed him. He began to have cramps in the calves of his legs, and it seemed as if his muscles were tying themselves into knots. Sharp pains in the groin made it a torture to lift his feet above the level of the snow; and once or twice he could have groaned with the pain. But he set his teeth grimly, and endured it in silence, thinking of the girl moving somewhere ahead in the hands of a lawless and ruthless man. He knew that the torture he was suffering was what was known among the voyageurs as *mal de roquette*, induced by a considerable tramp on snow-shoes after a long spell of inactivity, and that there was no relief from it, until it should gradually pass away of its own accord.

The trail was not an easy one, and the dogs whined as they bent to the collars, but Jean Bènard, with a frame of iron and with muscles like steel-springs marched steadily on, for what to Stane seemed hours, then in the shelter of a cliff crowned with trees he called a halt.

"We rest here," he said, "an' wait for zee daylight. Den we look down on zee lak' of zee Leetle Moose. We mak' fire behind zee rock."

Without more ado, he slipped the harness from the dogs and fed them, whilst Stane collected wood for a fire, which was made as an Indian makes his fire, small and round, and which, built behind a mass of rock, was hidden from any one on the lake-side of the trail. Then a meal was prepared of which both partook heartily; and over the pipes they sat to await the dawn. After a little while Stane, in spite of his consuming anxiety for Helen, under the genial warmth of the fire and the fatigue induced by the strenuous march, began to nod, and at last fell sound asleep. But Jean Bènard watched through the night, a look of hopelessness shadowing his kindly face.

CHAPTER XIX

A HOT TRAIL

The cold Northland dawn had broken when Stane was roused from his sleep by the voice of his companion.

"M'sieu! m'sieu! It ees time to eat!"

Stane rubbed his eyes and looked round. Then he stood upright and stretched himself, every stiff muscle crying out against the process. He looked at the waiting breakfast and then at Bènard. One glance at the drawn face of the latter told him that he had not slept, but he refrained from comment on the fact, knowing well what thoughts must have made sleep impossible for him.

"Have you seen anything yet, Jean?" he asked as he seated himself again.

"Not yet, m'sieu," answered the trapper. "But eef Chief George did not lie we cannot miss Chigmok—an zee oders."

"But if he lied?" asked Stane with a sudden accession of anxiety.

"Then we shall haf to range an' find zee trail. But I do not tink he lie. He too mooch afraid! Eat, m'sieu, den we can watch zee lak' for zee comin' of Chigmok."

Stane ate his breakfast quickly, and when he had finished, accompanied Bènard a little way up the trail, which running along the base of the cliff by which they had camped, made a sudden turn between the rocks and unexpectedly opened out on a wide view.

Before him lay the snow-covered lake of the Little Moose, a narrow lake perhaps fifteen miles long. On one side ran a range of high rocky hills, a spur of which formed his own vantage place, and on the other side were lower hills covered with bush and trees almost to their crests. From the height where he

stood he had an almost bird's-eye view of the lake, and he examined it carefully. Nothing moved on its virgin surface of snow. It was as blank as Modred's shield. He examined the shore at the foot of the wood-covered hills carefully. Creek by creek, bay by bay, his eye searched the shore-line for any sign of life. He found none, nowhere was there any sign of life; any thin column of smoke betokening the presence of man. He looked at the other shore of the lake, though without any expectation of finding that which he sought. It was bleak and barren, and precipitous in places, where the hills seemed to rise directly from the lake's edge. Nothing moved there, and a single glance told him that the land trail on that side was an impossibility. He looked at his companion.

"Dey haf not yet arrive," said Bènard, answering his unspoken question. "Dey camp in zee woods for zee night."

"If Chief George lied——"

"I say again I tink he not lie. We must haf zee patience, m'sieu. Dere is noding else dat we can do. We are here an' we must watch."

The minutes passed slowly, and to keep themselves from freezing the two men were forced to do sentry-go on the somewhat narrow platform where they stood, occasionally varying the line of their short march by turning down the trail towards their camp, a variation which for perhaps a couple of minutes hid the lake from view. Every time they so turned, when the lake came in sight again, Stane looked down its length with expectation in his eyes, and every time he was disappointed. An hour passed and still they watched without any sign of their quarry to cheer them. Then Jean Bènard spoke.

"We tire ourselves for noding, m'sieu. We walk, walk, walk togeder, an' when Chigmok come we too tired to follow heem. It ees better dat we watch in turn."

Stane admitted the wisdom of this, and since he felt that it was impossible for himself to sit still, and suspected that his companion was sadly in need of rest, he elected to keep the first watch.

"Very well, Jean, do you go and rest first; but tell me before you go where the party we are looking for should strike the lake."

"Ah, I forgot to tell you dat, m'sieu." He pointed towards the southern shore of the lake, where a small tree-covered island stood about half a mile from the shore. "You see zee island, m'sieu. Just opposite dere ees a creek. Zee regular trail comes out to zee lak' just dere, an' it ees dere dat you may look for zee comin' of Chigmok."

Stane looked at the island and marked the position of the creek, then an idea struck him. "Would it not be better, Bènard, if we removed our camp to the island? We could then surprise Chigmok when he came."

"Non, m'sieu! I tink of dat las' night; but I remember dat we must build a fire, an' zee smoke it tell zee tale; whilst zee odour it ees perceived afar. Den zee dogs, dey give tongue when oder dogs appear, an' where are we? Anoder ting, s'pose Chigmok not come zee regular trail; s'pose he knew anoder way through zee woods, an' come out further up zee lak'. Eef we on zee island we not see heem, but up here—" he swept a hand in front of him—"we behold zee whole lak' and we not miss him."

"Yes," agreed Stane. "You are right, Jean. Now go and rest. I will keep a bright look-out."

"I not doubt dat, m'sieu. You haf zee prize to watch for, but I——"

He turned away without finishing his sentence, and Stane resumed his sentry go, stopping from time to time to view the long expanse of the snow-covered lake, and to search the woods along the shore. As the time passed without bringing any change, and as the unbroken surface of the snow mocked him with its emptiness, he grew sick at heart, and a feverish anxiety mounted within him. He felt utterly helpless, and a fear that Chief George had lied, and had deliberately misled them, grew in him till it reached the force of conviction. Watching that empty valley of the lake, he felt, was a waste of time. To be doing nothing, when Helen was being hurried to be knew not what fate, was torture to him. It would, he thought, be better to go back on their trail, and endeavour to pick up that of the kidnappers, since that way they would at least be sure that they were on the right lines. So strongly did this idea appeal to him, that he turned down the trail to the camp to propose the plan to his companion. But when he turned the corner of the cliff, it was to find Jean Bènard fast asleep in front of the fire, and though his first impulse was to waken him, he refrained,

remembering how tired the man must be, and how necessary it was that he should be as fresh as possible when the moment for action arrived.

"No," he whispered, as he looked at the bent form of the sleeping man. "I will wait one hour, and then we will decide."

He himself was beginning to feel the strain of the steady marching to and fro, and decided that it would be wise to spare himself as much as possible. Accordingly he seated himself by the fire, contenting himself by walking to the top of the trail to view the lake at intervals of from twelve to fifteen minutes. Twice he did this and the second time was made aware of a change in the atmosphere. It had grown much colder and as he turned the corner of the cliff a gust of icy-wind smote him in the face. He looked downwards. The surface of the lake was still barren of life; but not of movement. Films of snow, driven by the gusty wind, drove down its narrow length, were lifted higher and then subsided as the wind fell. Overhead the sky was of a uniform leaden hue and he knew that before long there would be snow. And if snow came——

His heart stood almost still at the thought. It might snow for days, and in the storm, when all trails would be obliterated it would be an easy matter to miss Helen and her captors altogether. As he returned to the fire, his mind was full of forebodings. He was afraid, and though Jean Bènard slept on, he himself could not rest. He made up the fire, prepared bacon and moose meat for cooking, set some coffee to boil. It would be as well to have a meal in case the necessity for a start should arise. These things done he went once more to the outlook, and surveyed the snow-covered landscape. The wind was still for the moment, and there were no wandering wisps of snow. His first glance was towards the creek opposite the island. There was nothing there to arrest attention. His eyes travelled further without any light of expectation in them. Creek by creek, bay by bay, he followed the shore line, then, in a second, his gaze grew fixed. The lake was no longer devoid of life. Far-off, at least ten miles, as he swiftly calculated, a blur of black dots showed on the surface of the snow. Instantly he knew it for what it was—a team of sled dogs. His heart leaped at the sight, and the next moment he was running towards the camp.

"Jean! Jean!" he cried. "Jean Bènard!"

The sleeping man passed from slumber to full wakefulness with the

completeness that characterizes a healthy child.

"Ah, m'sieu," he said, standing upright. "Dey haf arrive?"

"I do not know. But there is a dog-train a long way up the lake."

"I weel tak' one look," said the trapper, beginning to walk quickly towards the head of the trail.

Stane went with him and indicated the direction.

"There, where the shore sweeps inward! Do you see, Jean?"

"Oui, m'sieu."

With bent brows the trapper stared at the blur of dots on the white surface, and after a couple of seconds began to count softly to himself. "Un, deux, trois, quatre——" Then he stopped. "Four dogs and one man," he said, turning to his companion. "But Chigmok it ees not. Behold, m'sieu, he comes dis way."

"Then who——"

"Dat ees not to be told. Zee men in zee wilderness are many." As he finished speaking a gust of wind drove suddenly in their faces, bringing with it a few particles of snow, and he looked up into the leaden sky. "Presently," he said, "it weel snow, m'sieu. Let us go and eat, then eef Chigmok has not appeared we weel go meet dat man out dere. He may haf zee news."

Reluctantly Stane turned with him, and went back to the camp. He had no desire for food, but he forced himself to eat, and when the meal was finished he assisted his companion to load the sledge. Then Bènard spoke again.

"We weel tak' one look more, m'sieu, before we harness zee dogs."

They went up to the outlook together. The lake once more showed its white expanse unbroken; the little blot of moving dots having withdrawn. Stane stared on the waste, with an expression of blank dismay upon his face, then he turned to his companion.

"Zee man, he camp," explained Bènard. "He not pushed for time, an' he know it snow b'fore long. We find heem, m'sieu, an' den—By gar! Look dere!"

As he gave vent to the exclamation, he pointed excitedly up the lake, two miles beyond the island, the neighbourhood of which Stane had gazed at so often and hopelessly during the last three hours. A dog-train had broken from the wood, and taken to the surface of the lake, three men accompanying it.

"Chigmok! Behold, m'sieu!"

On a mutual impulse they turned and running back to the camp, began hurriedly to harness the dogs to the sledge. A few minutes later they were on the move, and turning the corner of the cliff began the descent towards the lake. As they did so both glanced at the direction of the sled they were pursuing. It was moving straight ahead, fairly close in shore, having evidently sought the level surface of the lake for easier travelling. More than that they had not leisure to notice, for the descent to the lake was steep, and it required the weight and skill of both to keep the sled from overrunning the dogs, but in the space of four minutes it was accomplished, and with a final rush they took the level trail of the lake's frozen and snow-covered surface. As they did so a gust of wind brought a scurry of snow in their faces, and Bènard looked anxiously up into the sky.

"By-an'-by it snow like anythin', m'sieu. We must race to catch Chigmok b'fore it come."

