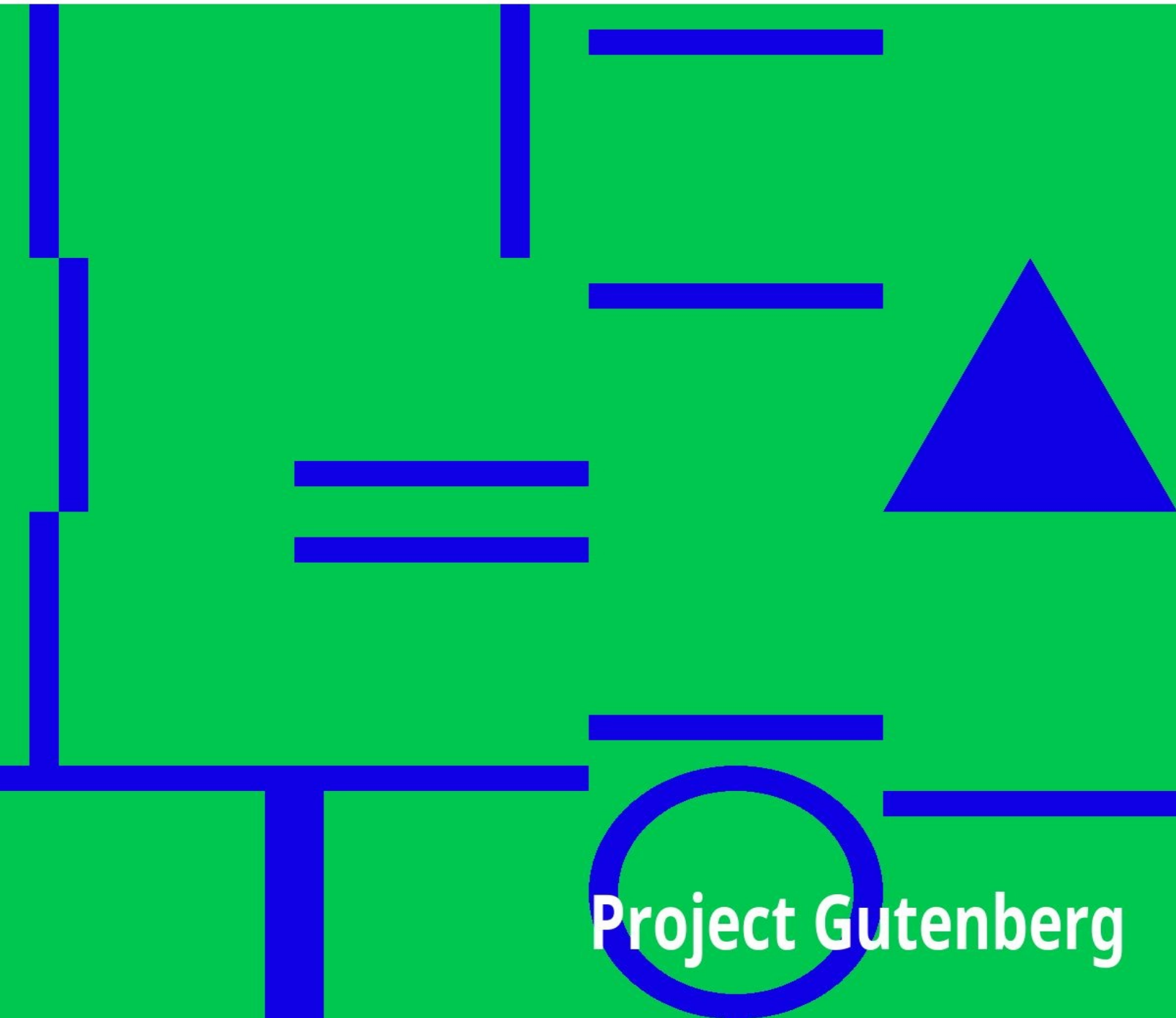
The Greater Power

Harold Bindloss



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THE GREATER POWER

BY SAME AUTHOR

The Cattle Baron's Daughter
Alton Of Somasco
Dust Of Conflict
Winston Of The Prairie
For Jacinta
Delilah Of The Snows
By Right Of Purchase
Lorimer Of The Northwest

“I AM AFRAID I’M GOING TO LOSE HIM, AFTER ALL.”
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The
GREATER POWER
BY HAROLD BINDLOSS

Author of "The Cattle Baron's Daughter,"
"By Right of Purchase," "Lorimer of the Northwest,"
"Thrice Armed," etc.
With Frontispiece in Colours by
W. HERBERT DUNTON

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THE GREATER POWER

The Greater Power

CHAPTER I

OVERBURDENED

It was winter in the great coniferous forest which rolls about the rocky hills and shrouds the lonely valleys of British Columbia. A bitter frost had dried the snow to powder and bound the frothing rivers; it had laid its icy grip upon the waters suddenly, and the sound of their turmoil died away in the depths of the rock-walled cañons, until the rugged land lay wrapped in silence under a sky of intense, pitiless blueness that seemed frozen too. Man and beast shrink from the sudden cold snaps, as they call them, in that country, and the rancher, who has sheep to lose, sits shivering in his log house through the long forenights with a Marlin rifle handy, while the famished timber wolves prowl about his clearing. Still, it is the loggers toiling in the wilderness who feel the cold snaps most, for the man who labours under an Arctic frost must be generously fed, or the heat and strength die out of him, and, now and then, it happens that provisions become scanty when no canoe can be poled up the rivers, and the trails are blocked with snow.

There were four loggers at work in a redwood forest, one January afternoon, rolling a great log with peevies and handspikes out of a chaos of fallen trunks. The Bush, a wall of sombre green, spangled here and there with frost, and impressively still, closed in about the little gap they had made. Not a sound came out of the shadowy avenues between the tremendous colonnades of towering trunks, and the topmost sprays of the cedars and Douglas firs cut motionless against the blue high above. There was no wind, and the men’s breath went straight up, a thin white vapour, into the biting air. Still, they were warm and comparatively well fed, which was a good deal to be thankful for, and three of them toiled contentedly, with now and then a glance at their companion, who realized at length that he was beaten. In fact, it was only by calling up all the resolution that was in him that this fourth man, Derrick Nasmyth, had held himself to his task since early morning, for there is no occupation which demands from man more muscular effort and physical courage than logging, as it is generally carried on in the forest of Western Canada.

Nasmyth was a tall man, apparently under thirty, and leanly muscular, as were

his companions, for those who swing the axe from dawn to dusk in that wilderness seldom put on flesh. His bronzed face was also lean, and a trifle worn. Considering his occupation, it was, perhaps, too finely chiselled, and there was a certain elusive suggestion of refinement in it. He had clear blue eyes, and the hair beneath his battered fur cap was brown. For the rest, he wore a black leather jacket with several rents in it, ragged duck trousers, and long boots. His companions were the usual Bush choppers—simple, strong-armed men of kindly nature—and Nasmyth was quite aware that they had undertaken most of his share in the work during the last few hours.

“Another heave!” said one of the woodsmen. “Hit her hard, boys, and away she goes!”

They strained sinewy backs and splendid arms. The great log rolled a trifle farther, canted, as one of them slipped a handspike under the butt of it, and landed on the skids, which were laid like railway sleepers down the slope of a steep declivity. The snow was ground down and rammed back about the skids, and the worn-out hollow gleamed a faint blue-grey in the shadow of the firs. The men made another strenuous effort as the log started, but in another moment it rushed away, and, like a toboggan, sped downwards through the forest to the river-ice below. The skids screamed beneath it, the snow flew up like smoke, and then there was a thunderous crash and stillness again. Nasmyth gasped heavily, and dropped his handspike.

“Boys,” he said, “I’m used up. I’ll go along to the shanty and get my time.”

He generally expressed himself much as his comrades did, but now his clean English intonation was a little more noticeable than usual. One of the others nodded sympathetically, as he answered:

“Well, I guess I’ve seen the trouble trailing you for quite a while. Got to let up or play out. It’s one I’ve been up against myself.” He made a vague gesture. “A little rough on you.”

Then he and one of his comrades took up a big crosscut saw, while the other swung a gleaming axe. Nasmyth walked back wearily through the silent Bush towards the camp. His back ached, his head ached, and he felt a trifle dazed. The strength seemed to have gone out of him, and he fancied that he was not very far from a physical collapse. He was glad when he reached the shanty, where, after he had shaken the snow from his dilapidated boots, he sat down by the glowing stove, and smiled wryly as he looked about him. The shed was rudely built of logs, and a row of bunks packed with swamp-grass and spruce-twigs, from some

of which there hung portions of greasy blankets, ran down one side of it. It smelt horribly of acrid tobacco and cookery, but at least, it was warm, which counted for much, and, during the last few months, Nasmyth had grown to look on it as home. He knew, also, that it would cost him something to leave it now, especially as he had nowhere else to go.

Lying back listlessly in a lounge an ingenious chopper had made out of a few branches and a couple of sacks, Nasmyth vaguely recalled the comfort of his London chambers and the great pillared smoking-room of a certain exclusive club, for he was a man acquainted with the smoother side of life. He had various gifts which were apparently of no account in British Columbia, and he had enjoyed an education that had, it seemed, unfitted him for anything strictly utilitarian. There are a great many men of his description chopping trees and driving cattle in Western Canada. Indeed, his story was one which, with slight variations, may be heard frequently in that country. Financial disaster had overtaken his family. Friends in high places had regarded him coldly, and he had been too proud to ask for favours, or to profit by those that were grudgingly offered him. That was why he had gone out to Canada and spent several years there earning his board, and, now and then, a few dollars as well, by bodily labour, until he went up into the Bush with the loggers.

For a time he had somehow contrived to hold his own with the other workers, though logging in heavy timber is one of the tasks one could almost fancy that man was never meant for, and the logger, whose overtaxed muscle fails him for a moment, is very likely to have the life crushed out of him by some ponderous, slipping trunk. Perhaps, his lack of endurance was due to the excessive strain, or the ill-cooked food, but during the last few weeks he had been conscious that a slackness was creeping over him. Once or twice the handspike or peevie had been torn from his grasp, and the lives of his comrades had been placed in peril. He had found it more and more difficult to drag himself out to his work each morning, but he had held on until that afternoon when his strength had suddenly failed him.

Nasmyth was half-asleep when the cook and the leader of the gang came in. The latter, who was a big, gaunt man with grizzled hair, stopped close by the stove and looked at him.

“Well,” said the gang leader, “what do you figure you’re doing here?”

Nasmyth explained with some difficulty, for in the Bush, men acquire a certain pride in their physical manhood, and it is never a pleasant thing to own oneself

defeated. The logger, however, nodded comprehendingly. He was a reticent, grim-faced person from Ontario, where they breed hard men, though some have, also, kindly hearts in them.

“That’s quite right. I’ve noticed it myself,” he commented. “In fact, I’ve been figuring on asking you to get out the last week or two.”

Nasmyth smiled. Like other men of his description in that country, he had become accustomed to hearing such remarks addressed to him.

“I wonder,” he answered reflectively, “why you didn’t.”

The logger appeared to consider. It was characteristic of him and the stock he sprang from that he would never have admitted that he had borne with Nasmyth as long as possible out of kindness. The thing would have hurt him.

“Well,” he said, “it seemed to me we might start you teaming, if I could have got a span or two of oxen in, but I’m most afraid I can’t get them at my figure.” He changed the subject abruptly. “Where are you heading for?”

“I don’t quite know, though I shall probably land in Victoria sooner or later. I might strike something a little easier than logging there. Still, it would be most of a week’s march before I could reach the railroad, and there’s not a ranch anywhere near the trail.”

The logger nodded. “Well,” he said, “I’d head West instead. There’ll be nothing going on along the railroad just now, and the mines are running easy, while you ought to fetch the settlement south of Butte Lake on the third day. Guess you might pick up a dollar or two in that neighbourhood, and, any way, there’s a steamer running down the West Coast to Victoria. Seems to me quite likely one of those Bush-ranchers would take you in a while, even if he didn’t exactly want a hired man; but they don’t do that kind of thing in the city.”

Nasmyth smiled. Experience had already taught him that, as a rule, the stranger who is welcomed in the cities arrives there with money in his pockets, and that it is the hard-handed men with the axes from whom the wanderer in that country is most likely to receive a kindness. Still, though he was naturally not aware of it, a great deal was to depend upon the fact that he followed the advice of the logger, who traced out a diagram on the bench upon which they sat.

“There’s an Indian trail up the river for the first four leagues,” said the logger. “Then you strike southwest, across the divide—here—and you come to the Butte River. She’s running in a little cañon, and you can’t get over ’cept where a prospector or somebody has chopped a big fir.”

The log span across a stream is an old device, and was probably primitive man's first attempt at bridge-building, though it is one frequently adopted on the Pacific slope, where a giant tree grows conveniently close to an otherwise impassable river. It was, however, important that Nasmyth should be able to find the tree.

"You know exactly where that fir is?" he asked.

"Southwest of the highest ridge of the divide. Once you're over, you'll fetch the Butte Lake in a long day's march. When d'you figure you'll start?"

"To-night," said Nasmyth, "after supper. If there's sickness of any kind hanging round me—and I feel like it—you don't want me here, and I dare say they'd take me into the hospital at Victoria. Walking's easier than logging, anyway, and it seems wiser to try for that fir in daylight."

The logger nodded as if he concurred in this, and, taking a little book from his pocket, he turned it over, wrinkling his brows while Nasmyth watched him with a smile.

"Well," he said at length, "we'll count you full time to-day, but there's the four days off when you got crushed by that redwood, and the week when you chopped your leg. Then, counting the amount for your board, that's thirty-six dollars I'm due to you."

"Not quite," answered Nasmyth. "There was the day or two after I fell through the ice and had the shivers. I'd sooner you knocked off the few dollars."