Without another word he stepped ahead, and began to make the trail for the dogs, whilst Stane took the gee-pole to guide the sledge. Bènard bent to his task and made a rattling pace, travelling in a bee-line for their quarry, since the lake's surface offered absolutely no obstructions. Stane at the gee-pole wondered how long he could keep it up, and from time to time glanced at the sled ahead, which, seen from the same level, now was half-hidden in a mist of snow. He noted with satisfaction that they seemed to be gaining on it; and rejoiced to think that, as Jean Bènard's dogs were in fine mettle and absolutely fresh, they could not be long before they overhauled it. Presently the trapper stopped to rest, and Stane himself moved ahead.

"I will take a turn at trail-breaking," he said, "and do you run behind, Jean."

It was a different matter going ahead of the dogs on the unbroken snow. In a little time his muscles began to ache intolerably. It seemed as if the ligaments of the groin were being pulled by pincers, and the very bone of the leg that he had broken, seemed to burn with pain. But again, as on the previous night, he set his teeth, and defied the dreaded *mal de roquette*. New hope sustained him; before him, within sight as he believed, was the girl, whom, in the months of their wilderness sojourn, he had learned to love, and who on the previous night (how long ago it seemed!) in the face of imminent death, had given herself to him unreservedly. His blood quickened at the remembrance. He ignored the pangs he was enduring. The sweat, induced by the violent exertion froze on eyebrows and eyelashes, but he ignored the discomfort, and pressed on, the snow swirling past his ankles in a miniature storm. Twice or thrice he lifted his bent head and measured the distance between him and the quarry ahead. It was, he thought nearer, and cheered, he bent his body again to the nerve-racking toil.

Half an hour passed, and though the wind was rising steadily, blowing straight in their teeth and adding greatly to their labours, the snow kept off. They were still gaining slowly, creeping forward yard by yard, the men with the train ahead apparently unaware of their pursuit. Then they struck the trail made by their quarry and the work became less arduous and the pace quickened.

"By gar!" cried Bènard as they hit the trail, "we get dem now, dey make zee trail for us."

"Yes," answered Stane, his eyes ablaze with excitement.

A mile and three quarters now separated the two teams, and as they followed in the trail that the others had to make, their confidence seemed justified. But nature and man alike were to take a hand and upset their calculations. In the wind once more there came a smother of snow. It was severe whilst it lasted, and blotted out all vision of the team ahead. As it cleared, the two pursuers saw that their quarry had turned inshore, moving obliquely towards a tree-crowned bluff that jutted out into the lake. Jean Bènard marked the move, and spoke almost gleefully.

"Dey fear zee snow, an' go to make camp. By zee mass, we get dem like a wolf in zee trap!"

The sledge they pursued drew nearer the bluff, then suddenly Jean Bènard threw back his head in a listening attitude.

"Hark!" he cried: "what was dat?"

"I heard nothing," answered Stane. "What did you fancy you——"

The sentence was never finished, for borne to him on the wind came two or three sharp sounds like the cracks of distant rifles. He looked at his companion.

"The detonation of bursting trees far in the wood," he began, only to be interrupted.

"Non, non! not zee trees, but rifles, look dere, m'sieu, someting ees happening."

It certainly seemed so. The sled which had almost reached the bluff, had swung from it again, and had turned towards the open lake. But now, instead of three figures, they could see only one; and even whilst they watched, again came the distant crack of a rifle—a faint far-away sound, something felt by sensitive nerves rather than anything heard—and the solitary man left with the sledge and making for the sanctuary of the open lake, plunged suddenly forward, disappearing from sight in the snow. Another fusillade, and the sled halted, just as the two men broke from the cover of the bluff and began to run across the snow in the direction of it.

"By gar! By gar!" cried Jean Bènard in great excitement. "Tings dey happen. Dere are oder men who want Chigmok, an' dey get heem, too."

Then with a clamouring wind came the snow, blotting out all further vision of the tragedy ahead. It hurtled about them in fury, and they could see scarcely a yard in front of them. It was snow that was vastly different from the large soft flakes of more temperate zones—a wild rain of ice-like particles that, as it struck, stung intolerably, and which, driven in the wind, seemed like a solid sheet held up to veil the landscape. It swirled and drifted about them and drove in their faces as if directed by some malevolent fury. It closed their eyes, clogged their feet, stopped their breathing, and at the moment when it was most essential, made progress impossible. Dogs and men bowed to the storm, and after two

minutes of lost endeavour in attempting to face it, the course was altered and they raced for the shore and the friendly shelter of the trees. When they reached it, breathless and gasping, they stood for a moment, whilst the storm shrieked among the tree-tops and drove its icy hail like small shot against the trunks. In the shelter of one of them, Stane, as his breath came back to him, swung his rifle off his shoulder, and began to strip from it the deer-hide covering. Jean Bènard saw him, and in order to make himself heard shouted to him.

"What you do, m'sieu?"

"I'm going after them, Jean. There's something badly wrong."

"Oui! But with zee storm, what can you do, m'sieu?"

"I can find that girl," he said. "Think, man, if she is bound to the sled—in this ——"

"Oui! Oui! m'sieu, I understand, but——"

"I shall work my way in the cover of the trees till I reach the bluff. If the storm abates you will follow but do not pass the bluff. There will be shelter in the lee of it, and I will wait your coming there."

"Go, and God go with you, m'sieu; but do not forget zee rifles which were fired dere."

"I will keep them in mind," answered Stane, and then setting his face to the storm, he began to work his way along the edge of the wood.

CHAPTER XX

A PRISONER

When Hubert Stane left the burning cabin, Helen did not obey his injunctions to the letter. A full minute she was to wait in the shadow of the door before emerging, but she disregarded the command altogether in her anxiety to know what fate was to befall him. She guessed that on his emergence he expected a volley, and had bidden her remain under cover until the danger from it should have passed; and being morally certain that he was going to his death, she had a mad impulse to die with him in what was the supreme hour of her life. As the yell greeted his emergence, she caught the sound of the rifle-shot, and not knowing that it had been fired by Stane himself, in an agony of fear for him, stepped recklessly to the door. She saw him running towards the trees, saw him grappled by the Indian who barred the way, and beheld the second figure rise like a shadow by the side of the struggling men. The raised knife gleamed in the firelight, and with a sharp cry of warning that never reached Stane, she started to run towards him. The next moment something thick and heavy enveloped her head and shoulders, she was tripped up and fell heavily in the snow, and two seconds later was conscious of two pairs of hands binding her with thongs. The covering over her head, a blanket by the feel of it, was bound about her, so that she could see nothing, and whilst she could still hear, the sounds that reached her were muffled. Her feet were tied, and for a brief space of time she was left lying in the snow, wondering in an agonized way, not what was going to happen to herself, but what had already happened to her lover.

Then there came a sound that made her heart leap with hope—a sound that was the unmistakable crack of a rifle. Again the rifle spoke, three times in rapid succession, and from the sounds she conjectured that the fight was not yet over, and felt a surge of gladness in her heart. Then she was lifted from the ground, suddenly hurried forward, and quite roughly dropped on what she guessed was a sledge. Again hands were busy about her, and she knew that she was being lashed to the chariot of the North. There was a clamour of excited voices, again the crack of the rifle, then she felt a quick jerk, and found the sled was in motion.

She had no thought of outside intervention and as the sled went forward at a great pace, notwithstanding her own parlous condition, she rejoiced in spirit. Whither she was being carried, and what the fate reserved for her she had not the slightest notion; but from the rifle-shots, and the manifest haste of her captors, she argued that her lover had escaped, and believing that he would follow, she was in good heart.

That she was in any immediate danger, she did not believe. Her captors, on lashing her to the sledge, had thrown some soft warm covering over her, and that they should show such care to preserve her from the bitter cold, told her, that whatever might ultimately befall, she was in no imminent peril. With her head covered, she was as warm as if she were in a sleeping bag, the sled ran smoothly without a single jar, and the only discomfort that she suffered came from her bound limbs.

Knowing how vain any attempt at struggle would be, she lay quietly; reflecting on all the events of the night. Strong in the faith that Stane had escaped, she rejoiced that these events had forced from his lips the declaration that in the past few weeks she had seen him repress again and again. He could never recall it; and those kisses, taken in the very face of death, those were hers until the end of time. Her heart quickened as she thought of them, and her lips burned. It was, she felt, a great thing to have snatched the deepest gladness of life in such an hour, and to have received an avowal from a man who believed that he was about to die for her. And what a man!

The thought of Miskodeed occurred to her; but now it did not trouble her very greatly. That visit of the Indian girl to the cabin had at first been incomprehensible except on one hateful supposition; but Stane's words had made it clear that the girl had come to warn them, and if there was anything behind that warning, if, as she suspected, the girl loved Stane with a wild, wayward love, that was not the man's fault. She remembered his declaration that he had never seen Miskodeed except on the two occasions at Fort Malsun, and though Ainley's evil suggestions recurred to her mind, she dismissed them instantly. Her lover was her own——

The sledge came to a sudden standstill; and lying there she caught a clamour of excited voices. She listened carefully, but such words as reached her were in a tongue unknown to her. A few minutes passed, something was thrown on the

sled, close by her feet, then a whip cracked, a dog yelped, and again the sledge moved forward.

She was quite warm, and except for the thongs about her, comfortable, and presently her eyes closed, at first against the rather oppressive darkness resulting from the covering blanket, then remained closed without any conscious volition, and she slept, heavily and dreamlessly.

She was awakened by the sled coming to a standstill; and then followed the sounds of men pitching camp; the crackle of a fire, the growling and yelping of dogs quarrelling over their food. She did not know how long she had slept; but after awakening, it seemed a very long time before any one came near her. Then she caught the sound of steps crunching the frozen snow. The steps halted by the sledge and hands busied themselves with the fastenings. A minute later she felt that her limbs were free; and as the blanket was jerked from her head, she looked round.

It was still night, but by the light of a fire by which two men were sitting smoking, she caught the sight of overhanging trees and of a man who was standing by the sledge, looking down upon her. His face was in shadow and could not be seen, but the voice in which he addressed her was harsh and guttural, his manner almost apologetic.

"You stan' up now, mees."

As the blanket was jerked from her, Helen was conscious of a little prick of fear, but as the man spoke the fear vanished quicker than it had arisen. From the fact that he addressed her as miss, it was clear that he held her in some respect, whilst his manner spoke volumes. The words, though harshly spoken, were an invitation rather than a command, and accepting it as such, she first sat up, waited until a little attack of dizziness passed and then rose slowly to her feet. She swayed a little as she did so, and the man stretched a quick hand to steady her.

"Vait min'te," he said, "zee seeckness et veel pass."

It passed quicker than the man knew, and as the man had moved, bringing his face to the light, Helen used the opportunity to survey the man behind the

mittened hand which she had lifted to her head. He was, she saw, a half-breed of evil, pock-marked countenance, with cruel eyes. Who he was she had not the slightest notion, but curiosity was strong within her, and as she lowered her hand, she waited for him to speak again.

"Ve vait here, leetle taime—une hour, deux, maybe tree. Zee dogs dey tire. But you veel not runs away. Dat vaire fool ting to do. Zee wood et ees so vast, an' zee wolves are plenty. You come to zee fire an' eat."