The logger was said to be a hard man, and in some respects this was certainly the case; but a faint flush crept into his grim face. Perhaps he had noticed the weariness in Nasmyth's voice or the hollowness of his cheeks.

"All right," he said awkwardly. "Jake will put you up grub for four days, and we'll call it square."

He counted out the money, which Nasmyth slipped into the receptacle inside his belt. When the logger moved away the weary man crossed over to his bunk. Nasmyth had brought his few possessions up in a canoe, and now, knowing that he could not take them all away, he turned them over with a curious smile. There were one or two ragged pairs of duck trousers stained with soil, a few old tattered shirts, and a jacket of much the same description. He remembered that he had once been fastidious about his tailoring, as he wondered when he would be able to replace the things that he left behind. Then he rolled up some of the garments and his two blankets into a pack that could be strapped upon his

shoulders, and, as he did this, his comrades came trooping in, stamping to shake the snow off their leggings.

There were about a dozen of them—simple, strenuous, brown-faced Bush-ranchers for the most part—and they ate in haste, voraciously, when the abundant but rudely served supper was laid out. Nasmyth had not much appetite, and the greasy salt pork, grindstone bread, desiccated apples, flavoured molasses, and flapjacks hot from the pan, did not tempt him. He preferred to watch his companions, and now and then his glance was a trifle wistful. He had worked and eaten with them; they had slept about him, and he knew he had their rude good-will. When his strength had begun to give way, some of them had saddled themselves with more than their share of the tasks they were engaged in, and he knew that it was possible he might not fall in with comrades of their kind again. Now that the time had come, he, who had once been welcomed at brilliant London functions, felt that it would cost him an effort to part with these rough comrades. Perhaps this was not so astonishing, for, after all, strenuous, valiant manhood and rude kindliness count for much.

The shanty was cheerfully lighted and cosily warm. Nasmyth had slept soundly there on the springy spruce-twigs, and there was at least abundance when the mealtimes came round. Now he was about to be cast adrift again to face a three days' march in the open, under the bitter frost, and what might await him at the end of it he did not know. At length, the meal was cleared away, and when the pipes were lighted, he told his comrades that he was going. They were not demonstrative in their expressions of regret, but they thrust upon him little plugs of tobacco, which could not well be replaced there, and several of them told him that, if he struck nothing he liked better, all he had to do was to present himself at this ranch or the other beside blue lake or frothing river when they went back in the spring. What was more to the purpose, they meant it.

Among those Western pines men are reared who, in point of primitive vigour, slow endurance, and the dogged courage that leads them to attempt, and usually to accomplish, the apparently impossible, are a match for any in the world, and no wanderer who limps up to their lonely ranches is turned away. Those who have no claim on them are honoured with their hospitality, and now and then one new to that country looks with wonder on their handiwork. Down all the long Pacific coast, from lonely Wrangel, wrapped in the Northern snow, to Shasta in the South, it is written on hewn-back forest, rent hillside, and dammed river. The inhabitants are subduing savage Nature; but, as time will surely show, their greatest achievement is the rearing of fearless men.

Though it cost him an effort, Nasmyth contrived to smile as he shook hands with the loggers. Then he set his lips tight as, with his pack strapped on his shoulders, he opened the door and looked out at the dimly shining snow. It was only natural that he hesitated for a moment. After all, brutal as the toil had been, he at least knew what he was leaving behind, and his heart sank as he drew the door to. The cold struck through him to the bone, though there was not a breath of air astir, and the stillness was almost overwhelming. The frost cramped his muscles and drove the courage out of him, and, as he plodded down the trail, he heard Jacques, the French-Canadian cook, tuning his battered fiddle. A little burst of laughter broke through the twanging of the strings, and Nasmyth closed one hand hard as he strode on faster into the darkness. There was as much of the animal in him as there is in most of us, and he longed for the cheerful light and the warmth of the stove, while one learns the value of human companionship when the Frost King lays his grip on that lonely land. He was once more homeless—an outcast—and it was almost a relief to him when at length the twanging of the fiddle was lost in the silence of the pines.

The trees rose about him, towering high into the soft darkness in serried ranks, and the snow gleamed a cold blue-grey under them. Not a twig stirred; the tall spires were black, and motionless, and solemn, and he felt that their stateliness emphasized his own feebleness and inconsequence. In the meanwhile, though the snow was loose and frost-dried, it was not much above his ankles, and the trail was comparatively good. It seemed to him advisable to push on as fast as possible, for he had only four days' provisions, and he was not sure of his strength. There was no doubt as to what the result would be if it failed him in the wilderness that lay between him and the settlement.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAIL

A half-moon rose above the black tops of the pines, and a faint light, which the snow flung back, filtered down between the motionless branches upon the narrow trail that wound sinuously in and out among fallen trunks and thickets draped with withered fern, for the Siwash Indians passed that way when the salmon came up the rivers, and the path an Indian makes is never straight. Over and over again, an Indian will go around an obstacle through which the Bush-rancher would hew a passage. This is essentially characteristic of both, for the primitive peoples patiently fit their lives to their environment, while the white man grapples with unfavourable conditions, and resolutely endeavours to alter them.

Until daylight Nasmyth made a tolerable pace. He had been troubled with a curious lassitude and an unpleasant dizziness, but walking is considerably easier than rolling ponderous logs, and he knew that it was advisable for him to push on as fast as possible. At length, the dawn broke high up in a dingy grey sky, and he stopped to build a fire. It did not take long to boil a can of strong green tea, and to prepare a piece of doughy bread, with a little salt pork, for his breakfast. Then he wrapped one of his blankets around him and took out his pipe. He did not remember how long he sat there, but it was clear daylight when he noticed that the fire was burning out, and, somewhat to his annoyance, he felt curiously reluctant to get up again.

Though it cost him an effort, he rose, and stood a minute or two shivering in the bitter wind, which now set the dark firs sighing. He could see the trees roll upwards before him in sombre ranks until their topmost sprays cut in a thin filigree very high up against the sky, and he knew that he must now leave the easy trail and cross the big divide. When he set out he was a little annoyed to find that the pack-straps hurt his shoulders, and that one of his boots galled his foot. Knee-boots are not adapted for walking long distances, but the only other ones that Nasmyth possessed were so dilapidated that he had left them behind.

He went up for several hours through withered fern and matted undergrowth, and over horrible tangles of fallen tree-trunks, some of which were raised high above the snow on giant splintered branches. The term “virgin forest” probably conveys very little to the average Englishman, since the woods with which he is acquainted are, for the most part, cleaned and dressed by foresters; but Nature rules untrammelled in the pine-bush of the Pacific slope, and her waste material lies piled in tremendous ruin until it rots away. There are forests in that country, through which a man accustomed to them can scarcely make a league in a day. Still, Nasmyth crossed the divide, struggling against a bitter wind, and then went down the other side, floundering over fallen branches, and smashing through thickets of undergrowth and brakes of willows. He wanted to find the river, and, more especially, the tree that bridged it, as soon as possible. It was, however, noon when he reached the river, and it frothed and roared a hundred feet below him in a smooth walled cañon, which had apparently kept the frost out, for there were only strips of crackling ice in the eddies.

It was clearly out of the question for him to get down to the river, even if he had wished to make the descent, and without stopping to make another fire, he plodded along the bank until the afternoon was almost spent. There were a good many fallen trees, as he discovered to his cost, since each one had to be painfully clambered over, but none of them spanned the chasm. Then, as his foot was becoming very sore, he decided to camp where a big cedar lay across a little ravine that rent the bank. It promised to afford him a partial shelter. He had no axe, but he tore off an armful or two of the thinner branches, with the twigs attached to them, to form a bed, and then, crawling down to the river, filled his smoke-blackened can and came back wearily to make a fire. Man needs very little in those solitudes, but there are two things he must have, and those are food to keep the strength in him, and warmth, though there are times when he finds it singularly difficult to make the effort to obtain them. The most unpleasant hour of the long day of persistent toil is often the one when worn-out muscle and jaded intelligence must be forced to the task of providing the evening meal and shelter for the night.

Nasmyth ate his supper, so far as it went, voraciously, but with a prudent check upon his appetite, for he had set out with only four days’ provisions, and he could not find the tree. When he had eaten, he took out his pipe, and crouched a while beside the fire, shivering, in spite of the blankets wrapped about him. The heat dies out of the man who has marched for twenty hours, as those who have done it know. In the meanwhile, darkness crept up from the east, and the pines faded into sombre masses that loomed dimly against a leaden sky. A mournful

wailing came out of the gloom, and the smoke whirled about the shivering man in the nipping wind, while the sound of the river's turmoil and the crash of stream-driven ice drifted up out of the cañon. Nasmyth listened drowsily, while his thoughts wandered back to the loggers' shanty. He could see the men with bronzed faces sitting smoking about the snapping stove, two or three of them dancing, while Jacques coaxed music full of fire from his battered fiddle.

Then his thoughts went farther back to the chambers that he had once occupied in London, and he saw himself and Frobisher, who shared them with him, sitting at a little table daintily furnished with choice glass and silver covers. There were big candles upon it—Frobisher, who was a fastidious man, had insisted upon them. After that, the artistically furnished room faded out of his memory, and he recalled a larger one in which he had now and then dined. He could picture the wine, and lights, and costly dresses, the smiling faces of those who had at that time expected a great deal from him, and he saw the girl who usually sat at his side. She had a delicate beauty and a dainty mind, and he had sometimes fancied they might be drawn closer when he had made his mark, which in those days appeared a very probable thing. He wondered vaguely what she was doing then, or if she ever thought of him. After all, as she had not answered the one letter which he wrote, it scarcely seemed likely that she remembered him. Those who fail, he reflected, are soon forgotten.

Then, as he was falling forward into the fire, he roused himself, and smiled wryly. He was once more an outcast, shivering, half-asleep in the wilderness, worn out, ragged, and aching, with a foot that was now distinctly painful. It is, however, fortunate for such men as he, and others among the heavily burdened, that the exhaustion of the body has its deadening effect upon the mind. Rolling the blankets round him, he lay down on the cedar branches and went to sleep.

He did not hear the timber wolves howling in the blackness of the night, though several that got wind of him flitted across the ravine after the fire burned low, and, when at length he awakened, it was with the fall of a wet flake upon his face, and he saw the dim dawn breaking through a haze of sliding snow. It seemed a little warmer, and, as a matter of fact, it was so, for the cold snaps seldom last very long near the coast; but the raw damp struck through him as he raked the embers of the fire together. Again he felt singularly reluctant to start when he had finished breakfast, and he found that he could hardly place one foot upon the ground; but haste was imperative now, so he set off limping, with the pack-straps galling his shoulders cruelly. He also felt a little dizzy, but he pushed on all that day beside the river through a haze of snow without coming upon the

tree. The dusk was creeping up across the forest when at length the river emerged from the cañon, and he ventured out upon the ice in a slacker pool. The ice heaved and crackled under him with the pulsations of the stream, but he got across, and roused himself with difficulty for the effort to make another fire. He was an hour gathering fuel, and then, after a sparing supper, he lay down in his wet clothing.

The snow that eddied about him whitened his spongy blankets, but he got a little sleep, and, awakening, found the fire out. He tried to light it and failed. His fingers seemed useless. He was cramped and chilled all through, and there was in one hip-joint the gnawing pain that those who sleep on wet ground are acquainted with. Sometimes it goes away when one gets warmed up, but just as often it does not. Nasmyth, who found it a difficult matter to straighten himself, ate a little damp bread, and then, strapping his pack upon his shoulders, stumbled on into the forest. He afterwards fancied it did not snow very much that day, but he was not sure of anything except that he fell over many rotten branches, and entangled himself frequently in labyrinths of matted willows. Night came and he went to sleep without a fire. He contrived to push on next day, walking during most of it half asleep. Indeed, now and then he would stagger along for minutes after consciousness of what he was doing had deserted him, for there are men in that Bush, at least, who know what it is to stop with suddenly opened eyes on the verge of a collapse, and find that they have wandered from the path—only in Nasmyth's case there was no path at all.

He was never sure whether it was that day or the next when, floundering through an undergrowth of willows, he came upon a break in the forest that was covered with sawn-off stumps. As he made for it, he fell into a split-rail fence, some of which he knocked down until he could climb over it. There was a faint smell of burning fir-wood in the air, and it was evident to him that there was a house somewhere in the vicinity. The snow was not deep in the clearing, and he plodded through it, staggering now and then, until he came to a little slope, and fell down it headlong. This time he did not seem able to get up again, and it was fortunate that, when he flung the split fence down, the crash made by the falling rails rang far through the silence of the woods.

While Nasmyth lay in the slushy snow, a girl came out from among the firs across the clearing, and walked down the little trail that led to a well. She was tall, and there was something in her face and the way she held herself which suggested that she was not a native of the Bush, though everything she wore had been made by her own fingers—that is, except the little fur cap, whose glossy

brown enhanced the lustre of her hair. This was of a slightly lighter tint, and had gleams of ruddy gold in it. Her eyes were large and brown, and there was a reposeful quietness in the face, which suggested strength. It was significant that her hands were a trifle hard, as well as shapely, and that her wrists were red.

She came to the top of the slope near the foot of which Nasmyth, who had now raised himself on one elbow, lay, and though this might well have startled her, she stood quietly still, looking down on him. Nasmyth raised himself a trifle further, and blinked at her stupidly, and she noticed that his face was drawn and grey.

“I heard the rails fall,” she said. “What are you doing there?”

It did not appear strange to Nasmyth that she should speak in well-modulated English, for there are probably as many insular English as Canadians in parts of that country. Besides, he was scarcely in a condition to notice a point of that kind just then.

“I think I upset the fence,” he answered. “You see, I couldn’t get over. Then I must have fallen down.”

It naturally struck the girl as significant that he did not seem sure of what had happened, but the explanation that would have suggested itself to anyone fresh from England did not occur to her. There was not a saloon or hotel within eight or nine miles of the spot.