He moved towards the fire, as if certain that she would follow, and after one glance into the deep shadows of the forest, she did so. Whoever the man was, and whatever his intentions towards her, he talked sense. Flight without equipment or food, in a strange country, and in face of the menace of the arctic North would be the wildest folly. She seated herself on a log which had been placed for her convenience, accepted some fried moose-meat and unsweetened tea, whilst the other two men by the fire, both Indians, smoked stolidly, without bestowing upon her a single glance whilst she ate. When she had finished she pushed the tin plate from her, and looked at the half-breed, who had seated himself a yard or so away from her.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"Ah not tell you dat!" said the man with a grin.

"Then tell me what are you going to do with me?"

"You fin' dat out for yourself in a vaire leetle taime," was the answer.

"Then where are you taking me?"

"Oh—Ah tell you dat, mees!" was the reply, given in a manner that implied that the speaker was glad to find something in which he could oblige her. "Ah tak' you to see lak' of zee Leetle Moose, ten, maybe douze miles away."

"But why should you take me there?" asked Helen.

"Non! Ah not tell you dat! You fin' out all in zee good taime," was the reply stolidly given.

Helen looked at the evil, cunning face, and knew that it was no use pursuing inquiries in that direction. She waited a full minute, then she began to ask another question, to her of even vaster moment:

"That man who was with me in the cabin, he——"

"Sacree!" cried the half-breed in a sudden burst of fury. "Dat man he ees dead, Par Dieu! an' eef he was not, I roast heem alive!"

"Dead!" As the exclamation broke from her, the girl looked at the half-breed with eyes in which gleamed a sudden fear. Then hope came to her as she remembered the shots that she had heard. "But," she protested, "he was firing on you as you left. It cannot be that he——"

"Non!" broke in the half-breed. "Dat man was with you he fire onlee once, den he die. Dose shots dey come from zee wood, an' I not know who fire dem. Eet was strange, I not know eef there be one man or more, so I run aways wit' you."

He had more to say upon that particular matter, but Helen Yardely had no ears for his words. Her hope was completely shattered by the half-breed's explanation of those pursuing shots. From them, believing they had come from her lover's rifle, she had argued with certainty that he had survived the attack, that he was alive; and now——

Dead! As the word beat in her brain, she was overwhelmed by a feeling of despair; and bowing her face suddenly in her hands gave way to her grief. Great sobs shook her shoulders, and scalding tears welled in her eyes. Her lover had indeed gone to his death after all, had given his life for hers as at the very beginning of their acquaintance he had risked it to the same end of saving her!

The callous half-breed was disturbed by the utter abandon of her grief. In his brutal nature there was a stirring of unusual compunction, and after watching her for a moment, he strove to console her, speaking in a wheedling voice.

"No need to weep lik' zee rain in spring, mees! What ees one man when men are as zee leaves of zee forest? Dis man dead! True—but eet ees a small ting—zee death of a man. An' I tak' you to anodder man——"

"You will what?" Helen looked up sharply as she asked the question. There

was a light of wrath struggling with the grief in her eyes and the half-breed was startled by it.

"I tak' you to anodder man who weel lov' you as white squaws desire. He ——"

"Who is this man?" she asked, suddenly interrupting him.

But the half-breed developed a sudden wariness.

"Non!" he said. "I not tell you dat, for why, zee surprise it veel be zee more pleasant!"

"Pleasant!" cried Helen, wrath uppermost in her heart once more. "Pleasant! I ——" She checked herself, then as something occurred to her she asked another question.

"This man whom you promise me? He pays you to bring me to him?"

"Oui! He pays a great price!"

"Why?"

"I not know! How can I tell what ees in zee heart of heem? But it ees in my mind dat he burns with love, dat——"

Helen rose suddenly from her seat. "I will tell you something," she said in a voice that made the callous half-breed shiver. "When you bring me to this man I will kill him because that other man has died!"

"I not care what you do wid heem!" answered her captor with a brutal laugh. "You marrie heem, you keel heem, it ees all zee same to me, I get zee price, an' I do not love dat mans, no."

"Tell me who is he—his name, and I will pay you double the price he promises."

The half-breed smiled cunningly. "Where is your double zee price? Zee price dat man pay I haf seen. Eet ees real! Eet ees a good price! Non! mees; a promise

what ees dat? A red fox in zee trap ees more dan a silvaire fox in zee wood. Dis man half zee goods, an' you—what haf you?"

He lit his pipe and turned from her to the fire. Helen gave him one glance and guessed that it was useless to try to bribe him further, then she turned and began to walk restlessly to and fro. There was a set, stony look of grief on her face; but deep in the grey eyes burned a light that boded ill for the man who had brought the grief upon her.

Time passed, and she still marched to and fro. The half-breed was nodding over the fire, and his two companions were sound asleep. Under her fur parka she felt the butt of the pistol which Stane had given her, when the attack on the cabin had commenced. She looked at the three men, and with her hand on the pistol-butt the thought came to her mind that it would be a simple thing to kill them in their sleep, and to take the dogs and so effect her escape. They were murderers; they deserved to die; and she felt that she could kill them without compunction. But her eyes swept the dark circle of trees, and for a moment she stared into the darkness with fixed gaze, then her hand slipped from the pistol, and she put from her the thought that had come to her. It was not fear of the darkness or any terror at the hazards of the frozen wilderness that deterred her from the attempt; it was just that there was within her a fierce, overwhelming desire, to meet the man who was the ultimate cause of her lover's death.

When the half-breed rose, and ordered her to resume her place on the sledge, she did so without demur, making herself as comfortable as possible. She was bound to the sledge again, though, when they resumed the journey, she was less like a mere bale than she had been, and was free to lift the blanket which now was thrown over her head for protection from the extreme cold more than for any other reason. But only once before the dawn did she avail herself of this privilege to look about her, and that was when the second halt was made. She lifted the blanket to learn the cause of the delay; and made the discovery that the dog-harness having become entangled in the branch of a fallen tree, had broken and the halt was necessary for repairs. She dropped her head-covering again and lay there in the darkness, wild thoughts mingling with her grief. She chafed at the delay. Her one anxiety was for the meeting that should involve a terrible justice; the man should die as her lover had died; and her own hand should inflict upon him the recompense of God.

The sullen dawn of the Northern winter had broken when she lifted the blanket again. They were still in the forest, having lost the trail in the darkness, and presently a fresh halt was necessary, and whilst two of the men prepared a meal, her chief captor went off through the woods as she guessed to discover their whereabouts. He returned in the course of half an hour and said something to his companion which Helen did not understand; and after a rather leisurely meal they harnessed up once more.

After a time the forest began to open out. They struck a frozen river and descending the bank and taking to its smooth surface, their speed accelerated. The banks of the river widened, and in a little time they swept clear of them on to the open plain of what she easily guessed was a frozen lake. They turned sharply to the right, and a few minutes afterwards a whirl of snow caused her to cover her face. Some considerable time passed before she looked forth again. They were travelling at a great rate. The snow was flying from the shoes of the man who broke the trail. The half-breed who was acting as driver was urging the dogs with both whip and voice, and occasionally he cast an anxious look over his shoulder. Wondering why he should do so Helen also looked back. Then her heart gave a great leap. Behind them was another dog-team with two men. Was it possible that after all the half-breed was mistaken, or that he had told her a lying tale?

She did not know, she could not tell, she could only hope, and her hope was fed by her captor's evident anxiety. He whipped the dogs cruelly, and his glances back became more frequent. Helen also looked back and saw that the sled behind was gaining on them. Was it indeed her lover in pursuit, or were these men who had witnessed the attack on the cabin, and had fired the shots which had compelled the attackers to take flight? Anything now seemed possible, and as the half-breed's anxiety grew more pronounced, her own excited hopes mounted higher.

The snow came again, a blinding whirl that blotted out the whole landscape, then the half-breed gave a sharp order, and the Indian in front breaking trail turned ashore. The half-breed looked back, and then forward, and gave a grunt of satisfaction. The girl also looked forward. They were approaching a tree-crowned bluff, which was apparently their goal. Then suddenly, bewildering in its unexpectedness, came the flash and crack of a rifle from the bushes in shore.

"Sacree!" cried the half-breed, and the next moment three rifles spoke, and he pitched over in the snow, whilst the man at the gee-pole also fell.

The man breaking the trail in front, swerved from the bluff, and the dogs swerved after him, almost upsetting the sledge. Again a rifle, and the remaining man went down. The dogs, in excitement or fear, still moved forward, and Helen strove to free herself, but a moment later the sledge halted abruptly as two of the dogs fell, shot in their traces. She had a momentary vision of two men running towards her from the shore, then the snow came down in a thick veil. Dimly she caught the outline of one of the men by her sled, and the next moment a voice she remembered broke on her ears through the clamour of the wind.

"Thank God, Helen! I am in time."

And she looked up incredulously to find Gerald Ainley looking down at her.

CHAPTER XXI

CHIGMOK'S STORY

When Stane set his face to the storm he knew there was a difficult task before him, and he found it even more difficult than he had anticipated. The wind, bitingly cold, drove the snow before it in an almost solid wall. The wood sheltered him somewhat; but fearful of losing himself, and so missing what he was seeking, he dared not turn far into it, and was forced to follow the edge of it, that he might not wander from the lake. Time after time he was compelled to halt in the lee of the deadfalls, or shelter behind a tree with his back to the storm, whilst he recovered breath. He could see scarcely a yard before him, and more than once he was driven to deviate from the straight course, and leave the trees in order to assure himself that he had not wandered from the lake side.

The bitter cold numbed his brain; the driving snow was utterly confusing, and before he reached his objective he had only one thing clear in his mind. Blistering though it was, he must keep his face to the wind, then he could not go wrong, for the storm, sweeping down the lake, came in a direct line from the bluff in the shadow of which the tragedy which he had witnessed, had happened. As he progressed, slowly, utter exhaustion seemed to overtake him. Bending his head to the blast he swayed like a drunken man. More than once as he stumbled over fallen trees the impulse to sit and rest almost overcame him; but knowing the danger of such a course he forced himself to refrain. Once as he halted in the shelter of a giant fir, his back resting against the trunk, he was conscious of a deadly, delicious languor creeping through his frame, and knowing it for the beginning of the dreaded snow-sleep which overtakes men in such circumstances, he lurched forward again, though he had not recovered breath.

He came to a sudden descent in the trail that he was following. It was made by a small stream that in spring flooded down to the lake but which now was frozen solid. In the blinding snow-wrack he never even saw it, and stepping on air, he hurtled down the bank, and rolled in a confused heap in the deep snow at the bottom. For a full minute he lay there, out of the wind and biting snow-hail,

feeling like a man who has stumbled out of bitter cold to a soft couch in a warm room. A sense of utter contentment stole upon him. For some moments he lost all his grip on realities; time and circumstances and the object of his quest were forgotten. Visions, momentary but very vivid, crowded upon him, and among them, one of a girl whom he had kissed in the face of death. That girl—Yes, there was something. His mind asserted itself again, his purpose dominated his wavering faculties, and he staggered to his feet.

"Helen!" he muttered. "Helen!"

He faced the bank of the stream on the other side from that which had caused his downfall. Then he paused. There was something—twenty seconds passed before he remembered. His rifle! It was somewhere in the snow, he must find it, for he might yet have need of it. He groped about, and presently recovered it; then after considering for a moment, instead of ascending to the level, he began to walk downstream, sheltered by the high banks. It was not so cold in the hollow, and though a smother of sand-like particles of snow blew at the level of his head, by stooping he was able to escape the worst of it. His numbed faculties began to assert themselves again. The struggle through the deep soft snow, out of reach of the wind's bitter breath, sent a glow through him. His brain began to work steadily. He could not be far from the bluff now, and the stream would lead him to the lake. How much time he had lost he did not know, and he was in a sweat of fear lest he should be too late after all. As he struggled on, he did not even wonder what was the meaning of the attack that he had witnessed; one thing only was before his eyes, the vision of the girl he loved helpless in the face of unknown dangers.