“Can you get up?” she asked.

“I’ll try,” said Nasmyth; but the attempt he made was not a complete success, for, although he staggered to his feet, he reeled when he stood upon them, and probably would have fallen had she not run down the slope and taken hold of him.

“You can rest on me,” she said, laying a firm and capable hand upon his shoulder.

With her assistance, Nasmyth staggered up the slope, and there were afterwards times when he remembered the next few minutes with somewhat mixed feelings. Just then, however, he was only glad to have someone to lean upon, and her mere human presence was a relief, since Nature had come very near to crushing the life out of him.

“This is your ranch?” he inquired, looking at her with half-closed eyes, when at length she moved away from him, a pace or two, and, gasping a little, stood still,

beneath a colonnade of towering firs.

“It is,” she said simply; and a moment or two later he saw a little house of logs half hidden among the trees.

They reached it in another minute, and, staggering in, he sank into the nearest chair. A stove snapped and crackled in the middle of the little log-walled room, which in spite of its uncovered, split-boarded floor, seemed to possess a daintiness very unusual in the Bush. He did not, however, know what particular objects in it conveyed that impression, for the whole room seemed to be swinging up and down; but he was definitely conscious of a comforting smell of coffee and pork, which came from the stove. He sat still, shivering, and blinking at the girl, while the water trickled from his tattered clothing. He fancied from the patter on the shingle roof, that it was raining outside.

“I wonder if you would let me camp in the barn to-night,” he said.

The girl’s eyes had grown compassionate as she watched him, for there was a suggestive greyness in his face. It was evident to her that he was utterly worn-out.

“Go in there,” she said, pointing to a door. “You will find some dry clothes. Put them on.”

Nasmyth staggered into a very small room, which had a rude wooden bunk in it, and with considerable difficulty sloughed off his wet things and put on somebody else’s clothing. Then he came back and sank into a deer-hide lounge at the table. The girl set a cup of coffee, as well as some pork and potatoes, before him. He drank the coffee, but finding, somewhat to his astonishment, that he could scarcely eat, he lay back in his chair and looked at the girl deprecatingly with half-closed eyes.

“Sorry I can’t do the supper justice. I think I’m ill,” he said.

Then his head fell back against the deer-hide lounge, and, while the girl watched him with a natural consternation, he sank into sleep or unconsciousness. She was not sure which it was, but he certainly looked very ill, and, being a capable young woman, she remembered that within the next hour, the weekly mail-carrier would strike a trail which passed within a mile of the ranch. Rising, she touched Nasmyth’s shoulder.

“Stay there, and don’t try to get up until I come back,” she commanded in a kindly tone.

Nasmyth, as she had half-expected, said nothing, and, slipping into another room—there were three in the house—she returned, wearing a jacket of coarse fur, and went quietly out into the rain. It was dark now, but she had, as it happened, not long to wait for the mail-carrier.

“I want you to call at Gordon’s ranch, Dave,” she told the man. “Tell him he is to come along as soon as he can. There’s a stranger here who seems very ill.”

The mail-carrier would have asked questions, but she cut him short.

“How long will it be before you can tell Gordon?” she asked.

“Well,” answered the man reflectively, “I’m heading right back for the settlement, but it’s a league to Gordon’s, anyway. He could be here in two hours, if he starts right off, and, considering what the trail’s like, that’s blamed fast travelling.”

He disappeared into the darkness, and the girl went back to the ranch. It was, perhaps, significant that she should feel sure that the man she had sent for would obey the summons, but she grew anxious while the two hours slipped by. At last, a man opened the door and walked in, with the water dripping from the long outer garment he flung off. He was a young man, with a bronzed face and keen grey eyes, and he had swung the axe, as one could see by his lithe carriage and the hardness of his hands, but there was something professional in his manner as he stooped down, regarding Nasmyth closely while he gripped the stranger’s wrist. Then he turned to the girl.

“He’s very sick,” Gordon said. “Guess you have no objections to my putting him in your father’s bunk. First, we’ll warm the blankets.”

The girl rose to help him, and—for she was strong—they stripped off most of Nasmyth’s garments and lifted him into the bunk in the next room. Then Gordon sent her for the blankets, and, when he had wrapped them round Nasmyth, he sat down and looked at her.

“Pneumonia,” he said. “Anyway, in the meanwhile, I’ll figure on it as that, though there’s what one might call a general physical collapse as well. Where did he come from?”

“I don’t know,” said the girl.

“Your father won’t be back for a week?”

“It’s scarcely likely.”

The man appeared to reflect for a moment or two. Then he made a little expressive gesture.

“Well,” he said, “it’s up to us to do what we can. First thing’s a poultice. I’ll show you how to fix it; but while we’re here, I guess we might as well run through his things.”

“Is that needful?” and the girl glanced at Nasmyth compassionately.

“Well,” said the man with an air of reflection, “it might be. This thing’s quick. Leaves you or wipes you out right away. There’s very little strength in him.”

He turned out the pockets of Nasmyth’s clothes, which were, however, empty of anything that might disclose his identity.

“Not a scrap of paper, not a dollar; but I guess that wasn’t always the case with him—you can see it by his face,” he said. Then he laughed. “He’s probably like a good many more of us—not very anxious to let folks know where he came from.”

The girl, though he did not notice it, winced at this; but next moment he touched her shoulder.

“Get some water on,” he said. “After we’ve made the poultice, I’ll take charge of him. We may get Mrs. Custer round in the morning.”

The girl merely smiled and went out with him. She was aware that it was in some respects an unusual thing which she was doing, but that did not greatly trouble her. They are not very conventional people in that country.

CHAPTER III

WAYNEFLEET'S RANCH

Though he afterwards endeavoured to recall them, Nasmyth had never more than a faint and shadowy recollection of the next few days. During most of the time, he fancied he was back in England, and the girl he had left there seemed to be hovering about him. Now and then, she would lay gentle hands upon him, and her soothing touch would send him off to sleep again; but there was a puzzling change in her appearance. He remembered her as slight in figure—sylph-like he had sometimes called her—fastidious and dainty, and always artistically dressed. Now, however, she seemed to have grown taller, stronger, more reserved, and, as he vaguely realized, more capable, while her garments were of a different and coarser fashion. What was still more curious, she did not seem to recognize her name, though he addressed her by it now and then. He pondered over the matter drowsily once or twice, and then ceased to trouble himself about it. There were several other things that appeared at least as incomprehensible.

After a long time, however, his senses came back to him, and one evening, as he lay languidly looking about him in his rude wooden bunk, he endeavoured to recall what had passed since he left the loggers' camp. The little room was comfortably warm, and a plain tin lamp burned upon what was evidently a home-made table. There was nothing, except a rifle, upon the rough log walls, and nothing upon the floor, which was, as usual, rudely laid with split boards, for dressed lumber is costly in the Bush. Looking through the open door into the general living-room, which was also lighted, he could see a red twinkle beneath the register of the stove, beside which a woman was sitting sewing. She was a hard-featured, homely person in coarsely fashioned garments, which did not seem to fit her well, and Nasmyth felt slightly disconcerted when he glanced at her, for she was not the woman whom he had expected to see. Then his glance rested on a man, who had also figured in his uncertain memories, and now sat not far away from him. The man, who was young, was dressed in plain blue duck, and, though Nasmyth noticed that his hands were hard, and that he had

broken nails, there was something in his bronzed face that suggested mental capacity.

“I suppose,” the sick man said, “you are the doctor who has evidently taken care of me?”

He was not quite himself yet, and he spoke clean colloquial English, without any trace of the Western accentuation he usually considered it advisable to adopt, though, as a matter of fact, the accent usually heard on the Pacific slope is not unduly marked. The other man naturally noticed it, and laughed somewhat curiously.

“I have some knowledge of medicine and surgery,” Gordon answered. “Now and then I make use of it, though I don’t, as a rule, get a fee.” Then he looked rather hard at Nasmyth. “Quite a few of us find it advisable to let our professions go when we come to this country.”

Nasmyth nodded, for this was a thing he had discovered already. Many of the comrades he had made there were outcasts—men outside the pale—and they were excellent comrades, too.

“Well,” he said, “I have evidently been very sick. How did I get here? I don’t seem to remember.”

“Miss Waynefleet found you lying in the snow in the clearing.”

“Ah!” said Nasmyth—“a tall girl with a quiet voice, big brown eyes, and splendid hair?”

Gordon smiled. “Well,” he said, “that’s quite like her.”

“Where is she now?” asked Nasmyth; and though he was very feeble still, there was a certain expectancy in his manner.

“In the barn, I believe. The working oxen have to be fed. It’s very probable that you will see her in the next half-hour. As to your other question—you were very sick indeed—pneumonia. Once or twice it seemed a sure thing that you’d slip through our fingers. Where were you coming from when you struck the clearing?”

Nasmyth, who had no reason for reticence, and found his mind rapidly growing clearer, briefly related what had led him to set out on his journey through the Bush, and his companion nodded.

“It’s very much as I expected,” he said. “They paid you off before you left that

logging camp?”

“They did,” said Nasmyth, who was pleased to recall the fact. “I had thirty-two dollars in my belt.”

His companion looked at him steadily. “When you came here you hadn’t a belt on. There was not a dollar in your pockets, either.”

This was naturally a blow to Nasmyth. He realized that it would probably be several weeks at least before he was strong enough to work again, and he had evidently been a charge upon these strangers for some little time. Still, he did not for a moment connect any of them with the disappearance of his belt. He was too well acquainted with the character of the men who are hewing the clearings out of the great forests of the Pacific slope. As a matter of fact, he never did discover what became of his belt.

“Well,” he said, “I suppose I forgot to put it on, one of those mornings on the march. Still, it’s not very astonishing that the thing should worry me. I can’t expect to stay on at this ranch. When do you think I can get up and set out again?”

“How long have you been out here?”

“Been out?”

Gordon laughed. “You’re from the Old Country—that’s plain enough.”

“Several years.”

“In that case I’m not going to tell you we’re not likely to turn you out until you have some strength in you. I believe I’m speaking for Miss Waynefleet now.”

Nasmyth lay still and considered this. It was, at least, quite evident that he could not get up yet, but there were one or two other points that occurred to him.

“Does the ranch belong to Miss Waynefleet?” he inquired. “She can’t live here alone.”

“She runs the concern. She has certainly a father, but you’ll understand things more clearly when you see him. He’s away in Victoria, which is partly why Mrs. Custer from the settlement is now in yonder room. Her husband is at present building a trestle on the Dunsmore track. I come up here for only an hour every day.”

Nasmyth afterwards discovered that this implied a journey of three or four miles either way over a very indifferent trail, but at the moment he was thinking

chiefly of Miss Waynefleet, who had given him shelter.

“You practise at the settlement?” he asked.

“Yes,” said his companion dryly, “chopping big trees. I’ve a ranch there. Still, I don’t know that you could exactly call it practising. By this time, I’ve acquired a certain proficiency in the thing.”

Nasmyth fancied that he must have gone to sleep soon after this, for when he opened his eyes again there was no sign of the doctor, and a girl was quietly moving about the room. She sat down, when she saw that he was awake, and looked at him with a little smile, and it was only natural that Nasmyth should also look at her. It struck him once more that she had wonderful hair. In the lamp-light, it seemed to glow with curious red-gold gleams. She had also quiet brown eyes, and a face that was a trifle darkened by sun and wind. He guessed that she was tall. She looked so as she moved about the room with a supple gracefulness that had a suggestion of strength in it. That was all he noticed in detail, for he was chiefly conscious of the air of quiet composure that characterized her. He was a trifle fanciful that night, and, while he looked her, he felt as he had sometimes felt when he stood at sunset in the silence of the shadowy Bush, or gazed down into the depths of some still river pool. Only her gleaming red-gold hair and her full red lips slightly counteracted this impression. There was in them at least a hint of fire and passion.

“You are much better,” she said, and her softly modulated voice fell pleasantly on his ears. He contrived to raise himself a trifle.

“I believe I am,” he answered, “In any case, I know I owe it to you that I’m alive at all. Still”—and he hesitated—“I can’t help feeling a bit uncomfortable. You see, I have really no claim on you.”

Laura Waynefleet laughed. “Did you expect me to leave you out in the snow?”

“If you had, I couldn’t have complained. There wasn’t the least obligation upon you to look after a penniless stranger.”

“Ah!” said the girl, with a little smile which was curiously expressive, “after all, many of us are in one sense strangers in the Bush.”

Nasmyth pondered over this, for, in view of what he had noticed in her voice and manner, he fancied he understood her meaning.

“Well,” he said, “it’s evident that I can do nothing in return for all your kindness, except take myself off your hands as soon as possible. That’s partly why I’m

particularly anxious to get better."

He stopped a moment, with a faint flush in his hollow face. "It sounds very ungracious, doesn't it? But, after all, it's sense. Besides, I scarcely feel up to expressing myself very neatly."

The girl moved across the room, and gently pressed him down again on the pillow.

"Go to sleep again at once," she said.

Nasmyth did as he was bidden, which, since he felt that he wanted to lie awake and watch her, was in one way significant. As a matter of fact, what Laura Waynefleet considered advisable was usually done. Nasmyth's head was clearer next morning, and, during the week that followed, he grew stronger rapidly, until one night, as he sat beside the stove, he realized that he could, in all probability, set out again on his journey in a day or two. While he talked to Laura Waynefleet, there were footsteps outside, and she ran towards the door as a man came into the room. Nasmyth fancied the newcomer was her father, for he was grey-haired and elderly, but he did not look in the least like a Bush-rancher. Beneath the fur coat, which he flung off when he had kissed his daughter, he was dressed as one who lived in the cities, though his garments were evidently far from new. He was tall, but his spareness suggested fragility, and his face, which emphasized this impression, had a hint of querulous discontent in it.

"I didn't expect to get through until to-morrow, but they've altered the running of the stage," he said. "Wiston drove me up from the settlement, and said he'd send my things across to-morrow. I was glad to get out of Victoria. The cooking and accommodation at the hotel I stayed at were simply disgusting."

Nasmyth glanced at the speaker in amused astonishment, for the Bush-ranchers of the Pacific slope are not, as a rule, particular. They can live on anything, and sleep more or less contentedly among dripping fern, or even in a pool of water, as, indeed, they not infrequently have to do, when they go up into the forests surveying, or undertake a road-making contract. Laura Waynefleet directed her father's attention to her convalescent guest.

"This is Mr. Nasmyth," she said. "You will remember I mentioned him in my letter."

Waynefleet made the young man a little inclination that was formally courteous. "I am glad to see you are evidently recovering," he said. "I hope they have made you at home here." Then he turned to his daughter. "If you could get me some

supper——”

Laura busied herself about the stove, while Waynefleet sat down and talked to Nasmyth about generalities. Waynefleet appeared to be a politician, and he criticized the Government, which, in his opinion, was neglecting the Bush-ranchers shamefully. It was evident that he considered it the duty of the Government to contribute indirectly towards the support of settlers. Then the supper was laid out. As he ate fastidiously, he made a few faintly sardonic observations about the cookery, and, after the girl had brought in a pot of coffee, he frowned at the cup he put down.

“There is one place in Victoria where you can get coffee, as it ought to be, but this is merely roasted wheat,” he said. “You will excuse me from drinking any more of it. As you have probably discovered, Mr. Nasmyth, one has to put up with a good deal in this country. It is in many respects a barbarous land.”

Nasmyth saw the faint flush in Laura Waynefleet’s face, and said nothing. He fancied that he knew the establishment in Victoria to which Waynefleet referred, but it was not one which he had ever visited, or which the smaller Bush-ranchers usually frequented.

Soon after supper, Nasmyth withdrew to the bed, which he had insisted on preparing for himself in the loft above the stables, and it was next day when he spoke to Laura Waynefleet alone.

“I can’t abuse your kindness any longer,” he said. “I must go away.”

The girl looked at him quietly. “You are far from strong yet, and—it must be mentioned—there was not a dollar in your pockets.”

“That is certainly the case;” and Nasmyth flushed a little. “Still, I can get as far as the settlement, and I dare say somebody, who won’t be too hard on me at first, may want a hand. I am really rather a good chopper.”

Laura smiled as she glanced at his face, but it was not its hollowness she was thinking of. Nasmyth had not the appearance of the average chopper.

“Well,” she said, “perhaps you had better see my father. I think he has something to say to you.”

She left him, and, half an hour later, Waynefleet came up to Nasmyth, who was sunning himself outside the ranch-house. Like many other houses in that country, it stood beneath a few great firs on the edge of a desolate clearing, round which the primeval forest rose in an unbroken wall. Behind it, and a little

farther back among the trees, was the rude barn, built of big notched logs, and roofed with cedar shingles. In front there lay some twenty acres of cleared land, out of which rose the fir-stumps, girdled with withered fern, for a warm wind from the Pacific had swept the snow away. Beyond that, in turn, and outside the split-rail fence, rows of giant trunks lay piled in the tremendous ruin usually called the “slashing.” Some day, these would be sawn up and burnt, and the clearing driven farther back into the Bush. The little gap into which the sunlight shone, however, had been hewn out at the cost of several years of strenuous labour, and Nasmyth, who was aware of this, felt inclined to smile as the man who owned it strolled up to him. It was a little difficult to imagine that he had had any great share in the making of that clearing.

Waynefleet was dressed in duck, but it was whole and unsoiled, and Nasmyth made his own deductions from a glance at the delicate hands. As a rule, Waynefleet’s expression was discontented and querulous, but for the time being his manner was gracious. In fact, he was generally more or less courteous to Nasmyth.

“Miss Waynefleet tells me you are thinking of going away,” said the owner of the ranch.

Nasmyth replied that he intended to leave the ranch, and was explaining that he felt he had already abused his host’s kindness, when Waynefleet cut him short.

“We have been glad to have you here,” he said; “in fact, I have been wondering if you might feel disposed to stay. It is probably evident to you that I cannot do all that is necessary about this place with one pair of hands.”

Nasmyth knew, from what he had seen on other and larger ranches, that one man could do the work, though he felt that it was more than one could reasonably have expected from Waynefleet. It was, however, clear that somebody did a great deal, and he fancied that it was the rancher’s daughter.

“Well,” continued Waynefleet, “I am disposed to spend a little upon the ranch. They are talking of building a pulp-mill near the settlement. That will make land more valuable, and probably lead to a demand for produce. With that in view, I wish to raise a larger crop, and I’m open to hire somebody.” He made a little gesture. “My strength scarcely permits me to undertake any severe physical effort, and I may confess that my faculty is rather that of administration. Now I will make you an offer.”

Nasmyth considered it gravely. As it happened, he was feeling sorry for the rancher’s daughter, and it was this fact chiefly which led him to come to terms

with the man, since it seemed to him that there were tasks the girl must shrink from—tasks of which he could relieve her. Though he was quite aware that when his strength came back, he could probably earn more than Waynefleet offered him, he accepted the chance to stay at the ranch. Moreover, the varied work was likely to be much easier than logging.

“It’s a bargain. I’ll make a start now, and haul one or two of those logs out with the oxen,” he said. “Still, I’m afraid you must not expect too much from me for a week or two.”

Waynefleet made no objections. There was, as a matter of fact, a great deal to be done, and Nasmyth went back to his new quarters over the stable almost too weary to hold himself upright that night. He, however, gathered strength rapidly, and a few days later he was chopping a great tree, standing on a narrow plank notched into the trunk of it several feet from the ground as he swung the axe, when the man who had instructed Miss Waynefleet how to nurse him came up the trail. Gordon sat down on a log close by, and looked at Nasmyth.

“I was coming round to make sure I was quite through with your case, but it’s tolerably evident you have no more use for me,” he said. “Stopping here?”

Nasmyth said he was, and Gordon nodded.

“Well,” he said, “in several ways I’m rather glad. It’s going to make things easier for Miss Waynefleet. Guess you understand what I meant when I said she ran the ranch?”

Nasmyth said he thought he did, and then, with a certain diffidence, he changed the subject.

“You must have spent a good deal of time looking after men—professionally,” he said.

Gordon laughed in a somewhat curious fashion. “We’ll let that go. In one sense, I’ve dropped my profession. I had to, and it’s scarcely likely that I shall take it up again.”

“I wonder,” said Nasmyth reflectively, “if it’s admissible for me to mention that I had fancied something of the kind. You see, in the Bush, I have naturally come across a good many men who have turned their backs upon the cities.”

Gordon made a little gesture. “It’s a sure thing you’ll hear a good deal about me at the settlement, where, though the boys don’t cast it up to me, I’m credited with having killed somebody back East, and as I’ve had an idea that I could hit it

rather well with you, I'd sooner tell you the thing myself. Well, I was making my mark in a big city, several years ago, when I lost my head. When success comes too quickly, it's a thing you're rather apt to do. The trouble is that you have usually to face the results of it."

He broke off for a moment with a little wry smile. "In my case they were serious. There was a woman of hysterical temperament with a diseased imagination. I was overworked and a trifle overwrought, and had a glass of brandy too much at a certain committee lunch. Then there was a rather delicate operation in a hospital, and though I'm not sure yet that I blundered, it was suggested that I did, and the thing was complicated by what the woman said when the committee took it up. It didn't matter that the patient recovered, for when he took action against the woman, the thing made a sensation in the Eastern papers."

He looked at Nasmyth with a question in his eyes.

"Now," he said, "you more or less understand my reasons for ranching here. How's it going to affect you?"

Nasmyth gazed reflectively towards the East. "I think," he replied, "there are more of us who have left a good deal behind back yonder. Perhaps it's fortunate that the thing is possible."

Then he swung his axe again, and Gordon, who saw Waynefleet approaching, strolled away towards the ranch-owner.

CHAPTER IV

LAURA WAYNEFLEET'S WISH

It was a hot summer evening, and a drowsy, resinous fragrance stole out of the shadowy bush when Nasmyth, who had now spent six months at Waynefleet's ranch, lay among the wineberries by the river-side. Across the strip of sliding water the sombre firs rose in a great colonnade from the grey rock's crest, with the fires of sunset blazing behind their wide-girthed trunks. The river was low and very clear, and the sound of it seemed to intensify the solemn stillness of the Bush. Nasmyth had come there to fish, after a long day of tolerably arduous labour, but he did not expect much success, though the trout rise freely just after sunset in those rivers. Indeed, he had almost forgotten that the rod and net lay near his side, for his employer's daughter sat on a fallen cedar not far away from him.

She had laid her hat aside, and, as it happened, two humming-birds that flashed, bejewelled, in a ray of ruddy light hung poised on invisible wings about the clustered blossoms of an arrow-bush that drooped above her head. She was, however, not looking at them, but watching Nasmyth with thoughtful eyes. Everything she wore was the work of her own fingers, but the light print dress became her curiously well.

"You have been here six months now," she said.

"I have," answered Nasmyth, with a little laugh. "I almost venture to think I do you credit, in view of the state I was in when I reached the ranch. If you hadn't taken me in hand, two or three days would probably have been the length of my stay."

The girl made no disclaimer. She was one who admitted facts, even when they did not chime with her wishes, and she still regarded Nasmyth thoughtfully. He certainly did her credit, so far as his physical appearance went, for his strength had fully come back to him, and, as he lay among the wineberries in an easy pose, his thin duck garments displayed the fine proportions of a figure that had

been trained almost to muscular perfection by strenuous labour. The light of the paling sunset was on his bronzed face, and it revealed the elusive delicacy that characterized it. Nasmyth was certainly a well-favoured man, but there were respects in which his companion was not altogether satisfied with him. She had, as she admitted, restored him to bodily health, but, after all, that was only going so far, and she felt it was possible that she might accomplish a little more, though there was no very evident reason why she should wish to do so. Still, she was conscious of the wish.

“I was wondering,” she said, “how long you would be content to stay.”

Nasmyth gazed at her in evident astonishment. “Stay!” he exclaimed. “Oh, you can call it twenty years, if one must be precise.”

“Ah!” replied Laura, “in one sense, that is an admission I’m not exactly pleased that you should make.”

The man raised himself slowly, and his face became intent as he strove to grasp her meaning. He was not in the least astonished that she should speak to him as she did, for there are few distinctions drawn between the hired man and those who employ him on the Pacific slope, and he had discovered already that the girl was at least his equal in intelligence and education. In fact, he had now and then a suspicion that her views of life were broader than his. In the meanwhile it was in one respect gratifying to feel that she could be displeased at anything he might think or do.

“I’m not quite sure I see the drift of that,” he said.

“You would be content to continue a ranch-hand indefinitely?”

“Why not?” Nasmyth asked, with a smile.

Laura once more looked at him with an almost disconcerting steadiness, and she had, as he was already aware, very fine eyes. She, however, noticed the suggestive delicacy of his face, which had, as it happened, more than once somewhat displeased her, and a certain languidness of expression, with which she had also grown almost impatient. This man, she had decided, was too readily acquiescent.

“That,” she continued, “is rather a big question, isn’t it?”

“Ah!” said Nasmyth reflectively. “Now I begin to understand. Well, I don’t mind admitting that I once had ambitions and the means of gratifying them, as well as an optimistic belief in myself. That, however, was rudely shattered when the

means were withdrawn, and a man very soon learns of how little account he is in Western Canada. Why shouldn't I be content to live as the ranch-hands do, especially when it's tolerably evident that I can't do anything else?"

"You are forgetting that most of them were born to it. That counts for a good deal. Have you noticed how far some of the others drift?" A faint trace of heightened colour crept into her cheeks. "Perhaps one couldn't blame them when they have once acquired the whisky habit and a Siwash wife."

Nasmyth lay very still for a few moments, resting on one elbow among the wineberries, for she had, after all, only suggested a question that had once or twice troubled him. It was, however, characteristic of him that he had temporized, and, though he knew it must be answered some day, had thrust it aside.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "you want to send me away. Now, I had almost fancied I had made things easier in various ways for you, and we have been good comrades, haven't we? One could call it that?"

"Yes," agreed Laura slowly; "I think one could call it that."

"Then," returned Nasmyth, "why do you want me to go?"

It was difficult to answer, and, to begin with, Laura did not exactly know she desired him to leave the ranch—in fact, she was willing to admit that there were several reasons why she wished him to stay. Still, perhaps because she had watched over him in his sickness, and, so Gordon said, had snatched him back to life again, she had a certain pride in him, and vaguely felt that. In one sense, he belonged to her. She would not have him throw away the life she had saved, and she had recognized, as many of his English friends had not, the perilously acquiescent side of his character. He was, she feared, one who had an unfortunate aptitude for drifting.

"That," she said, "is rather more than I could explain either to myself or to you, but I will tell you something. They are going to build the pulp-mill down the valley, and they are now asking for tenders for the construction of the dam. The thing, I have heard, is not big enough to interest contractors from the cities, and most of the men round here have their hands full with their ranches."

Nasmyth became a trifle more intent. "Still," he remarked, "I have never built a dam."

"You told me you were rather a good chopper, and I think you are. You have made roads, too, and know how to handle giant-powder in the rock-cutting, and

how to use the drill."

"There are shoals of men in this country who know considerably more about those things than I do."

Laura made a little impatient gesture. "Yes," she admitted, "there are, but they are simple Bushmen for the most part; and does intellect count for nothing at all? Are a trained understanding and a quick comprehension of no use when one builds a dam?"

Nasmyth frowned, though she saw a little glow kindle in his eyes. "I'm by no means sure that I possess any of those desirable qualities. Besides, there's a rather serious objection—that of finance."