The banks of the stream lowered and opened suddenly. The withering force of the blast struck him, the snow buffeted him, and for a moment he stood held in his tracks, then the wind momentarily slackened, and dimly through the driving snow he caught sight of something that loomed shadowlike before him. It was the bluff that he was seeking, and as he moved towards it, the wind broken, grew less boisterous, though a steady stream of fine hard snow swept down upon him from its height. The snow blanketed everything, and he could see nothing; then he heard a dog yelp and stumbled forward in the direction of the sound. A minute later, in the shelter of some high rocks, he saw a camp-fire, beside which a team of dogs in harness huddled in the snow, anchored there by the sled turned on its side, and by the fire a man crouched and stared into the snow-wrack. As he

visioned them, Stane slipped the rifle from the hollow of his arm, and staggered forward like a drunken man.

The man by the fire becoming aware of him leaped suddenly to his feet. In a twinkling his rifle was at his shoulder, and through the wild canorous note of the wind, Stane caught his hail. "Hands up! You murderer!"

Something in the voice struck reminiscently on his ears, and this, as he recognized instantly, was not the hail of a man who had just committed a terrible crime. He dropped his rifle and put up his hands. The man changed his rifle swiftly for a pistol, and began to advance. Two yards away he stopped.

"Stane! by—!"

Then Stane recognized him. It was Dandy Anderton, the mounted policeman, and in the relief of the moment he laughed suddenly.

"You, Dandy?"

"Yes! What in heaven's name is the meaning of it all? Did you see anything? Hear the firing? There are two dead men out there in the snow." He jerked his head towards the lake. "And there was a dog-team, but I lost it in the storm. Do you know anything about it, Stane? I hope that you had no hand in this killing?"

The questions came tumbling over each other all in one breath, and as they finished, Stane, still a little breathless, replied:

"No, I had no hand in that killing. I don't understand it at all, but that sledge, we must find it, for to the best of my belief, Miss Yardely is on it."

"Miss Yardely! What on earth——"

"It is a long story. I haven't time to explain. We were attacked and she was carried off. Come along, Dandy, and help me to find her."

The policeman shook his head and pointed to the whirling snow. "No use, old man, we couldn't find a mountain in that stuff, and we should be mad to try. We don't know which way to look for her, and we should only lose ourselves and die in the cold."

"But, man, I tell you that Helen——"

"Helen is in the hands of the good God for the present, my friend. I did not know she was with that sledge, and though I had only a glimpse of it, I will swear that the sledge was empty."

"There were two men ran out after the firing," cried Stane. "I saw them just before the snow came. They were making for the sledge. Perhaps they took Helen——"

"Sit down, Stane, and give me the facts. It's no good thinking of going out in that smother. A man might as well stand on Mount Robson and jump for the moon! Sit down and make me wise on the business, then if the storm slackens we can get busy."

Stane looked into the smother in front, and reason asserted itself. It was quite true what Anderton said. Nothing whatever could be done for the present; the storm effectually prevented action. To venture from the shelter of the bluff on to the open width of the lake was to be lost, and to be lost in such circumstances meant death from cold. Fiercely as burned the desire to be doing on behalf of his beloved, he was forced to recognize the utter folly of attempting anything for the moment. With a gesture of despair, he swept the snow from a convenient log, and seated himself heavily upon it.

The policeman stretched a hand towards a heap of smouldering ashes, where reposed a pan, and pouring some boiling coffee into a tin cup, handed it to Stane.

"Drink that, Hubert, old man, it'll buck you up. Then you can give me the pegs of this business."

Stane began to sip the coffee, and between the heat of the fire and that of the coffee, his blood began to course more freely. All the numbness passed from his brain and with it passed the sense of despair that had been expressed in his gesture, and a sudden hope came to him.

"One thing," he broke out, "if we can't travel, neither can anybody else."

"Not far—at any rate," agreed Anderton. "A man might put his back to the storm, but he would soon be jiggered; or he might take to the deep woods; but

with a dog-team he wouldn't go far or fast, unless there was a proper trail."

"That's where they'll make for, as like as not," said Stane with another stab of despair.

"They—who? Tell me, man, and never bother about the woods. There's a good two hundred miles of them hereabouts and till we can begin to look for the trail it is no good worrying. Who are these men——"

"I can't say," answered Stane, "but I'll tell you what I know."

Vividly and succinctly he narrated the events that had befallen since the policeman's departure from Chief George's camp on the trail of Chigmok. Anderton listened carefully. Twice he interrupted. The first time was when he heard how the man whom he sought had been at Chief George's camp after all.

"I guessed that," he commented, "after I started on the trail to the Barrens, particularly when I found no signs of any camping place on what is the natural road for any one making that way. I swung back yesterday meaning to surprise Chief George, and rake through his tepees."

The second time was when he heard of the white man who had offered the bribe of the guns and blankets for the attack on the cabin, and the kidnapping of the girl.

"Who in thunder can have done that?" he asked.

"I don't know," answered Stane, and explained the idea that had occurred to him that it was some one desiring to claim the reward offered by Sir James.

"But why should you be killed?"

"Ask the man who ordered it," answered Stane with a grim laugh.

"I will when I come up with him. But tell me the rest, old man."

Stane continued his narrative, and when he had finished, Anderton spoke again. "That solitary man with the team whom you saw coming down the lake, must have been me. I turned into the wood a mile or two on the other side of this

bluff to camp out of the snow which I saw was coming. Then it struck me that I should do better on this side, and I worked towards it. I was just on the other side when the shooting began, and I hurried forward, but the snow came and wiped out everything, though I had an impression of a second dog-team waiting by the shore as I came round. When I looked for it I couldn't find it; and then I tumbled on this camp, and as there was nothing else to be done until the snow slackened I unharnessed."

Stane looked round. "This would be the place where the man, who was to have paid the kidnappers their price, waited for them."

"And paid them in lead, no doubt with the idea of covering his own tracks completely."

"That seems likely," agreed Stane.

"But who——" Anderton broke off suddenly and leaped to his feet. "Great Christopher! Look there!" Stane looked swiftly in the direction indicated, and as the veil of snow broke for a moment, caught sight of a huddled form crawling in the snow.

"What——" he began.

"It's a man. I saw him distinctly," interrupted the policeman, and then as the snow swept down again he ran from the shelter of the camp.

A minute and a half later he staggered back, dragging a man with him. He dropped the man by the fire, poured some coffee into a pannikin, and as the new-comer, with a groan, half-raised himself to look round, he held the coffee towards him.

"Here, drink this, it'll do you——" he interrupted himself sharply, then in a tone of exultation he cried: "Chigmok!"

"Oui!" answered the man. "I am Chigmok! And thou?"

"I am the man of the Law," answered Anderton, "who has been at your heels for weeks."

"So!" answered the half-breed in native speech, with a hopeless gesture, "It had been better to have died the snow-death, but I shall die before they hang me, for I am hurt."

He glanced down at his shoulder as he spoke, and looking closely the two white men saw that the frozen snow on his furs was stained.

"Ah!" said the policeman, "I hadn't noticed that, but we'll have a look at it." He looked at Stane, who was eyeing the half-breed with a savage stare, then he said sharply: "Give me a hand, Stane. We can't let the beggar die unhelped, however he may deserve it. He's a godsend anyway, for he can explain your mystery. Besides it's my duty to get him back to the Post, and they wouldn't welcome him dead. Might think I'd plugged him, you know."

Together they lifted the man nearer the fire, and examined the injured shoulder. It had been drilled clean through by a bullet. Anderton nodded with satisfaction. "Nothing there to kill you, Chigmok. We'll bandage you up, and save you for the Law yet?"

They washed and dressed the wound, made the half-breed as comfortable as they could; then as he reposed by the fire, Anderton found the man's pipe, filled it, held a burning stick whilst he lit it, and when it was drawing nicely, spoke:

"Now, Chigmok, you owe me something for all this, you know. Just tell us the meaning of the game you were playing. It can't hurt you to make a clean breast of it; because that other affair that you know of is ample for the needs of the Law."

"You want me to tell?" asked the half-breed in English.

"Yes, we're very curious. My friend here is very anxious to know why he was attacked, and why he was to die whilst the girl who was with him was carried off."

"You not know?" asked the half-breed.

"Well, we haven't quite got the rights of it," was the policeman's guarded answer.

"Then I tell you." His dark eyes turned to Stane. "You not know me?"

"No," answered Stane. "I never saw you in my life before."

"But I haf seen you. Oui! I steal your canoe when you sleep!"

"Great Scott!" cried Stane. "You——"

"I run from zee poleece, an' I haf nodings but a gun. When I watch you sleep, I tink once I shoot you; but I not know who ees in zee leetle tent, an' I tink maybe dey catch me, but I know now eet vas not so."

"You know who was in the tent?" asked Stane sharply.

"I fin' dat out zee ver' next morning, when I meet a man who ask for zee white girl. Ah I haf seen dat man b'fore. I see heem shoot zee paddle from zee girl's hand—."

Startled, Stane cried out. "You saw him shoot——"

"Oui! I not know why he do eet. But I tink he want zee girl to lose herself dat he may find her. Dat I tink, but I not tell heem dat. Non! Yet I tell heem what I see, an' he ees afraid, an' say he tell zee mounters he haf seen me, eef I say he ees dat man. So I not say eet, but all zee time he ees zee man. Den he pay me to take a writing to zee camp of zee great man of zee Company, but I not take eet becos I am afraid."

"Who was this man?" asked Stane grimly, as the half-breed paused.

"I not know; but he is zee ver' same man dat was to haf paid zee price of guns an' blankets for zee girl dat vos in zee cabin."

"And who said I was to die?"

"Oui! He order dat! An' I tink eet ees done, an' I not care, for already I am to zee death condemned, an' it ees but once dat I can die. Also I tink when zee price ees paid, I veel go North to zee Frozen Sea where zee mounters come not. But dat man he ees one devil. He fix for me bring zee girl here, where zee price veel be paid; den when I come he begin to shoot, becos he veel not zee price pay. He keel Canif and Ligan, and he would me haf keeled to save zee guns and blankets and zee tea and tabac, dog dat he ees!"

"Perhaps it was not the price he was saving," said Anderton. "Perhaps he was afraid that the story would be told and that the mounters would seek out his trail, Chigmok?"

"By gar! Yees, I never tink of dat," cried the half-breed as if a light had broken on him suddenly. "I tink onlee of zee price dat hee save."

"What sort of a man was he? What did he look like, Chigmok?"

"He dark an' vhat you call han'some. He haf sometimes one glass to hees eye,

an——"

"Ainley, by Heaven!" cried Stane in extreme amazement.

"I not know hees name," answered the half-breed, "but I tink he ees of zee Company."

Anderton looked doubtfully at Stane who suffered no doubt at all. "It is Ainley, unquestionably," said Stane, answering the question in his eyes. "The description is his, though it is a trifle vague and the monocle——"

"He affects a monocle still then?"

"I have seen it, and it is so. He sported it down at Fort Malsun."

Anderton nodded, and for a moment looked into the fire, whistling thoughtfully to himself. Then he looked up. "One thing, Stane, we need not worry over now, and that is Miss Yardely's welfare. Assuming that Ainley has taken possession of her, no harm is likely to come to her at his hands. Whatever may be behind his pretty scheme, it will not involve bodily harm to her. We have that assurance in the position he occupies and the plan he made for her to be brought here alive. No doubt he will be posing as the girl's deliverer. He doesn't know that Chigmok has survived. He doesn't know that I am here to get Chigmok's story; and whilst he can hardly have been unaware of your sledge following the trail of Chigmok, it is not the least likely that he associates it with you. Probably he is under the idea that it formed part of Chigmok's outfit. No doubt a little way down the lake he will camp till the storm is over, then make a bee line for Fort Malsun—we'll get him as easy as eating toast."

"And when we've got him?"

"Duty's duty!" answered Anderton with a shrug. "I can't enumerate all the charges offhand; but there's enough to kill Mr. Ainley's goose twice over. Lor', what a whirligig life is. I never thought—Hallo! Who's this? Jean Bènard, or I'm a sinner!"

Jean Bènard it was, and his face lighted with pleasure as he staggered into the camp.

"I fear for you, m'sieu," he said to Stane in simple explanation, "therefore I come. Bo'jour, M'sieu Anderton, dis ees a good meeting on zee bad day! But dat—surely dat ees Chigmok? An' zee mees where ees she?"

Stane waved a hand towards the lake. "Somewhere out there, Jean, and still to find."

"But we fin' her, m'sieu. Haf no fear but dat we weel her find, when zee snow it stop!"

And the ringing confidence in his tone brought new heart to Stane, still beset with fears for Helen.

CHAPTER XXII

AINLEY'S STORY

As Helen Yardely caught sight of Ainley's face, for a moment she was dumb with amazement, then she cried: "You? You?"

"Yes," he answered quickly, "I have been seeking you for weeks, and I find you in the nick of time. But there is no time to explain now. There were others with your captors; I saw the sledge following behind. We must get away at once."

As he spoke he cut the thongs which bound her to the sledge and helped her to rise. Then he spoke again urgently. "Quick!" he said. "There is danger. This way —I have a team waiting for you. We must take to the woods."

He took her arm, and began to hurry through the blinding snow. Helen, bewildered by the swift turn of events, did not resist, but moved forward with him, and in a couple of minutes found herself standing by a sled-team guarded by a couple of Indians.

"Get on the sledge, Helen," said Ainley, brusquely. "There is no time to waste. We must hurry."

Still in a whirl of conflicting thoughts, the girl seated herself on the sledge, Ainley swiftly did what he could for her comfort, and a moment later the dogs received their command.

"Moosh! Moosh!"

They turned from the storm-ridden lake to the shelter of the great woods. The trail was not a good one; but the snow among the trees was far from being the hindrance it was in the open; and though their progress was slow, on the whole it was steady. Except for forced halts to unravel the harness when it caught in the bushes, they did not stop for two hours, but pressed on until they reached an

open space in the woods, which they crossed in a smother of blinding snow. On the other side of this break they came to a fresh spur of forest, and when they had penetrated to the shelter of the trees once more, the first voluntary halt was made. Then for the first time since the march had begun, Ainley spoke to the girl.

"Comfortable, Helen?" he asked.

"As comfortable as possible under the circumstances," was the reply.

"I am sorry I can do no better," replied Ainley. "But we are in danger still, and a little hardship is better than the grave risk of life."

"Oh!" answered Helen. "I do not mind the hardship."

"That is what I should expect of you," answered Ainley quickly, "but it is not for long that I ask it of you. In another hour or so, we shall be safe, I hope, then we will camp until the storm is over."

"Of whom are you afraid?" asked Helen.

"Indians! We were forced to shoot three of your captors; and those of their friends who were following on behind may feel impelled to try and avenge their deaths."

"Oh!" said the girl; a note of such evident disappointment in her tone, that Ainley looked at her quickly.

"Why do you speak like that, Helen? One would think that you were almost sorry that I had delivered you from the fate awaiting you."

"Oh, it is not that!" replied Helen quickly. "Though of course I do not know what the fate was. Do you?"

"I have an idea," he said, "and I will explain when we camp. Just now I must have a word with my men. Coffee will be ready in a few minutes; and there will be bacon and biscuit, which if not exactly appetising will be sustaining."

"I shall not mind bacon and biscuit," answered Helen, and as Ainley walked

away a look of deep thought came on the girl's face.

Was it true, she asked herself, that he was afraid of the pursuit of revengeful Indians? She remembered the sledge which she had seen following behind, a sledge accompanied by only two men, and the evident anxiety it had occasioned her chief captor, and one thing fixed itself in her mind with all the force of a conviction, namely that whatever Gerald Ainley thought about these men behind, her captors knew nothing whatever about them; then she remembered the revelations made by the half-breed. He had owned that he had attacked the cabin and captured her for a price, a great price paid by a man who loved her. Was that man Gerald Ainley? It was an odd coincidence that he should have been waiting just where he was, which was quite evidently the place where the half-breed had been making for. His words of greeting made it clear that he had been expecting to meet her, but in that case how did it come about that he knew she was in the neighbourhood? Was he indeed the man to whom the half-breed was looking for the price? If so, why had he so ruthlessly shot down the men who were his confederates?

Instantly an explanation that fitted the facts occurred to her. He had shot down her captors in order to conceal his connection with them and with the attack upon the cabin. She remembered the man whom she had seen, and her odd fancy that he was a white man, and recalled her lover's conviction that no bodily harm was meant to her, though the same was not true of himself, and a very deep distrust of Gerald Ainley surged in her heart; a distrust that was deepened by her recollection of the policeman's story of the forged bill, and the sheet of foolscap which had been in her lover's possession.

But of this distrust she gave no sign when Ainley approached her, bearing food and coffee. She accepted the situation as if it were the most everyday one in the world; and she listened to the few words that he had to say, with real interest.

"We shall resume our march in twenty minutes or so, Helen, but as I said, in an hour or so, we shall be beyond pursuit. Then, when we have camped, you shall tell me the story of your adventures."

"Yes," she answered quietly, "and you shall tell me exactly how you came to find me."

"That is a long story," he answered with a slight frown, "but you shall hear it all in good time. It has taken me months to find you, and I had almost begun to despair, when a fortunate chance gave me the clue to your whereabouts."

"What chance was it?" asked Helen quickly.

"To answer that," he answered deliberately, "is to forestall my story." Then he smiled, "You must be patient a little while longer, as I am, and when you have heard it, I hope you will not deny me my reward?"

"Oh," she said with a little touch of scorn creeping into her tones. "You have been working for a reward?"

"No," he replied sharply. "My toil has been a labour of love. You must know that, Helen! Though it is quite true that Sir James——"

He broke off, and as he showed no signs of continuing Helen forced him to do so. "You were saying something about my uncle? Did he send you after me?"

"He made me head of the search-party, because he knew I loved you, and he hinted that when I had found you I might go to him. You understand, Helen?"

"Yes," answered the girl enigmatically. "I think I do."

Looking at her, Ainley saw that there was nothing to be gained by pressing the matter further at that moment; and excusing himself he went to give orders to his Indians. A short time later they resumed their journey, and travelled steadily for something more than an hour; then almost in the dark they pitched camp for the night. A substantial meal was prepared of which Helen partook in the shelter of a little tent which had been erected; then when she had finished the meal, she seated herself by the big fire which had been built.

Ainley also seated himself less than a yard from her; and without giving him a chance of asking for her story, she instantly demanded his.

"Now," she said, as lightly as she could, "you shall tell me everything. How you searched for me, how you got on my trail at last, and the fate from which you saved me this morning."

Ainley would have preferred to hear her story first; but he did not demur to her suggestion, and with a little deprecatory laugh he began. "It is not very easy to talk of one's own doings, but I will do my best to avoid boastfulness."

Then, carefully picking his words, he described the anxiety her non-return to her uncle's camp had given rise to; and the preliminary search made by himself and the Indian Joe. As he described his own feelings of despair at the finding of the portion of her canoe in the drift-pile beyond the falls, his voice shook with quite genuine emotion, and Helen moved so as to bring her face a little in shadow whilst she watched him. In that moment she momentarily forgot the distrust which her own questioning had awakened in her, and listened absorbed whilst he narrated the discovery of the brooch, and the new hope it occasioned, since it afforded evidence that she was in all probability still alive. Then he broke off sharply. "You were saved from the river, somehow, by that fellow Stane, who was up at Fort Malsun, were you not?"

"Yes! How did you know?"

"I got his description from a half-breed who had met and hailed you going up the river in a canoe towards Old Fort Winagog."

"But we met no half-breed," said Helen quickly, her distrust awakening in full force.

"You met no half-breed?" The surprise in Ainley's face was quite genuine, as Helen saw, and she realized that whatever was to come, this part of the man's story was quite true.

"No, we met no one, and we never reached Fort Winagog, because our canoe was stolen whilst we slept."

"Is that so?" Ainley's face grew dark as he asked the question; then a troubled look came upon it. "The man must have lied to me," he said, "or have told me only half the truth, but he must have seen you, or how did he know that the man who was with you was Stane?"

"Perhaps he was the man who stole our canoe," said Helen.

"Yes," answered Ainley, "that will be it. But——" he broke off without

finishing. "Anyway," he continued after a moment, "following his statement, I went up to Old Fort Winagog, but found no sign of you, then back by another and a quicker route that I might tell your uncle of the lack of news, and organize a regular search. After that, I started to beat the country round about steadily. Rodwell sent news of you to all the Indians and trappers in the country, whilst your uncle promised a reward. For weeks I searched, and all in vain, then one day an Indian girl came with a story of a white man and woman living in a cabin on a lake, and though she did not know their names she was able to tell me that this man and woman were Stane and you."

"Who was the girl?" asked Helen quickly.

"It was that Indian girl who was up at Fort Malsun!"

"Miskodeed!" cried Helen.

"That I believe was her name. She looked on Stane as her lover, and she did you the honour of being jealous of you!" Ainley laughed as he spoke. "Absurd, of course—But what will you? The primitive, untutored heart is very simple in its emotions and the man was her paramour!"

"It is a lie!" cried Helen hotly. "He had spoken to her only twice in his life."

"He was scarcely likely to own to anything more, to you," answered Ainley, "and in any case I am giving you the Indian girl's version; that it accords with my own belief is of little moment. What I do know is that she cared nothing about the reward your uncle offered, and that her sole purpose seemed to be to remove you from Stane's company."

"And when you heard?" asked Helen prompting him as he fell silent.

"When I heard, I did not waste time. I made a bee-line for the cabin on the lake, taking the girl with me. I arrived there last night——"

"How long were you on the way?" interrupted Helen suddenly.

"Four days."

"And Miskodeed was with you all the time?"

"Of course!" answered Ainley a trifle uneasily. "She was our guide."

"I see," answered Helen quietly. She made no further comment on the Indian girl, but she knew now that Ainley had departed from whatever truth there was in his narrative, for Miskodeed, on the sure evidence of her own eyes had been at the Indian encampment when he claimed she had been with him. She listened quietly whilst Ainley continued:

"As I was saying, I arrived in the neighbourhood of the cabin last night, to find you gone——"

"And Mr. Stane?" she asked almost breathlessly. "Did you find him? Did you see him?"

Ainley shook his head. "No, I did not see him myself, but one of my men turned a body over that was lying in the snow. It was that of a white man, who could be no other than Stane!"