Then Laura Waynefleet made it clear that she had considered the question, and she favoured the man with a glimpse of the practical side of her character.

"The stores give long credit, and partial payments are generally made as a work of that kind goes on. Then it is not a very unusual thing for workmen to wait for their wages until the contract is carried through."

Nasmyth lay still for at least another minute. He had gradually lost his ambition during the few years he had wandered through the Bush of British Columbia. The aimless life was often hard, but it had its compensations, and he had learned to value its freedom from responsibility and care. When he did not like a task he had undertaken, he simply left it and went on again. Still, he had had misgivings now and then when he noticed how far some of his comrades had drifted. Presently he rose slowly to his feet.

"Well," he said, "you're right, I think, and, if I'm given an opportunity, I'll undertake the thing. The credit will be yours if I'm successful."

The girl rose. "Then," she admonished, with a faint smile, "don't tell me that you have failed."

She turned away and left him somewhat abruptly, but Nasmyth did not resume his fishing, though he could hear the big trout splashing in the pool as the sunset light faded off the water. He lay down among the wineberries, which were scattered among the glossy leaves like little drops of blood, to think harder than he had thought for a considerable time. An hour ago, as he had told Laura Waynefleet, he would have been well content to stay on at the ranch, and, though she had roused him, he knew that it would cost him an effort to leave it. He was not, he fancied, in love with her. Indeed, he now and then admitted that she would probably look for more from the man who won her favour than there was

in him, but the camaraderie—he could think of no better word for it—that had existed between them had been very pleasant to him.

He realized that he was in one sense hers to dispose of. She had, in all probability, saved his life, and now she was endeavouring to arouse his moral responsibility. She was sending him out to play a man's part in the battle of life. He admitted that he had shrunk from it, of late, or, at least, had been content to sink back among the rank and file. He had made the most of things, but that, he was beginning to realize, was, after all, a somewhat perilous habit. Laura Waynefleet evidently considered that a resolute attempt to alter conditions was more becoming than to accept them, even though one was likely to be injured while making it. He heard footsteps, and, looking up, saw Gordon sit down upon the cedar-log.

"I came to look at Wiston's hand, and walked across when I heard that Waynefleet hadn't been about," he explained. "I don't think you need feel any particular anxiety about your employer."

Nasmyth grinned at this. Waynefleet had spent part of one day chopping a big balsam, and was apparently feeling the effects of the very unusual exertion. Then Gordon took out his pipe.

"I guess you're fishing?" he observed.

"I came here to get a trout for breakfast."

"You look like it." Gordon smiled. "As it happened, I saw Miss Waynefleet crossing the clearing. It occurs to me that she may have said something that set you thinking."

"I wonder," said Nasmyth reflectively, "what made you fancy that?"

Gordon regarded him with a little twinkle in his eyes. "Well," he replied, "I have the honour of Miss Waynefleet's acquaintance, and have some little knowledge of her habits."

Men make friends with one another quickly in the Western forests, and Nasmyth had acquired a curious confidence in his companion, in spite of the story Gordon had told him. As the result of this he related part, at least, of what the girl had said. Gordon nodded.

"It's quite likely you'll get that contract if you apply for it. The folks about the settlement haven't sent an offer in," he said. "The notion is naturally Miss Waynefleet's. It's the kind of thing that would appeal to her, and, in a way, it's

fortunate you have fallen into her hands. She's one of the protesters."

"The protesters?"

"Yes," answered Gordon; "I can't think of a better name for them, though it doesn't exactly convey all I mean. To make the thing a little clearer, we'll take the other kind—in this country they're best typified by the Indians. The Siwash found it a wilderness, and made the most of it as such. They took their toll of the salmon, and fed their ponies on the natural prairie grass. If we'd left it to them for centuries it would have remained a wilderness. We came, and found Nature omnipotent, but we challenged her—drove the steel road down the great cañon to bring us provisions in, dyked the swamp meadows, ploughed up the forest, and rent the hills. We made our protest, and, quite often, it was no more than that, for the rivers were too strong for us, and the Bush crept back upon our little clearings. Still, we never let go, and it's becoming evident that we have done more than hold our own."

He paused, and laughed in a deprecatory fashion before he went on again. "Now and then I have an outbreak of this kind," he added lightly. "The thing would make an epic, but, if one could write it, it wouldn't be worth while. The protest that counts in this land is made with the axe and drill."

The outbreak was comprehensible, for it must be remembered that the average Westerner, either by birth or adoption, is seldom a reticent man. He is, in fact, usually characterized by a daring optimism, and not infrequently filled to overflowing with the clean pride of achievement. One can hear this new-world enthusiasm bubble over on public platforms and at brilliant functions, as well as in second-rate saloons, but it is most forcibly expressed where men toil waist-deep in icy water building dyke and dam, or blast their waggon roads out of the side of the gloomy cañons. Their handiwork is not always beautiful, but one wonders to see what they have made of that great desolation.

Nasmyth lay still among the wineberries, for a minute or two, and, though a cold green transparency had replaced the fires of sunset behind the tall trunks now, and the trout were splashing furiously in the pool, he forgot all about the rod beside him as he pondered over a question which had often occurred to him.

"How is it that Miss Waynefleet is content to stay here?" he asked.

"You would hardly expect her to leave her father."

"No," said Nasmyth. "Any way, that is scarcely an answer. What keeps Waynefleet here? One wouldn't fancy he likes living in the Bush."

“It’s a little curious that you haven’t heard. Anyway, somebody is bound to tell you. Waynefleet had to get out of the Old Country. Some trouble about trust-money. He came out to Victoria and set up in the land agency business, but it was his misfortune that he couldn’t keep out of politics. There are folks like that. When they can’t handle their own affairs, they’re anxious to manage those of the community. Somebody found out the story and flung it in his face. The man hadn’t the grit in him to live it down; he struck up into the Bush and bought the half-cleared ranch.”

For the next minute or two Nasmyth gazed straight in front of him with a very thoughtful face, for he had now a vague recollection of hearing or reading of the affair in which his employer had played a discreditable part. He had already decided that he was not in love with Laura Waynefleet—in fact, it was perhaps significant that he had done so more than once, but he had a warm regard for the girl who had saved his life, and, after all, his ideas were not quite so liberal as he fancied they had become in the Western forest. It was a trifle disconcerting to discover that she was the daughter of a swindler.

“It hurts?” inquired Gordon dryly.

Nasmyth rose. “To be frank,” he admitted, “it does. Still, though the subject’s a rather delicate one, I don’t want you to misunderstand me. After all, Miss Waynefleet is not in the least responsible for anything her father may have done.”

“That,” said Gordon, “is a sure thing. Well, I must be hitting the trail home. Aren’t you going to try for some of those trout in the pool?”

“No,” answered Nasmyth, and his smile was a trifle grim; “I don’t think I am.”

He watched Gordon stride away through the undergrowth, and then, in the creeping dusk, went slowly back to the ranch. Waynefleet was out when he reached it, but Laura was sitting sewing by the lamp, and she looked at him sharply when he came in. He was unpleasantly conscious that the light was on his face. Then the girl laid down her sewing and turned fully towards him.

“I saw Mr. Gordon cross the clearing. He has told you why we are living here?” she said.

“I think,” said Nasmyth, with a slowness that was very expressive, “it was not done out of unkindness.”

“Oh, no,” and Laura smiled in a rather curious fashion, “he had probably quite another motive.” Then she leaned forward a little, looking at him steadily. “I

knew that he would tell you."

Nasmyth stood still, with his forehead deeply furrowed, and an unusual gravity in his eyes. The girl's courage and serenity appealed to him, and he was conscious that his heart was beating rapidly. He said nothing, for a moment or two, and afterwards remembered how still the little room was, and how the sweet, resinous scent of the firs flowed in through the open window. Then he made a vague gesture.

"There is, perhaps, a good deal one could say; but I fancy most of it would savour of impertinence," he said. "After all, the thing doesn't affect you in any way."

Laura glanced down at her hands, and Nasmyth guessed what she was thinking, for they were hard, and work-roughened. The toil that her hands showed was, as he realized, only a part of her burden.

"I think it affects me a very great deal," she declared slowly.

Then a curious compassion for her troubled the man. She was young and very comely, and it was, he felt, cruelly hard on her that, bearing her father's shame, she must lead a life of hard labour at that desolate ranch. He felt an almost uncontrollable desire to comfort her, and to take her cares upon himself, but that was out of the question, since he was merely a ranch-hand, a Bush-chopper, who owed even the food he ate and the clothes he wore to her. There is, as he realized then, after all, very little one can do to lighten another's load, but in that moment the half-formed aspirations that she had called into existence in his mind expanded suddenly. There was, he felt, no reason why he should not acquire money and influence, once he made the effort.

"Miss Waynefleet," he said haltingly, "I can only offer you my sincere sympathy. Still"—and perhaps he did not recognize how clear the connection of ideas was—"I am going down to see about that dam-building contract to-morrow."

Then Laura smiled, and took up her sewing again. Her burden, as she realized, was hers alone, but she knew that this man would no longer drift. She had called up his latent capacities, and he would prove his manhood.

CHAPTER V

THE FLOOD

The autumn afternoon was oppressively hot when Gordon, floundering among the whitened driftwood piled along the river-bank, came upon Nasmyth, who lay upon a slope of rock, with his hands, which were badly bruised, clenched upon a drill. Another man, who stood upon a plank inserted into a crevice, swung a hammer, and its ponderous head came ringing down upon the drill, which Nasmyth jerked round at every stroke, so many times to the minute, with rhythmic regularity. As Nasmyth was apparently too busily engaged just then to trouble about him, Gordon sat down on a big log, and taking out his pipe, looked about him when he had lighted it.

The river had made a gap for itself in the great forest that filled the valley, and the sombre firs that rose in serried ranks upon its farther bank rolled back up the hillside, streaked here and there with a little thin white mist. A mile or so away, and lower down the valley, there was an opening in their shadowy masses, out of which rose the ringing of hammers and a long trail of smoke, for workmen from the cities were building the new wood-pulp mill there. In the foreground the river swirled by, frothing at flood level, for a week's fierce sunshine had succeeded a month of torrential rain, and the snow high up on a distant peak was melting fast.

Nobody about the little settlement at the head of the deep inlet had seen the water quite so high at that season, and Gordon noticed how it frothed and boiled about the row of stone-backed piles that stretched out from either bank. As he listened to the hoarse roar of the pent-up torrent, he understood what that partly completed dam must have cost Nasmyth. After a little time Nasmyth rose, and, stepping on the plank, wearily straightened his back.

"We're down far enough," he announced. "Let me have the two sticks of giant-powder, and then tell the boys to jump for cover."

The other man, who sprang down from his perch, handed him what appeared to

be two thick sticks of yellow wax, and Gordon watched him as he carefully nipped a copper detonator down on a length of snaky fuse, and embedded it in the plastic material. Then he cautiously tamped the two yellow rolls down into the drilled-out hole. After that he lighted the fuse, and, clambering down the slope of rock, saw Gordon.

“We’ll get out of this. It’s a short fuse,” he said.

Gordon, who was acquainted with the action of giant-powder, had no desire to stay, and they floundered as fast as possible over the driftwood and masses of shattered rock until Nasmyth drew his companion behind a towering fir. Then there was a sharp detonation, a crash, and a shower of flying stones went smashing through the forest and into the river. One, which Gordon fancied must have weighed about two hundred pounds, drove close past them, and struck a young cedar, which snapped off beneath the impact. Then there was a sudden silence, and Nasmyth stretched out his arms with a suggestive weariness before he sat down and took out his pipe.

“No one could have expected that stone to come this way,” he remarked, with a little laugh. “It’s an example of how contrary things can be. In fact, they’ve been about as contrary as it’s possible the last month or so. As no doubt you have noticed, one very seldom gets much encouragement when he takes the uphill trail. It’s very rarely made any easier for him.”

Gordon grinned, though he realized that the trail his companion had set out upon was very steep indeed. He had secured the dam-building contract, which was not astonishing, since nobody else appeared anxious to undertake it, and he had already acquired a certain proficiency with the axe and drill. There is as yet very little specialization in that land, which is in many respects fortunate for those who live in it, and the small rancher cheerfully undertakes any kind of primitive engineering that seems likely to provide him with a few dollars, from building timber bridges to blasting waggon roads out of the hardest rock. What is more, he usually makes a success of it. In Nasmyth’s case, however, the rise of water had made his task almost insuperably difficult, and it had already left a certain mark on him. Gordon, who was, after all, a doctor, naturally noticed this as he watched him.

Nasmyth was very lean now, but he was also hard and muscular, and the old blue shirt, which hung open at the neck, and torn duck trousers, which clung about him still wet with river-water, accentuated the wiry suppleness of his frame; but it was in his face that Gordon noticed the greatest change. The good-humoured,

tolerant indifference he remembered had melted out of it, the lips seemed set more firmly, and the eyes were resolute and keen. Nasmyth, so Gordon noticed, had grown since he first took up his duties as Waynefleet's hired hand. Still, though it was less apparent, the stamp of refinement and what Gordon called, for want of a better term, "sensibility," clung to him, and it seemed to the trained observer that the qualities it suggested might yet handicap his comrade in a country where the struggle with primitive forces chiefly demands from man an unreasoning animal courage. In that land the small contractor and Bush-rancher must bear the brunt on his body every day, toiling waist-deep in icy waters, or gripping the drill with bleeding hands, while each fresh misfortune that follows flood and frost is met with a further strain on weary muscles and sterner resolution. It is a fight that is usually hardest for the man who thinks, and in which the one thing that counts is the brutal, bulldog valour that takes hold and holds on in spite of each crushing blow.

"This high water," said Gordon, "has kept you back considerably."

"It has," Nasmyth replied with emphasis. "It has cost me more money that I care to figure up the last month, and we're considerably behind. The dam's still at the mercy of the next big flood."

"It's a little curious that you seem to stand it better than you did the logging," said Gordon, with a quick glance at him.