Helen flinched at the answer which confirmed what the half-breed had said to her about Stane being dead. She looked away, not wishing Ainley to see her face at that moment, whilst the hot tears welled in her eyes, and the man, choosing to disregard her manifest sorrow, continued his story. "We found an Indian in the snow, who had been wounded in the fight, as he told us, and on pressure he gave me the information that you had been carried away by a half-breed of the name of Chigmok, who, as the Indian averred, was making for the lake of the Little Moose, that is the lake where we rescued you. This wounded man also informed us that Chigmok had a camp on the lake, gave us instructions how to find it; and volunteered the further information that Chigmok was taking the longest route to the lake, since that was the easier way for a heavily-loaded sledge. There was a shorter way, as he informed us, a way which if we travelled hard, would bring us to the lake before Chigmok himself; and after considering the matter carefully I decided to take the shorter route, and to await your captor at his own camp, since, as he had no reason for anticipating pursuit, the surprise would be all the more complete. We arrived there in good time, and—well, you know the rest, Helen."

"Not quite," answered the girl in a listless, toneless voice. "You have not yet told me what this man Chigmok proposed to do with me."

"Well, the wounded Indian told us that he had fallen violently in love with you, and that he proposed to make you his squaw."

"Ah!"

Ainley interpreted the exclamation in his own way, but looking at the girl was surprised by a look which had come into her face. Her listlessness had fallen from her. There was a look of absorption about her which puzzled him, and he wondered what she was thinking of. He did not know what her captor had revealed to her, and so never dreamed the truth, which was that Helen was thinking that for the second time he had fallen from the truth in his narrative. But again she gave no further sign. For a little time she sat there grasping at the hope, the very little hope it gave her. He had lied twice, she was sure. What reason was there for supposing that the other parts of his narrative were true? He had owned that he had not seen Hubert Stane's body, and that he had taken the Indian's word. But what if that were a lie, what if after all there had been no body, what if that, like the other things, was a fabrication? It was true that the half-breed had said Stane was dead, but that might be a mistake. A faint hope stirred in her heart, and she determined to question Ainley's two Indians as soon as the opportunity arose. Then a new thought came to her, and she turned quickly to Ainley.

"Tell me one thing," she said, "when you arrived at the cabin the attack was quite over?"

"Quite," he answered.

"And you did not take part in the fighting? You fired no shots at the attackers?"

"No," he answered. "They had gone when we arrived, all except the wounded Indian who gave me the information."

"Then who was it?" she cried.

"Who was it? I do not understand what you mean, Helen."

"Some one fired on the Indians from the wood, and he kept on firing as the Indians bound me to the sledge, and even after we had begun to flee."

Ainley rose abruptly to his feet. It was very clear to the girl that the information she had given him had astonished him. His manner betrayed perturbation as he replied in short, jerky sentences: "You amaze me! What you say is—most astonishing. Are you sure? You have not dreamed this by any chance?"

"If I have," answered Helen, "another shared my dream. For when I heard the shots I thought that Mr. Stane had fired them; it was the half-breed who told me that I was mistaken, and that the shots had been fired by some one in the forest."

Ainley's perturbation did not subside at this further information. There was in his face a look of agitation that amounted almost to apprehension. "I do not understand it at all," he said, more to himself than to Helen. "It is beyond me. Good Heavens! Is it possible that Stane escaped after all? He——"

"I thought one of your men saw his body?" interrupted Helen, quickly.

"He certainly saw the body of a white man, or so he avers, and I had no reason to suppose that it could be any one else!"

"Then," said the girl, "you are not sure?"

"No, not in the sense you mean; but I am morally certain that—but why worry about Stane? Dead or alive he can be nothing to you."

The girl turned to him sharply, and there was a flash in her eyes and a look on her face that startled him.

"Dead or alive," she said quickly, "he is more to me than you ever can be!"

"Helen!" there was a note of angry protest in Ainley's voice. "You cannot think what you are saying. You must have forgotten how I love you."

"No," answered the girl deliberately. "I have not forgotten."

"Then you are forgetting what I have endured for you—all the toil and travail of these weeks of search—the risks I have taken to find you, the risks I took this morning. Stane may have done something heroic in saving you from the river, I

don't know, but I do know that, as you told me months ago, you were a hero-worshipper, and I beg of you not to be misled by a mere romantic emotion. I have risked my life a score of times to serve you. This morning I saved you from something worse than death, and surely I deserve a little consideration at your hands. Will you not think again? Since heroism is your fetish, can you find nothing heroic in my labours, in my service?"

The man was in deadly earnest, pleading for something on which his heart was set, and whatever dissimulation there had been in his narrative, there was none whatever in his pleadings. But Helen remembered how her lover had gone to prison for this man's deed, and her heart was like a flint, her tone as cold as ice as she answered him.

"You do not understand," she said, "you have not yet heard my story. When you have, whatever I may owe you, you will not press me again."

"Tell me the story then," cried Ainley in a voice hoarse with passion. "And for God's sake, be quick about it!"

CHAPTER XXIII

A SURPRISE FOR AINLEY

"I will," answered Helen coldly, and without further preamble began the narrative of all that had befallen her from the time she had left her uncle's camp to inspect the beaver colony. Ainley listened for a long time without interruption. Much of the story he already knew, though the girl was unaware of the fact; much more he had guessed, but some things were unknown to him, and when she gave the account of Stane's accident at the deadfall and of the camp she had made there, he broke out in chagrin: "That explains how it was we never found you. We must have passed within a very few miles of you."

"You were once within a quarter of a mile of me."

"How do you know that?" he cried.

"Because I saw you and the Indian Joe pitch your camp on the shore of the lake."

"You saw——" he began, and then stopped staring at her with incredulous eyes.

"Yes! I watched you make your fire, and then I went back to camp, and put out my own fire."

"Why?" he demanded harshly, though he had already guessed.

"Because I was afraid you would discover me," answered the girl calmly. "And I, with a joyful heart, watched you departing in the morning."

Ainley rose suddenly to his feet. "Helen," he cried hoarsely, "do you know what you are saying? You are telling me that you were glad to be left alone in this god-forsaken wilderness with a man who was a discharged convict? I wonder what our world would think of that confession?"

"I do not care what our world, as you call it, would think about my action. These few months in the wilderness have made me think little of those conventions which have such rigid observance in the letter but are outraged in the spirit every day."

"Our acquaintances would say——" he began, with a note of bitter malice in his voice, but Helen interrupted him.

"I wonder what our acquaintances would say if they knew everything about the crime for which Hubert Stane became a convict?"

As she dealt this blow the girl looked at him with ruthless eyes. Now she was defending, not herself alone, but the memory of the man she loved, and who out of consideration for herself had only declared his love when he was going out to meet his death. That thought made her merciless, and as she saw him waver under the weight of the blow and his face grow white as the snow about them, she continued unflinchingly.

"If they knew what I know they might say that I had made a wise choice in remaining with a convict who had suffered for something of which he was innocent, instead of going with the man who sent another man to——"

"Helen! You are mad! mad!" cried Ainley in a voice so wild that one of the Indians, dozing at the other side of the fire, started suddenly to his feet, and looked around him as if for enemies. Ainley saw him and checked the other wild words which sprang to his lips, and after a moment the Indian sank down on his haunches and dropped his chin on his breast again.

"No," answered Helen calmly. "I am not mad, I am telling the truth, as you gave me evidence just now. You did not let me finish my sentence. You knew what I was going to say. How did you know it? You could not have guessed it if the facts had not been within your knowledge." She broke off and was silent for a moment whilst Ainley stared at her with wild eyes. "I may be in your debt for what happened this morning. I do not know, for I do not, cannot trust you; but I will never forgive you for what the man I loved suffered. Never!"

"You believe some lying tale of Stane's?" said Ainley, in a sneering attempt to cover up his own discomfiture.

"I believe what he told me; I would have believed it on his word alone, but fortunately the matter does not depend on that word only. There is evidence, and I know where that evidence is, and I will tell you what I am going to do. When we get to Fort Malsun, I shall get Mr. Rodwell to equip an expedition, and I shall recover that evidence and publish it to the world, in order to clear the memory of the man whom you have so deeply wronged."

"There will be no need for that, fortunately, Miss Yardely!" said a voice behind her.

The girl jumped to her feet in surprise. And Ainley took a quick step forward as a man emerged from the shadow of the trees into the circle of the firelight. It was the mounted policeman, Dandy Anderton, and behind him came another man at whom Helen stared for a moment incredulously, then with a great cry of joy ran to meet him.

"Hubert! Hubert!"

"Yes!" he answered, slipping an arm about her.

"But I thought—I thought——"

"I was afraid you might think so," he replied in answer to her unspoken thought. "But that could not be helped. I followed after you as fast as I could, and I was at your heels when your captors were shot down on the lake and the snow came on."

"Oh, how glad I am that you are alive! That you have found me."

She rested against him well-content, and Stane's arm about her tightened its grip; then they came back to the little world about them, at the sound of the policeman's voice.

"Didn't know me, Ainley? I dare say not. I'm not quite the tailor's mannikin that I was in the old days at the 'Varsity. Got a man's job now, you see. And that reminds me, I'm here on duty. I happened to be up the Little Moose when that shooting took place this morning. There's a couple of dead Indians up there, and as I guess you had something to do with their sudden deaths I shall have to call on you for an explanation you know."

Ainley looked at the policeman without fear, and then for a moment his eyes turned and rested on Helen and Stane standing together in the shadow of a great fir-tree. It must have been a moment of exceeding bitterness to him, but beyond a short, abrupt laugh he gave no sign of his feelings. He turned again to the policeman. Apparently he was perfectly cool and self-possessed. He waved a hand towards the fire.

"May as well make ourselves comfortable. It's rather a long story I have to tell. Where are your dogs?"

"Back in the wood—anchored. I'll slip back and fetch them."

"No," said Stane, "I will go back for them."

He turned, and Helen turned with him.

"You don't mind," she whispered.

"Mind!"

She walked by his side, a hand on his arm. Once when they were well in the shadows of the wood they stopped, and with his arm about her he kissed her.

"My dear!" he whispered, "my dear."

Helen said nothing immediately, but gave a little sobbing laugh of gladness. Then after a moment she asked, "How did you escape? How did you find me?"

"It is too long a story to tell you the whole of it just now. But right in the nick of time, when I was expecting to die, the owner of our cabin, Jean Bènard came back. He saved my life; but as he knew nothing about you, the attackers got away with you, but as soon as he heard my story he got ready to pursue, and having found out that your kidnappers were making for the Little Moose we took a short cut and waited for you. We were at your heels when the rifles fired from the shore——"

"Then you *were* with that second sledge?"

"Yes, I and Jean Bènard!"

"I saw you and I wondered," cried Helen. "But the half-breed had told me you were dead."

"We lost you in the snow," said Stane, continuing his explanation, "but found Anderton, and though the snow was as bad as ever, after a time we started to search for your trail. Jean Bènard found it deep in the wood where we were searching, knowing the lake was impossible for any one to travel in the storm, and after he had made the discovery, Anderton and I started to track you."

"And where is Jean Bènard?" asked Helen quickly. "I want to thank him for saving you, for bringing joy back to me when I thought that it was dead for ever."

"He is following us, he will be here, presently."

"Then I shall see him?"

"I hope so. But we must hurry on, dear. The dogs——"

"Bother the dogs—."

"But I want to hear Gerald Ainley's explanation. It is important that I should."

"I have already heard it," said Helen quickly. "It is full of lies."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"All the more reason that I should hear it with Anderton. There is much more behind all this than you know, Helen."

"Perhaps I guess something of what lies behind."

"I do not think you can. It is an extraordinary story, and there will be a *dénouement* presently that will surprise Ainley. Come!"

They moved forward together, found the dogs, and having righted the sledge

by which they had been anchored, they returned to the camp. Ainley, pipe in hand, apparently quite cool, was talking. He gave one glance at the couple as they re-entered the circle of light, watched Stane for a moment as he stooped to unharness the dogs, and then continued the story he had been telling glibly and evenly.

"Having got the news, I made straight for the cabin, and had the ill-luck to arrive there half an hour too late. One of the men found a dead man, who, from the description, I mistook for Stane there, and we also found a wounded Indian, who, with a little persuasion, told us what he knew, which was that a half-breed, of the name of Chigmok, inflamed with love for Miss Yardely, had carried her off, designing to make her his squaw. I understand this Chigmok is what the Indians call a bad man—but perhaps you know him?"

He broke off and looked directly at Anderton as he spoke, and waited for a reply. The mounted policeman nodded, and as casually as he could replied: "Yes, I have met him. He is—no good."

As the policeman replied, Helen, who was watching Ainley's face, saw a subtle change come over it. For one moment it lost its assurance and a flicker of doubt came in the eyes. The girl divined that he had suddenly grown uncertain of his ground, and to her it was noticeable that after Anderton's reply Ainley's glibness left him, and that he spoke hesitatingly, haltingly, with frequent pauses, like a man uncertain of his words.

"Then, by all accounts, you have met a regular rogue, Anderton! But to resume, the Indian told us that Chigmok had carried off Miss Yardely. Under pressure he told also the place for which the half-breed was making, a desolate district, little travelled—the Lake of the Little Moose. Know it?"

"Yes, I was there this morning; Stane and I have just come from there."

Again the flicker of doubt came in Ainley's eyes, and in the glow of the firelight, Helen saw a look of apprehension come on his face. It was there for but a moment, then it was gone, but in that moment the girl had seen deeply into Ainley's heart, and knew that fear was rapidly mounting there.

"Ah! you also followed Chigmok's trail, I suppose. But I was there first. I

followed a shorter route and I was at his camp waiting for him when he showed up. I saw Miss Yardely on the sledge, and as for the moment we were three against three, I felt that it was not an occasion when chances should be taken, so we fired from the bushes on the three kidnappers and shot them down. Then as there was another sledge coming on behind, I removed Miss Yardely to my own sledge, and to escape further trouble we pushed the dogs hard till we got here.... And that's about all, I think."

He fell silent for a moment, and sat there watching the two white men and the white girl who had heard the conclusion of his narrative. They remained quite still, and not one of the three spoke. Ainley evidently found the silence too much for his nerves, for after a little time had passed in profound silence, he flashed out irritably:

"Well, what do you think of my story?"

"It is a very interesting story," said Anderton at last.

A quick look of relief came into Ainley's face. "You think I was justified in shooting down those three kidnappers then?"

"On the face of things—yes! If your story is the correct one there is not the slightest doubt that you followed the right course."

"You don't doubt its correctness?" flashed Ainley.

"I have not said so," answered the policeman gravely, "but so far, as you will see, I have only your word for it."

"The two men who are with me can corroborate," replied Ainley.

"That will be helpful, of course," said Anderton. "But I am not trying the case, Ainley, I am only making the necessary inquiries that I may make my report at the Post. And I had better warn you that you may have a little trouble about this matter. Things in the North here are not like they were a few years back, when any wandering white man felt himself justified in potting any Indian whose presence he considered inimical. The administration of the Territories is very tender towards the natives under its charge, and watchful of their interests. It is bound to be. Since it expects the red man to accept its laws, it can do no less than

compel whites to honour them."

"Oh I know all that," said Ainley, a trifle contemptuously. "But you won't claim that the circumstances of this affair are anything but extraordinary."

"No," agreed the policeman, "I think they are very extraordinary."

Something significant in his tones caused Ainley to look at him questioningly. The policeman, whose face was like a mask, was staring into the fire, and did not catch the look. Ainley made as if to speak, then changed his mind and remained silent. After a little time Anderton spoke again.

"Seems a long time since we three men foregathered at Oxford."

"Yes," agreed Ainley, apparently relieved at the change of subject. "A good bit of water has gone down the Isis since then."

"And all the circumstances considered it is rather a coincidence that we three should meet like this in the wilderness."

"It certainly is dramatic," admitted Ainley. "Quite a Drury Lane drama."

"More so than you know, Ainley," answered Anderton quickly. "Stane, let Ainley have a look at that piece of paper you carry about with you."

A moment later Stane had opened the oilskin packet, and was unfolding the sheet of note-paper. Ainley watched him in amazement, and then as Stane held the paper towards him, and he bent over it, a look of consternation came on his face, and a quick oath broke from his lips. "God in heaven!"

"You had better put that paper in safety, again, Stane," said the policeman quickly. "Ainley recognized it first glance."

"It's a lie," cried Ainley. "I've never seen the thing in my life before!"

"Your tongue lies better than your face, Ainley. Just now your face told the truth. You have seen that paper before. You saw it at Oxford when you prepared yourself for the forgery that sent Stane to prison. You——"

"I'll not stand it!" cried Ainley jumping to his feet. "You are charging me with a crime of which a judge and jury found Stane guilty. It is insufferable. You can't expect any man to sit still."

"Where did you find that paper, Stane?" interrupted the policeman brusquely.

"In a copy of Jowett's Plato which Ainley had borrowed from me, and which he returned to my scout after I was arrested."

"It's a barefaced lie! A plot!" cried Ainley. "I'm surprised at you, Anderton—a representative of the law too—lending yourself to such an absurd charge. You ought to know better."

"I know more than you think, Ainley. You remember Jarlock who was in our set—?"

"Jarlock!" The name broke from Ainley in a tone of consternation.

"Yes, Jarlock! A good fellow, Jarlock. A friend who could forgive a friend his faults, who indeed could on occasion overlook a crime when he thought it was the crime of a hard-pressed man."

"What in thunder are you gassing about?" cried Ainley blusteringly.

"About Jarlock and a certain promissory note which he paid, a note which bore your name and his. Your signature was quite genuine. Jarlock's—well, Jarlock denied it, and you owned that you——"

"He told?" said Ainley. "The cur told?"

"Yes, he told me in confidence, after he had heard of Stane's denial of the charge for which he was imprisoned. You see he believed in Stane, as I did myself——"

"And you would make me the scapegoat for Stane's crime." Ainley laughed harshly. "I will see you hung first," he cried. "I——"

He broke off abruptly as a sound of yelping dogs sounded from the wood, and stared into the darkness. Anderton rose from his seat.

"I expect that will be Jean Bènard," he said quietly.

"Jean Bènard? Who is Jean Bènard?" cried Ainley.

"He is the man who Stane and I left to bring Chigmok along."

"Chigmok!"

"Yes, you see, Ainley, Chigmok was not dead as you meant him to be. He was only winged, and he was able to tell his story which was a much more interesting story than yours, and as I beg leave to think, a much more truthful one."

Ainley did not reply. He stood staring into the darkness with wild eyes. The glow of the fire revealed a terrible look on his face—the look of a man who in a single moment has seen his life go suddenly to pieces. He stood there dumb, his face working painfully, and then, as the dog-team broke into the circle of the firelight, he fell back into his seat by the fire in utter collapse, his face hidden in his hands.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TRAIL TO PARADISE

When Ainley lifted a white, tortured face, it was to find the man whom he had used as a tool, and whom, having used, he had tried to kill, seated by the fire, staring at him with his evil eyes full of hate. The others also sat watching him, all except Helen who had withdrawn to the shadow of the wood, and was walking restlessly to and fro, unable to witness further the downfall of a man whom she had known so well. For a moment there was silence, then Anderton spoke.

"Would you like to hear Chigmok's story, Ainley?"

"There is no need that I should," answered Ainley with a bitter, hopeless laugh. "I can guess it fairly well."

The mounted policeman was silent for a little time, then he remarked: "The implications of his story are rather serious for you, Ainley."

"Oh, I know it, don't I?"

"Then you admit——"

"I admit nothing! I reserve my defence—that's the proper legal thing to do, isn't it?"

"It is the wise thing, anyway," said Anderton.

"The wise thing," again the bitter mirthless laugh sounded. "When did I ever do the wise thing? I suppose I may consider myself under arrest."

"Detained on suspicion," admitted the policeman. "I think I must trouble you for your pistol and hunting-knife."

Once more Ainley laughed his bitter laugh, and unbuckling his belt threw it to the policeman. "It isn't often you arrest an old chum," he said.

"No!" agreed Anderton, "thank heaven! But you understand, Ainley, I've no option. If you were my own brother it would be the same. The oath of service is a very exacting one—'without fear or favour or affection of or toward any person. So help me God!' A man can't——"

"Oh, you needn't apologize, Anderton, I recognize the situation well enough. Don't mind if I lapse into silence do you? There are some letters I want to write."

He unbuttoned his furs and taking out a pocket-book and pencil began to write. Jean Bènard, having fed his dogs, began to prepare a meal for himself. Anderton sat by the fire, staring into the flames, reflecting on the irony of fate that had selected him of all men in the Mounted Service to be the one to arrest his whilom fellow-student. Stane had turned away and joined Helen, who still paced to and fro in the shadows. Her face, as her lover saw, was full of trouble.

"Oh!" she whispered. "It is unbearable to watch a man one has known go all to pieces!"

"It is certainly very sad," agreed Stane, out of whose heart all hatred suddenly vanished. "I wish that things were not as they are."

"Let us try to forget," said Helen with a quick glance towards the fire. "Tell me what happened when you went out of the cabin last night."

"Well," answered her lover falling into step by her side, "when I went out, I thought I was certainly going to my death."

"Ah, I knew that was in your mind!... But how did you escape?"

"It was a narrow thing. An Indian grappled me, and another man was hurrying towards me with an ax. I could not get away, and a third person appeared suddenly with a knife. I thought the knife was meant for me, but it was not. It was meant for my antagonist, and he went down and just after—my—my—saviour was killed by the second Indian, who also struck at me, knocking me senseless."

"Who was the person with the knife? Someone with Jean Bènard?"

"No," answered Stane slowly, "it was the Indian girl, Miskodeed."

"Miskodeed!" cried Helen in utter surprise.

"Yes! I did not know it at the time, but we found her afterwards, Jean Bènard and I. It was a dreadful discovery. Jean had come back to his cabin, hoping to marry her, and she had died for me!"

"Oh," sobbed Helen in a sudden accession of grief. "I would have done as much!"

"I know," answered Stane quietly.

"And last night when you were in the wood together, and I heard your voices, I was jealous of that girl; last night and at other times."

"But," said the man, a note of wonder in his voice, "there was no need, Helen. You must know that?"

"Oh yes, I know it now. But she was very beautiful and Gerald Ainley had suggested that you—that you——. And I am sure that she loved you. But not more than I, though she died for you!"

"I am very sure of that," answered Stane, earnestly, putting his arm about her and trying to comfort her.

Helen sobbed convulsively. "I shall always be grateful to her, though I was jealous of her. She saved you—for me—and she was only an Indian girl."