Nasmyth appeared to consider this. "I do, and that's a fact. For one thing, I'm fighting for my own hand, and no doubt that counts, though, perhaps, it doesn't go quite far enough. After all, it's a point you ought to know more about than I do."

His companion smiled. "I can describe the mechanical connection between the thought in a man's brain and the movement of his muscles. It's comparatively simple; but when you understand that, you're only beginning. There's much more behind. To particularize, if you had done what you're doing now when you were logging, it would, in all probability, have broken you up again."

Nasmyth fancied that this was correct, though, as he had admitted, he could give no reason for it. He was only conscious that he was being constrained by some new influence, and, under the pressure it laid upon him, he became almost insensible to physical weariness. He had now a motive for fighting, in place of drifting, that no mere hired hand can possess. His indolent content had been rudely dissipated, and something that had lain dormant in the depths of his nature had come uppermost. It was certainly Laura Waynefleet who had given it

the first impulse, but why he had permitted her to impose her will on him was a matter that was still incomprehensible to him. Seeing that he did not answer, Gordon changed the subject.

“Some of the boys and I have been wondering how you contrived to finance the thing,” he said.

Nasmyth smiled, though there was just a trace of darker colour in his face. “Well,” he replied, “one can get tolerably long credit from most of the Bush stores, and Clipton has let me have provisions for the boys on quite reasonable terms. Besides, as it happens, there is money in the family. There was a time when one might have considered it almost the duty of certain relatives of mine to give me a lift, but I didn’t offer them the opportunity. I came out here and set about driving cows and chopping trees instead.”

“You felt you’d sooner cut your hand off than give them a gentle hint,” remarked Gordon. “It’s not an uncommon feeling, but, when you give way to it, it clears the other people. Won’t you go on?”

“When I undertook this affair, I laid the opportunity before them, and one—the last I expected anything of that kind from—sent me out a draft. He kindly pointed out that there appeared to be in me certain capabilities, which he had never supposed I possessed, and added that, if I ever really succeeded in building a dam or anything else useful, he would be pleased to take a share in my next venture. In the meanwhile, he would charge me interest on the amount of that draft. Perhaps I may mention that the man in question was naturally the one the rest of them rather looked down upon.”

Gordon laughed. “Oh, yes,” he said, “I like that, naturally. I guess you would have taken their view of him once. Well, since you can put your pride in your pocket, you’re evidently growing. There’s just one way of putting anything through here, and that’s to take hold and hang right on, no matter what it costs. I guess there’s one of the boys wanting you.”

A man stood knee-deep in the river waving his hand. Nasmyth rose and stretched himself.

“They seem to want me all the time from sun-up until it’s dark,” he said. “In one way it’s a little curious, since there’s reason to believe that most of them know a good deal more about what we’re doing than I do myself. You’ll excuse me.”

Gordon smiled as his comrade strode away. He was one who had studied human nature, and because he was well acquainted with the Bushman’s capabilities, he

knew that there were also limitations to them. Even in such matters as the splitting of hard rock and the driving of massive piles into the river-bed, the higher intelligence of the man of intellect had its effect. Gordon smoked his pipe out as he watched Nasmyth flounder into the stream among the other men, pushing a little car loaded with broken rock that apparently ran along a submerged track. Then he strolled back toward the settlement.

Nasmyth toiled on in the river until the camp-cook hammered upon a suspended iron sheet as a signal that supper was ready. The summons was answered without delay. With the water running from their clothing Nasmyth and his men went back to the little log shanty. One or two changed their dripping garments, but the rest left their clothes to dry upon them, as their employer did. When the plentiful, warm supper had been eaten, Nasmyth went back to the little hut that served him as store and sleeping quarters. A big, grizzled man from Mattawa, Ontario, went in with him, and lounged upon the table while he sat in his bunk, which was filled with fresh spruce twigs.

“I’m pretty well played out, and if I’m to work to-morrow, I’ve got to sleep to-night,” said Nasmyth.

The grizzled axeman nodded. “Well,” he volunteered, “I’ll stand watch. I was in the last two nights, and I guess it’s up to me to see you through. We’re going to have trouble, if one of those big logs fetches up across the sluiceway. The river’s full of them, and she’s risen ’most a foot since sun-up.”

Nasmyth held up one hand, and both heard the deep roar of frothing water that came in with the smell of the firs through the open door. The Bush was very still outside, and that hoarse, throbbing note flung back by the rock slope and climbing pines filled the valley. Nasmyth smiled grimly, for it was suggestive of the great forces against which he had pitted his puny strength. Then there was a crash, and, a few moments later, a curious thud, and both men listened, intent and strung up, until the turmoil of the river rose alone again.

“A big log,” said the older man. “She has gone through the run. Guess we’ll get one by-and-by long enough to jamb. Now, if you’d run out those wing-frames I was stuck on, she’d have took them straight through, every one.”

“The trouble was that I hadn’t the money, Mattawa,” said Nasmyth dryly.

His companion nodded, for this was a trouble he could understand. “Well,” he answered, “when you haven’t got it you have to face the consequences. I’ll roust you out if a big log comes along.”

Mattawa went out, and soon afterwards Nasmyth, whose clothes were now partly dry, lay down, dressed as he was, in his twig-packed bunk, with his pipe in his hand. It was growing a little colder, and a keen air, which had in it the properties of an elixir, blew in, but that was a thing Nasmyth scarcely noticed, and the dominant roar of the river held his attention. He wondered again why he had been drawn into the conflict with it, or, rather, why he had permitted Laura Waynefleet to set him such a task, and the answer that it was because he desired to hold her good opinion, and, as he had said, to do her credit, did not seem to go far enough. It merely suggested the further question why he should wish to keep her friendship. Still, there was no disguising the fact that, once he had undertaken the thing, it had got hold of him, and he felt he must go on until his task was successfully accomplished or he was crushed and beaten. It seemed very likely, then, that utter defeat would be his fate. While he pondered, the pipe fell from his hand, and the river's turmoil rang in deep pulsations through his dreams. He was awakened suddenly by a wet hand on his shoulder, and, scrambling out of his bunk on the instant, he saw Mattawa with a lantern in his hand.

"Log right across the sluice-run," said the watcher. "More coming along behind it. They'll sure get piling up."

Nasmyth did not remember that he gave any directions when he sprang, half asleep, out of the shanty. The roar of water had a different note in it, and the clangour of the iron sheet one of the men was pounding rang out harshly. A half-moon hung above the black pines, and dimly-seen men were flitting like shadows toward the waterside. They appeared to know what it was advisable to do, but they stopped just a moment on the edge of the torrent, for which nobody could have blamed them. The water, streaked with smears of froth and foam, swirled by, and there was a tumultuous white seething where the flood boiled across the log in the midst of the stream. The log blocked the gap left open to let the driftwood through, and, as Nasmyth knew, great trees torn up in distant valleys were coming down with the flood. It seemed to him that he could not reasonably have expected to clear that obstacle with a battalion of log-drivers, and he had only a handful of weary men. Still the men went in, floundering knee-deep in the flood, along the submerged pile of stone and clutching at the piles that bound it to save themselves when the stream threatened to sweep their feet from under them, until they came to the gap where the great tree, rolling in the grip of the torrent, thrashed its grinding branches against the stone.

Then, though it was difficult to see how a man of them found a foothold, or kept

it on the heaving trunk, the big axes flashed and fell, while a few shadowy figures ran along the top of the log to attack the massy butt across the opening. It would have been arduous labour in daylight and at low-water, but these were men who had faced the most that flood and frost could do. They set about their task in the dark, for that land would have been a wilderness still if the men in it had shown themselves unduly careful of either life or limb.

The great branches yielded beneath the glinting blades, and went on down river again, but Nasmyth, who felt the axe-haft slip in his greasy hands, did not try to lead. It was sufficient if he could keep pace with the rest of the wood-choppers, which was, after all, a thing most men, reared as he had been, would certainly not have done. The lust of conflict was upon him that night, and, balancing himself ankle-deep in water on the trunk that heaved and dipped beneath him, he swung the trenchant steel. He felt that he was pitted against great primeval forces, and, with the gorged veins rising on his forehead and the perspiration dripping from him, man’s primitive pride and passions urged him to the struggle.

How long it was before they had stripped the tree to a bare log he did not know, but twice, as they toiled on, he saw a man splash into the river, and, rising in the eddy beneath the submerged dam, crawl, dripping, out again, and at length he found himself beside Mattawa, whirling his axe above a widening notch, and keeping rhythmic stroke. He knew he was acquitting himself creditably then, for Mattawa had swung the axe since he could lift it, and there are men, and mechanics, too, who cannot learn to use it as the Bushmen do in a lifetime; but he also knew that he could not keep pace with his comrade very long. In the meanwhile, he held his aching muscles to their task, and the gleaming blades whirled high above their shoulders in the pale light of the moon. As each left the widening gap the other came shearing down.

The other men were now plying peevie and handspike at the butt of the log, and he and Mattawa toiled on alone, two dim and shadowy figures in the midst of the flood, until at last there was a rending of fibres, and Mattawa leapt clear.

“Jump!” he gasped. “She’s going.”

Nasmyth jumped. He went down in four or five feet of water, and had the sense to stay there while the log drove over him. Then he came up, and clutching it, held on while it swept downstream into a slacker eddy. There were several other figures apparently clinging to the butt of it, and when he saw them slip off into the river one by one, he let go, too. He was swung out of the eddy into a white turmoil, which hurled him against froth-lapped stones, but at length he found

sure footing, and crawled up the bank, which most of his companions had reached before him. When the others came up, he found that he was aching all over, and evidently was badly bruised. He stood still, shivering a little, and blinked at them.

“You’re all here?” he said. “Where are those axes?”

It appeared that most of them were in the river, which was not very astonishing, for a man cannot reasonably be expected to swim through a flood with a big axe in his hand, and when somebody said so, Nasmyth made a little gesture of resignation.

“Well,” he said, “the logs will just have to pile up, if another big one comes along before the morning.”

This was evident. They were all dead weary, and most of them were badly bruised, as well, and they trooped back to the shanty, while Nasmyth limped into his hut. Nasmyth sloughed off his dripping garments, and was asleep in five minutes after he had crawled into his bunk.

CHAPTER VI

THE BREAKING OF THE DAM

A faint grey light was creeping into the shanty when Nasmyth awoke again, and lay still for a minute or two, while his senses came slowly back to him. The first thing of which he was definitely conscious was a physical discomfort that rendered the least movement painful. He felt sore all over, and there was a distressful ache in one hip and shoulder, which he fancied was the result of falling on the log, or perhaps of having been hurled against the boulders by the rapids through which he had reached the bank. His physical condition did not trouble him seriously, for he had grown more or less accustomed to muscular weariness, and the cramping pains which spring from toiling long hours in cold water, and, although he made a grimace, as he raised himself a trifle, it was the sound outside that occupied most of his attention.

The door stood open, as he had left it, and a clean, cold air that stirred his blood came in, with the smell of fir and cedar, but what he noticed was the deeper tone in the roar of the river that seemed flung back in sonorous antiphones by the climbing pines. It had occurred to him on other occasions when he was in a fanciful mood that they were singing a majestic *Benedicite*, but just then he was uneasily conscious that there was a new note in the great reverberating harmonies. Stately pine and towering cedar had raised their voices, too, and a wild wailing fell through the long waves of sound from the highest of them on the crest of the hill. It was evident that a fresh breeze was blowing down the valley, and, as it must have swept the hollow farther up among the ranges, which was filled with a deep blue lake, Nasmyth realized that it would drive at least another foot of water into the river as well as set adrift the giant logs that lay among the boulders. Even then they were, he fancied, in all probability driving down upon his half-finished dam.

Rousing himself with an effort, he clambered out of his bunk, and then gripped the little table hard, for his hip pained him horribly as his weight came upon it. Then, as he struggled into his clothing, there was a heavy thud outside, that was

followed by a crashing and grinding, and a gasping man appeared in the door of the shanty.

“Big log across the run,” he cried, “three or four more of them coming along.”

Nasmyth, who said nothing, set his lips tight, and was out of the shanty in another moment or two. A glance at the river showed him that any effort he could make would, in all probability, be futile; but he and the others waded out into the flood and recommenced the struggle. That, at least, was a thing they owed to themselves, and they toiled for an hour or two very much as they had done in the darkness; only that fresh logs were now coming down on them every few minutes, and at last they recognized that they were beaten. Then they went back dejectedly, and Nasmyth sat down to breakfast, though he had very little appetite. He felt that all the strength he had would be needed that day.

After breakfast he lay among the boulders gnawing his unlighted pipe and watching the growing mass of driftwood that chafed and ground against the piles of the dam. Nothing, he recognized, could save the dam now. It was bound to go, for the piles were only partly backed with stone, and, in any case, men do not build in that new country as they do in England. Their needs are constantly varying, and their works are intended merely to serve the purpose of the hour. It is a growing country, and the men in it know that the next generation will not be content with anything that they can do, and, what is more to the purpose, they themselves will want something bigger and more efficient in another year or two. Hence the dam was a somewhat frail and temporary structure of timber as well as stone, but it would probably have done what was asked of it had it been completed before the floods set in. As it was, Nasmyth knew that he would see the end of it before another hour slipped by.

It came even sooner than he had expected. There was a dull crash; the piles that rose above the flood collapsed, and the mass of grinding timber drove on across the ruined dam. Then Nasmyth rose, and, stretching himself wearily, went back to his shanty. He felt he could not face the sympathy of his workmen. He was still sitting there in a state of utter physical weariness and black dejection, when, towards the middle of the afternoon, the door was quietly opened, and Laura Waynefleet came in. She looked at him as he remembered she had done once or twice at the ranch, with compassion in her eyes, and he was a little astonished to feel that, instead of bringing him consolation, her pity hurt him. Then he felt the blood rise to his face, and he looked away from her.

“You have heard already?” he asked.

“Yes,” said the girl softly. “I was at the settlement, and they told me there. I am so sorry.”

Nasmyth winced, but he contrived to say, “Thank you,” and then glanced round the untidy shanty, which was strewn with dripping clothes. “Of course,” he added, “it is something to know that I have your sympathy; but I must not keep you here.”

It was not a tactful speech, but Laura smiled. “I meant to take you out,” she said. “You have been sitting here brooding since the dam went, and from what Mattawa told me, you haven’t had any dinner.”

“No,” said Nasmyth; “now I come to think of it, I don’t believe I have. I’m not sure it’s very astonishing.”

“Then we’ll go away somewhere and make tea among the pines.”

Nasmyth glanced suggestively at his attire. His duck jacket had shrunk with constant wetting, and would not button across the old blue shirt, which fell apart at his bronzed neck. The sleeves had also drawn up from his wrists, and left the backs of his hands unduly prominent. His hands were scarred, and the fingers were bruised where the hammer-head had fallen on them in wet weather as it glanced from the drill. The girl was immaculate in a white hat and a dress of light flowered print.

“Do I look like going on a picnic with you?” he said. “The few other things I possess are in much the same condition.”

Laura had naturally noticed the state of his attire, but it was his face that troubled her. It was haggard and his eyes were heavy. As she had decided long before, it was a face of Grecian type, and she would sooner have had it Roman. This man, she felt, was too sensitive, and apt to yield to sudden impulses, and just then her heart ached over him. Still, she contrived to laugh.

“Pshaw!” she said. “I told Mattawa to get me a few things ready.”

Nasmyth followed her out of the shanty, and when he had picked up the basket and kettle somebody had left at the door, she turned to him.

“Where shall we go?” she asked.

“Anywhere,” said Nasmyth, “that is, as long as it’s away from the river.”

Laura saw the shrinking in his eyes as he gazed at the swirling flood, and though she was sorry for him, it roused in her a momentary spark of anger. Then she

went with him up the hillside beneath the climbing pines until they reached a shadowy hollow near the crest of it, out of which a little stream trickled down.

“Now light a fire, while I see what there is in the basket,” she said.

She found a splendid trout, a packet of tea, and a little bag of self-raising flour, among other sundries, and for the next half-hour she kept Nasmyth busy making flapjacks and frying the trout. Then they sat down to a simple meal, and when it was over, Nasmyth laughed.

“It’s a little astonishing, in view of how I felt at breakfast, but there’s nothing left,” he sighed. “In one way the admission’s a little humiliating, but I almost feel myself again.”

“It’s supposed to be a very natural one in the case of a man,” said Laura. “You can smoke if you like. I want to talk to you.”

Nasmyth stretched himself out on the other side of the fire, and Laura, leaning forward a little, looked at him. Without knowing exactly why, he felt somewhat uneasy beneath her gaze.

“Now,” she said, “I would like to hear what you are going to do.”

The man made a little rueful gesture. “I don’t know. Chop trees again for some rancher, most probably—in fact, I was wondering whether you would have me back as a ranch-hand.”

“Ah!” cried the girl sharply, while a trace of hardness crept into her eyes, “that is very much what I expected. As it happens, I am far from satisfied with the man we have, but I should not think of replacing him with you just now.”

Nasmyth winced, and it was characteristic of him that he endeavoured to beguile her away from the object she evidently had in view.

“What’s the matter with the man?” he asked.

“A diversity of gifts. Among other things, he appears to possess an extensive acquaintance with Colonial politics, and he and my father discuss the regeneration of the Government when they might with advantage be doing something else.”

Nasmyth frowned. “I understand. That’s one reason why I wanted to come back. After all, there is a good deal I could save you from. In fact, I get savage now and then when I think of what you are probably being left to do upon the ranch. I ventured a hint or two to your father, but he seemed impervious.” He hesitated

for a moment. “No doubt it’s a delicate subject, but it’s a little difficult quietly to contemplate the fact that, while those men talk politics, you—”

“I do their work?” suggested Laura with a lifting of her arched eyebrows. “After all, isn’t that or something like it what generally happens when men turn their backs upon their task?”

Nasmyth flushed. “I admit that I was trying to break away from mine, but it seems you have undertaken to head me off and drive me back to it again.”

“That was more or less what I wished,” said Laura quietly.

“Well,” Nasmyth replied, “as I think you’re a little hard on me, I’ll try to put my views before you. To begin with, the dam is done for.”

“You are quite sure? You built it so far once. Is it altogether out of the question for you to do as much again?”

Nasmyth felt his face grow hot. She was looking at him with quiet eyes, which had, however, the faintest suggestion of disdain in them.

“The question is why I should want to do it,” he said.

“Ah!” rejoined Laura, “you have no aspirations at all? Still, I’m not quite sure that is exactly what I mean—in fact, I think I mean considerably more. You are quite content to throw away your birthright, and relinquish all claim to the station you were born in?”

The man smiled somewhat bitterly. “I think you understand that it’s a custom of this country not to demand from any man an account of what he may have done before he came out to it. In my particular case it was, however, nothing very discreditable, and I once had my aspirations, or, as you prefer to consider it, I recognized my obligations. Then the blow fell unexpectedly, and I came out here and became a hired man—a wandering chopper. After all, one learns to be content rather easily, which is in several ways fortunate. Then you instilled fresh aspirations—it’s the right word in this case—into me, and I made another attempt, only to be hurled back again. There doesn’t seem to be much use in attempting the impossible.”

“Then a thing is to be considered impossible after one fails twice? There are men who fail—and go on again—all their lives long.”

“I’m afraid,” Nasmyth declared in a dull tone, “I am not that kind of man. After all, to be flung down from the station you were born to—I’m using your own words—and turned suddenly adrift to labour with one’s hands takes a good deal

of the courage out of one. I almost think if you could put yourself in my place you would understand."

Laura smiled in a suggestive fashion, and looked down at the hands she laid upon her knee. They were capable, as well as shapely, and, as he had noticed more than once, the signs of toil were very plain on them.

"I never did an hour's useful work before I came out West," she said.

She had produced the effect she probably desired, for in the midst of his sudden pity for her Nasmyth was troubled with a sense of shame. This girl, he realized, had been reared as gently as he had been himself, and he knew that she now toiled most of every day at what in the older country would have been considered most unwomanly tasks. Still, she had borne with it cheerfully, and had courage to spare for others whose strength was less than hers.

He sat silent for almost a minute, looking down between the great pines into the valley, and, as he did so, he vaguely felt the influence of the wilderness steal over him. The wind had fallen now, and there was a deep stillness in the climbing forest which the roar of the river emphasized. Those trees were vast of girth, and they were very cold. In spite of whirling snow, and gale, and frost, they had grown slowly to an impressive stateliness. In Nature, as he recognized, all was conflict, and it was the fine adjustment of opposing forces that made for the perfection of grace, and strength, and beauty. Then it seemed to him that his companion was like the forest—still, and strong, and stately—because she had been through the stress of conflict too. These were, however, fancies, and he turned around again to her with a sudden resolution expressed in his face and attitude.

"There's an argument you might have used, Miss Waynefleet," he told her. "I said I would try to do you credit, and it almost seems as if I had forgotten it. Well, if you will wait a little, I will try again."

He rose, and, crossing over, stood close beside her, with his hand laid gently on her shoulder, looking down on her with a quiet smile. "After all," he added, "there's a good deal you might have said that you haven't—in fact, it's one of your strong points that, as a rule, you content yourself with going just far enough. Well, because you wish it, I am somehow going to build that dam again."

She looked up at him swiftly with a gleam in her eyes, and Nasmyth stooped a little, while his hand closed hard upon her shoulder.

“You saved my life, and you have tried to do almost as much in a different way since then,” he went on. “It is probably easier to bring a sick man back to health than it is to make him realize his obligations and to imbue him with the courage to face them when it’s evident that he doesn’t possess it. Still, you can’t do things of that kind without results, and I think you ought to know that I belong to you.”

There was a trace of colour in Laura Waynefleet’s face, and she quivered a little under his grasp, but she looked at him steadily, and read his mind in his eyes. The man was stirred by sudden, evanescent passion and exaggerated gratitude, while pity for her had, she fancied, also its effect on him; but that was the last thing she desired, and, with a swift movement, she shook off his hand.

“Ah!” she said; “don’t spoil things.”

Her tone was quiet, but it was decisive, and Nasmyth, whose face flushed darkly, let his hand fall back to his side. Then she rose, and turned to him.

“If we are to be friends, this must never happen again,” she added.

Then they went down the hillside and back to the settlement, where Nasmyth harnessed the team, which the rancher who lived near occasionally placed at Waynefleet’s disposal, to a dilapidated waggon. When she gathered the reins up, Laura smiled down on him.

“After all,” she reminded him, “you will remember that I expect you to do me credit.”

She drove away, and Nasmyth walked back to his camp beside the dam, where the men were awaiting the six o’clock supper. He leaned upon a pine-stump, looking at them gravely, when he had called them together.

“Boys,” he said, “the river, as you know, has wiped out most of the dam. Now, it was a tight fit for me to finance the thing, and I don’t get any further payment until the stone-work’s graded to a certain level. Well, if you leave me now, I’ve just enough money in hand to square off with each of you. You see, if you go you’re sure of your pay. If you stay, most of the money will go to settle the storekeeper’s and the powder bills, and should we fail again, you’ll have thrown your time away. I’d like you to understand the thing; but whether you stay or not, I’m holding on.”

There was silence for half a minute, and then the men, gathering into little groups, whispered to one another, until Mattawa stood forward.

“All you have to do is to go straight ahead. We’re coming along with you solid—every blame one of us,” he said.

A red flush crept into Nasmyth’s face.

“Thank you, boys. After that I’ve got to put this contract through,” he answered.

CHAPTER VII

LAURA MAKES A DRESS

The frost had grown keener as darkness crept over the forest, and the towering pines about the clearing rose in great black spires into the nipping air, but it was almost unpleasantly hot in the little general room of Waynefleet's ranch. Waynefleet, who was fond of physical comfort, had gorged the snapping stove, and the smell of hot iron filled the log-walled room. There was also a dryness in its atmosphere which would probably have had an unpleasant effect upon anyone not used to it. The rancher, however, did not appear to feel it. He lay drowsily in a big hide chair, and his old velvet jacket and evening shoes were strangely out of harmony with his surroundings. Waynefleet made it a rule to dress for the six o'clock meal, which he persisted in calling dinner.

He had disposed of a quantity of potatoes and apples at the settlement of late, and had now a really excellent cigar in his hand, while a little cup of the Mocha coffee, brought from Victoria for his especial use, stood on the table beside him. Waynefleet had cultivated tastes, and invariably gratified them, when it was possible, while it had not occurred to him that there was anything significant in the fact that his daughter confined herself to the acrid green tea provided by the settlement store. He never did notice a point of that kind, and, if anyone had ventured to call his attention to it, he would probably have been indignant as well as astonished. As a rule, however, nobody endeavours to impress unpleasant facts upon men of Waynefleet's character. In their case it is clearly not worth while.

"Do you intend to go on with that dressmaking much longer?" he asked petulantly. "The click of your scissors has an irritating effect on me, and, as you may have noticed, I cannot spread my paper on the table. It cramps one's arms to hold it up."

Laura swept part of the litter of fabric off the table, and it was only natural that she did it a trifle abruptly. She had been busy with rough tasks, from most of

which her father might have relieved her had he possessed a less fastidious temperament, until supper, and there were reasons why she desired an hour or two to herself.

“I will not be longer than I can help,” she said.

Waynefleet lifted his eyebrows sardonically as he glanced at the scattered strips of fabric. “This,” he said, “is evidently in preparation for that ridiculous pulp-mill ball. In view of the primitive manners of the people we shall be compelled to mix with, I really think I am exercising a good deal of self-denial in consenting to go at all. Why you should wish to do so is, I confess, altogether beyond me.”

“I understood that you considered it advisable to keep on good terms with the manager,” said Laura, with a trace of impatience. “He has bought a good deal of produce from you to feed his workmen with.”

Her father made a gesture of resignation. “One has certainly to put up with a good deal that is unpleasant in this barbarous land—in fact, almost everything in it jars upon one,” he complained. “You, however, I have sometimes wondered to notice, appear almost content here.”

Laura looked up with a smile, but said nothing. She, at least, had the sense and the courage to make the most of what could not be changed. It was a relief to her when, a minute or two later, the hired man opened the door.

“If you’ve got the embrocation, I guess I’ll give that ox’s leg a rub,” he said.

Waynefleet rose and turned to the girl. “I’ll put on my rubber overshoes,” he announced. “As I mentioned that I might have to go out, it’s a pity you didn’t think of laying out my coat to warm.”

Laura brought the overshoes, and he permitted her to fasten them for him and to hold his coat while he put it on, after which he went out grumbling, and she sat down again to her sewing with a strained expression in her eyes, for there were times when her father tried her patience severely. She sighed as she contemplated the partly rigged-up dress stretched out on the table, for she could not help remembering how she had last worn it at a brilliant English function. Then she had been flattered and courted, and now she was merely an unpaid toiler on the lonely ranch. Money was, as a rule, signally scarce there, but even when there were a few dollars in Waynefleet’s possession, it seldom occurred to him to offer any of them to his daughter. It is also certain that nobody could have convinced him that it was only through her efforts he was able to keep the ranch

going at all. She never suggested anything of the kind to him, but she felt now and then that her burden was almost beyond her strength.