"She had a heart of gold," said Stane. "She came to warn me and then stayed to do what she did!" Both were silent for a long time, the girl thinking of Miskodeed in her flashing beauty, the other of Jean, bent over the cold face of his dead love, and then Helen spoke again.

"But tell me! The attack on the cabin, was that man who captured me—that man Chigmok—was he the inspirer of that?"

"I am afraid not!"

"Then it was Gerald Ainley who was to pay the price for me that the half-breed told me of, and that is why he collapsed so utterly when Chigmok came along just now?"

"Yes," answered Stane, simply.

"But why did he shoot down Chigmok's party?"

"Well, I think it was to get rid of witnesses who might rise up against him. You must remember that he would be under the impression that I was dead—killed in the attack, and that was a crime that might some day have come to light if those men had lived. The pretended rescue was a sufficient excuse for getting rid of the men who knew the instigator, particularly of the half-breed."

"Yes," said Helen thoughtfully. "An idea of that sort had occurred to me from something that Chigmok had said. But how dreadful it is to think that a man can so conspire to—to——"

She broke off without completing her words, and Stane nodded.

"There was always a crooked strain in Ainley. But it will go hard with him now, for the half-breed will be merciless. He is the man Anderton was after when he came to the cabin, and his life is forfeit on another count. He will not spare the man who bribed him to fresh crime, and then dealt treacherously with him."

He paused in his walk and looked back towards the fire where Ainley sat writing, with Chigmok glowering at him across the fire, whilst Anderton sat staring abstractedly into the glowing logs. Then a stealthy movement of the half-breed's arrested his attention. The man had thrust his hand into his furs, and as it was withdrawn Stane caught sight of something that gleamed in the firelight. In a flash he saw what was about to happen, and shouted a hurried warning.

"Look out, Ainley!"

In the same second, the half-breed, standing swiftly upright, launched himself across the fire at Ainley, knife in hand. The white man who had looked up at

Stane's sudden warning was bowled over in the snow with the half-breed on the top of him. The knife was lifted, but never struck, for in that second Anderton also had leaped, and gripping the half-breed's wrist he twisted the knife from his grasp, and flinging it away, dragged the attacker from his victim. By the time Stane had reached the scene, Ainley was gathering up some scattered papers, apparently none the worse for the encounter, whilst Anderton was admonishing the half-breed.

"You're a nice lot, Chigmok. Winged as you are, I thought you were quite safe. Now you force me to tie you up, savvy?"

He promptly proceeded to do so, whilst Ainley seated himself anew and looked up at Stane. "Thank you, Stane! The warning was more than I deserved from you!" Then he laughed bitterly. "The poor devil isn't to be blamed. I have merited what he meant to do, and you know it might have been the better way—for me."

Stane looked at him not knowing what to reply. There was something about Ainley that moved him to sudden pity. He looked like a man who had reached the end of hope and life, and his words were those of a man viewing his own end as a matter of no moment. "I'm sorry, Ainley!" said Stane awkwardly.

"So am I! But what's the use? There's no going back in life; a man can only go forward or——"

"Or what?" asked Stane.

"Or go out!" answered the other grimly.

"You are thinking of——"

"Better for you not to know, Stane. I'm going to do the straight thing for once in my life, as you will discover presently. Don't you worry about me. I am plumb at the end of things and I know it. But don't communicate any suspicions you may happen to have to Anderton. He has set up that precious duty of his as a fetish, worships it, as you heard. Think of Dandy Anderton of the old days on his knees at the shrine of duty!" He gave a little laugh, and then continued, "But I don't want to be offered on his altar, and I won't be. You can bank on that!" He

broke off and looked towards Helen, hovering on the edge of the shadows. "If you've any sense, Stane, you'll go and persuade Helen to lie down and rest, she must be worn out by now!"

Stane nodded and turned away, and after a little more walking to and fro, Helen sought the tent, whilst Stane, after a word or two with Anderton and Jean Bènard, rolled himself in his sleeping furs, though with little hope of sleep. He lay awake some time and frequently opened his eyes to see Ainley still bent over his pocket-book, but presently drowsiness came over him. The last time his eyes alighted on Ainley the latter had ceased to write and was sitting staring into the fire with sombre eyes. Then sleep overtook him completely.

He awoke in the grey dawn with Anderton's voice in his ears, and with a powdery snow driving into his eyes.

"What——"

"Ainley's gone. I left one of the Indians to watch—not that I thought there was any very real need—but the beggar slept, and Ainley evidently took the opportunity to bolt."

"Has he taken dogs?" asked Stane quickly.

"No, nor anything else that I can see. He has even left his pocket-book behind with some pages bent over and addressed to you. Here it is! Out of the wood it must be snowing like the very devil, and he can't go far. I'm going after him with Jean Bènard, and I want you to look after Chigmok and these Indians of Ainley's."

"All right, Anderton! But you won't catch Ainley, you know."

"Why not?"

"Because," was the reply given with quiet significance, "I am afraid that Ainley has gone very far indeed."

A light of comprehension came into the policeman's eyes, and he whistled thoughtfully.

"You think——" he began and stopped.

"I am quite sure that Ainley has started on the longest trail of all. Why didn't he take dogs? How long can he last in this wilderness without? And as you say outside the wood it must be snowing heavily—which way has he gone?"

"His tracks are on the backward trail——"

"To the open country—and in a blizzard. Anderton, old man, let him go. You must guess what he is about——"

"Maybe I do," answered Anderton quietly.

"And you'll only be wasting your strength for nothing."

"I hope to God you're right!" broke out the policeman vehemently. "But all the same I've got to follow him—Duty's duty—but you don't suppose I'm keen on taking an old pal to be hanged at Regina. I'm glad Ainley had the sense and grit to take the long trail on his own. But I'm bound to try and stop him; though I thank heaven that he has an hour's start. Now I must go. Keep your eye on Chigmok, he stands for my honour and credit much more than Ainley, because of his original crime. So long!"

He turned away and disappeared into the forest on the backward trail with Jean Bènard, and half an hour afterwards Helen emerged from her tent to find him bent over Ainley's pocket-book with a troubled look in his eyes.

"What is it?" she asked looking round. "Where is Mr. Ainley and where are ——"

"Ainley went away in the night. The others have gone after him. They will not catch him—at least I pray not."

"You think he will get away?"

"He has taken a trail where they are not likely to follow."

"Oh!" cried Helen with a sob. "You mean that he—that he——?"

"Yes! He hinted his intention to me last night——"

"And you did not try to stop him?" she cried almost reproachfully.

"No! Why should I? If you will think, Helen, you will find many reasons why this was the only thing for Ainley. He has left a long note in his pocket-book and a confession which clears me of that affair at Oxford. There is a note also for you —perhaps you would like to take the book and read the note to me as well."

He handed her the pocket-book and watched her as she returned to the little tent, then began to busy himself with preparations for breakfast. Half an hour later Helen emerged again. Her eyes were red with weeping.

"I have torn my note out," she said, "there it is." She held a crumpled ball of paper in her hand. "It is the saddest thing I ever read. He tells me that he was responsible for my going adrift, that he deliberately broke my paddle in order that he might find me and pose as a hero, because he wanted me to marry him and knew that I worshipped heroism. He says that he had made what reparation was possible to you and that you will be able to clear your name. He prays for our happiness, and—and—he hints at what he was about to do, because he finishes with the old cry of the gladiators—'Hail Cæsar, we who are about to die, salute thee!' Oh! It is so sad!... No eyes but mine shall ever read it—and I—shall never read it again."

She moved her hand slightly and the crumpled ball rolled into the blaze of the fire. She watched the flickering flame leap up, and die down, then she turned to her lover with streaming eyes.

"You were right to let him go, my dear! I—I pray God they will not find him."

"I also!" said Stane.

... They waited an hour, two hours, saying little, neither trying to hide from the other the anxiety each felt, and then through the mist of snow between the trees came Anderton and Jean Bènard. Stane flashed a question at the policeman, who shook his head.

"Thank God!" said Stane, whilst Jean Bènard looked at Helen.

"Zee deaths een zee snow, eet ees nodings! I know. I haf seen a man die so. Eet ees as gentle as a woman's hand."

And as he finished speaking Helen turned and went to the little tent to pray for the repose of the man who had sinned, but had made the last complete reparation.

Two days later, when the storm had blown itself out, all of them took the trail to Fort Malsun, and at the end of the first day reached a small river that was unknown to Stane.

"Where does this go to?" he asked over the camp fire at night, pointing to the frozen waterway.

"It makes a big bend and falls into the river above Fort Malsun," said Anderton.

"And the other way? Where does it come from?"

"Don't know!" answered Anderton. "Never travelled it!"

"But I haf," said Jean Bènard. "I haf been up eet fiftee miles. Two days' trail from here dere ees an Engleesh Mission, where a married priest preach zee Gospel to zee Indians. He ees vaire good man, who laugh like an angel!"

A musing look came on Stane's face, and he sat for some time in thought, then when the opportunity came he walked with Helen on the edge of the wood, conversing earnestly. A burst of light laughter reached the men by the camp fire and Jean Bènard looked round.

"What ees ze saying of your countrymen, p'liceman? 'Youth eet veel be served!' It veel snatch eet's happiness from zee jaws of death, eetself."

"Yes! And these two deserve the happiness they will get!"

When Stane and Helen returned to the fire, the former, whilst Anderton was

busy elsewhere, spent some time in conversation with Jean Bènard, who, after a few moments, cried enthusiastically:

"By gar! Dat ees a great plan, m'sieu! Zee dogs an' zee stores I would giv' dem you eef I vos not so poor a mans! But you can buy dem—wid pleasure!"

"Very well! But not a word to Anderton till morning."

"Right, m'sieu. I understand. You an' your mees you giv' zee p'licemans one beeg surprise! Eees not dat so?"

"That is it," laughed Stane.

And Anderton's surprise was complete. Whilst it was yet dark and the stars were twinkling frostily, the three dog-teams were harnessed on the river trail.

Then the policeman made the discovery that Jean Bènard's team was headed upstream.

"Hallo, Jean," he cried, "are you going to leave us?"

"Not I, M'sieu Anderton," said the trapper with a grin. "I go wid you to Fort Malsun to help you look after Chigmok an' zee odders. But I zee team sold to M'sieu Stane, an' he goes to zee Engleesh Mission."

"To the English Mission!" Then a light broke on the policeman, and he turned to where Stane and Helen stood together, with laughter in their eyes. "I could shake you—shake you both," he said. "It is a pretty game to cheat me out of the job of best man. But, Great Christopher! it's the tip-top thing to do, to marry before you go out of the wilderness."

"That missionary," laughed Stane, "is a Godsend. It would be folly not to use the opportunity he represents."

"So I should think if I were in your shoes," laughed Anderton, joining in the laughter.

"And Jean says he laughs like an angel," cried Helen gaily. "I want to see him, naturally. I have never seen an angel laugh!"

"But I have! And so has Stane," replied the policeman. "How soon do you take the trail to Paradise? We'll wait and see you start!"

"We're ready now," said Stane.

"Then it's time you were off!"

Hands were shaken, good-byes said, then Stane stepped ahead of the dogs, whilst Helen took her place at the gee-pole.

"Moosh! Moosh!" cried Jean to the dogs.

Then amid cries of well-wishes they started off on their trail to the English Mission, and overhead the lights of the Aurora, flaming suddenly, lit the trail with splendour.

THE END

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