She quietly went on with her sewing. There was to be a dance at the new pulp-mill, which had just been roofed, and, after all, she was young, and could take a certain pleasure in the infrequent festivities of her adopted country. Besides, the forest ranchers dance well, and there were men among them who had once followed other occupations; while she knew that Nasmyth would be there—in fact, having at length raised his dam to the desired level, he would be to a certain extent an honoured guest. She was not exactly sure how she regarded him, though it was not altogether as a comrade, and she felt there was, in one sense, some justice in his admission that he belonged to her. She had, in all probability, saved his life, and—what was, perhaps, as much—had roused him from supine acquiescence, and inspired him with a sustaining purpose. After the day when she had saved him from abject despair over his ruined dam, he had acquitted himself valiantly, and she had a quiet pride in him. Moreover, she was aware of a natural desire to appear to advantage at the approaching dance.

There was, however, difficulty to be grappled with. The dress was old, and when remade in a later style would be unfortunately plain. The few pairs of gloves she had brought from England were stained and spotted with damp, and her eyes grew wistful as she turned over the stock list of a Victoria dry goods store. The thing would be so easy, if she had only a little more money, but she sighed as she glanced into her purse. Then she took up the gloves and a strip of trimming, and looked at them with a little frown, but while she did so there were footsteps outside, and the door was opened. A man, whom she recognized as a hired hand from a ranch in the neighbourhood, stood in the entrance with a packet in his hand.

“I won’t come in,” he said. “I met Nasmyth down at the settlement. He’d just come back from Victoria, and he asked me to bring this along.”

He went away after he had handed her the packet, and a gleam of pleasure crept into Laura’s eyes when she opened it. There was first of all a box of gloves of various colours, and then inside another packet a wonderful piece of lace. The artistic delicacy of the lace appealed to her, for though she possessed very few dainty things she was fond of them, and she almost fancied that she had not seen anything of the kind more beautiful in England.

As she unfolded it a strip of paper fell out, and the warm blood swept into her face as she read the message on it.

“Considering everything, I really don’t think you could regard it as a liberty,” it ran. “You have given me a good deal more than this.”

Then for just a moment her eyes grew hazy. In proportion to the man’s means, it was a costly gift, and, except for him, nobody had shown her much consideration since she had left England. She was a trifle perplexed, for she did not think there was lace of that kind on sale often in Victoria, and, in regard to the gloves, it was not evident how he had known her size. Then she remembered that one of the cotton ones she sometimes wore had disappeared some little time before, and once more the flush crept into her cheeks. That almost decided her not to wear his lace, but she felt that to refrain from doing so would raise the question as to how they stood with regard to one another, which was one she did not desire to think out closely then; and, after all, the lace was exactly what she wanted to complete the dress. She rolled it together, and put it and the gloves away, but she treasured the little note.

It was a week later when her father drove her to the pulp-mill in a jolting waggon, and arrived there a little earlier than he had expected. A dance usually begins with a bountiful supper in that country, but Waynefleet, who was, as a rule, willing to borrow implements or teams from his Bush neighbours, would seldom eat with them when he could help it. He was accordingly not quite pleased to find the supper had not yet been cleared away, but Laura, who understood what he was feeling, contrived to lead him into a vacant place at one of the tables. Then she sat down, and looked about her.

The great room was hung with flags and cedar boughs, and the benches down the long uncovered tables were crowded. The men’s attire was motley—broadcloth and duck; white shirts, starched or limp, and blue ones; shoes with the creeper-spikes filed down, and long boots to the knees. There were women present also, and they wore anything from light print, put together for the occasion, to treasured garments made in Montreal or Toronto perhaps a dozen years before, but for all that the assembly was good to look upon. There was steadfast courage in the bronzed faces, and most of those who sat about the long tables had kindly eyes. The stamp of a clean life of effort was upon them, and there was a certain lithe gracefulness in the unconscious poses of the straight-limbed men. There was no sign of limp slovenliness about them. Even in their relaxation they were intent and alert, and, as she watched them, Laura realized something of their restless activity and daring optimism. They believe in anything that is good enough in that country, and are in consequence cheerfully willing to attempt anything, even if to other men it would appear altogether

visionary and impossible, and simple faith goes a long way when supplemented by patient labour. Laura suddenly became conscious that the manager of the pulp-mill, a little wiry man, in white shirt and store clothes, was speaking at the head of the table.

“In one way, it’s not a very big thing we have done, boys,” he said; and Laura was quick to notice the significance of the fact, which was also characteristic of the country, that he counted himself as one of them. “We’ve chopped a hole in the primeval forest, held back the river, and set up our mill. That’s about all on the face of it, but there’s rather more behind. It’s another round with Nature, and we’ve got her down again. It’s a thing you have to do west of the Rockies, or she’ll crush the life out of you. There are folks in the Eastern cities who call her beneficent; but they don’t quite understand what was laid on man in Eden long ago. Here he’s up against flood and frost and snow. Well, I guess we’ve done about all we can, and now that I’ve paid my respects to the chopper and carpenter-gang, there’s another man I want to mention. He took hold of the contract to put us up our dam, and kept hold through the blamedest kind of luck. There’s hard grit in him and the boys he led, and the river couldn’t wash it out of them. Well, when the big turbines are humming and the mill’s grinding out money for all of you, I guess you’re going to remember the boys who built the dam.”

There was a shout which shook the wooden building, and Laura sat very still when Nasmyth stood up. There was no doubt that he was a favourite with everybody there, and she knew that she had nerved him to the fight. He did not appear altogether at ease, and she waited with a curious expectancy for what he had to say. It was very little, but she appreciated the tact which made him use the speech his audience was accustomed to.

“I had a good crowd,” he said. “With the boys I had behind me I couldn’t back down.” Then his voice shook a little. “Still, I was mighty near it once or twice. It was the boys’ determination to hold on—and another thing—that put new grit in me.”

Without being conscious of what he was doing, he swept his glance down the long table until it rested on Laura Waynefleet’s face. She felt the blood creep into her cheeks, for she knew what he meant, but she looked at him steadily, and her eyes were shining. Then he spread his hands out.

“I felt I daren’t shame boys of that kind,” he said, and hastily sat down.

His observations were certainly somewhat crude, but the little quiver in his voice

got hold of those who heard him, and once more the big building rang with cheering. As the sound of hearty acclamation died away there was a great clatter of thrust-back benches through which the tuning of a fiddle broke. Then out of the tentative twang of strings rose, clear and silvery, the lament of Flora Macdonald, thrilling with melancholy, and there were men and women there whose hearts went back to the other wild and misty land of rock and pine and frothing river which they had left far away across the sea. It may be that the musician desired a contrast, or that he was merely feeling for command of the instrument, for the plaintive melody that ran from shift to shift into a thin elfin wailing far up the sobbing strings broke off suddenly, and was followed by the crisp jar of crashing chords. Then “The Flowers of Edinburgh” rang out with Caledonian verve in it and a mad seductive swing, and the guests streamed out to the middle of the floor. That they had just eaten an excellent supper was a matter of no account with them.

Nasmyth, in the meanwhile, elbowed his way through the crowd of dancers until he stood at Laura’s side, and as he looked at her, there was a trace of embarrassment in his manner. She wore his lace, but until that moment her attire had never suggested the station to which she had been born. Now she seemed to have stepped, fresh and immaculate, untouched by toil, out of the world to which he had once belonged. She was, for that night at least, no longer an impoverished rancher’s daughter, but a lady of station. With a twinkle in his eyes, he made her a little formal inclination, and she, knowing what he was thinking, answered with an old-world curtsey, after which a grinning ox-teamster of habitant extraction turned and clapped Nasmyth’s shoulder approvingly.

“V’la la belle chose!” he said. “Mamselle Laura is altogether ravissante. Me, I dance with no one else if she look at me like dat.”

Then Nasmyth and Laura laughed, and glided into the dance, though, in the case of most of their companions, “plunged” would have been the better word for it. English reserve is not esteemed in that land, and the axemen danced with the mingled verve of grey Caledonia and light-hearted France, while a little man with fiery hair from the misty Western Isles shrieked encouragement at them, and maddened them with his fiddle. Even Nasmyth and Laura gave themselves up to the thrill of it, but as they swung together through the clashing of the measure, which some of their companions did not know very well, confused recollections swept through their minds, and they recalled dances in far different surroundings. Now and then they even fell back into old tricks of speech, and then, remembering, broke off with a ringing laughter. They were young still, and

the buoyancy of the country they had adopted was in both of them.

The dance ended too soon, and, when the music broke off with a crash of clanging chords, Nasmyth led his partner out of the press into a little log-walled room where the half-built dynamos stood. It was lighted, but a sharp cool air and the fret of the river came in through a black opening in one wall. Laura sat upon a large deal case, and Nasmyth, looking down upon her, leaned against a dynamo. He smiled as he recognized that she grasped the significance of the throbbing roar of water.

“It was very pleasant while it lasted, but—and it’s a pity—the music has stopped,” he said. “What we are now listening to is the turmoil of a Canadian river.”

Laura laughed, though there was a wistfulness in her eyes. “Oh, I understand, but couldn’t you have let me forget it just for to-night?” she said. “I suppose that privilege was permitted to Cinderella.”

The man felt curiously sorry for her as he remembered how hard her life was at the lonely ranch, but he knew she would not be pleased if he expressed his thoughts.

“Well,” he observed reflectively, “a thing often looks most attractive when it’s forbidden you, or a long way off, and, you see, there are always compensations. In fact, I’m beginning to come across quite a few of them.”

He broke off for a moment, and Laura, who noticed that he looked at her, fancied she understood in what direction his thoughts were drifting; but he went on again with a laugh.

“After all,” he said, “there are exiles who realize that they are in various ways better off than in all probability they would have been had they stayed in the land they were driven out of.”

“Ah,” answered Laura, “would you go back if you were given the opportunity?”

“No,” Nasmyth asserted slowly, “I don’t think I should do that—now.”

Again she understood him, the more clearly because she saw by the slight wrinkling of his forehead, during the significant pause, that he had grappled with the question. She did not think he was altogether in love with her, but she knew, at least, that he did not wish to go away while she was left behind in Canada. It seemed desirable to change the subject, and she touched the lace.

“I have to thank you for this,” she said. “It has given me pleasure.” Then—and

the words were wholly unpremeditated—she added: “I wanted to look well—just for once—to-night.”

She was sorry, a moment later, when she saw the quick change in the man’s expression, for she remembered that they had always seemed to understand what the other meant. It was clear that the qualification just for once had not misled him, but, after all, it seemed to her that he must presently realize that the admission was not one a reticent woman really in love with him would have made.

“Oh,” he said, “you are always beautiful.” Then his manner became deprecatory. “I didn’t think you’d mind. In one way what I owe you makes me a privileged person. I felt that I could venture——”

This, too, was clear to her, and though she considered his attitude the correct one, it jarred a little upon her. She was content that they should be merely comrades, or, at least, that was what she had endeavoured to convince herself, but, after all, there was no reason why he should emphasize the fact.

“Yes,” she replied quickly, “I think I understand.” Then once more she changed the subject. “I want to compliment you on building the dam.”

Nasmyth laughed, but there was a light in his eyes. “I should never have built it, if it hadn’t been for you. Still”—and he made her a reverent bow—“I owe you a good deal more than that.”

Laura made no response to this. She had thrilled at his achievement, when she had heard the manager’s speech, and it became still plainer that there was a certain hazard in dwelling upon his success. She could also be practical.

“In one way,” she said, “I suppose the result was not quite so satisfactory?”

“It certainly wasn’t. Of course, the work is not quite completed yet, but after settling up everything, the interim payment left me with about fifteen dollars in hand.”

Laura was not astonished at this, but she was more than a little perplexed, for she fancied that the lace she was wearing must have cost a good deal more than fifteen dollars. Still, she had no wish to make it evident that he had been extravagant; and, while she considered the matter, a man appeared in the doorway.

“I guess you two have got to come right out,” he said. “What d’you figure you were asked here for?”

Nasmyth held his arm out, but when Laura would have laid her hand upon it, the man broke in with a grin.

“No, sir,” he said severely, “Miss Waynefleet’s going right round. Now you’re coming along with me, and we’ll show them how to waltz.”

Laura smiled good-humouredly, and he swept her into the dance, while Nasmyth was seized upon by a girl, who drove him through it much as she did her brother’s steers in the Bush.

“A bump or two don’t count for much. What you want to do is to hump yourself and make things hum,” said Nasmyth’s partner, when another couple jostled them.

Nasmyth expressed his concurrence in a gasp, and contrived to save her from another crash, but when the dance was over, he felt limp, and was conscious that his partner was by no means satisfied with him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Still, I really think I did what I could.”

The girl regarded him half compassionately. “Well,” she said, “it wasn’t very much, but I guess you played yourself out building that blamed dam.”

CHAPTER VIII

BY COMBAT

Nasmyth's partner condescended, as she said, to give him another show, but he escaped from that dance with only a few abrasions, and, though he failed to obtain another with Laura, he contrived to enjoy himself. All his Bush friends were not primitive. Some of them had once played their parts in much more brilliant functions. They had cultivated tastes, and he had learned to recognize the strong points of those who had not. After all, kindly hearts count for much, and it was not unnatural that, like other exiles who have plodded up and down that rugged land, he should think highly of the hard-handed men and patient women who willingly offer a night's shelter and a share of their dried apples, salt pork, and grindstone bread to the penniless wanderer.

What was more to the purpose, a number of the guests at the dance had swung the axe by his side, and fought the river with him when the valley was filled with the roar of water.

They had done their work gallantly, when it seemed out of the question that they would ever receive the money he had promised them, from sheer pride in their manhood, and to keep their word, and now they danced as determinedly.

There are no cramping conventions and very few shams—and the shams in those forests, it must be confessed, are as a rule imported ones. In fact, there was that evening, among all those in the pulp-mill, only one man who seemed to disassociate himself from the general good-will. That man was Waynefleet. He wore his old velvet jacket as a cloak of superciliousness—or, at least, that was how it seemed to the Bush-ranchers, who recognized and resented an effete pride in the squeak of his very ancient lacquered shoes. It is possible that he did not mean to make himself in any way offensive, and merely desired to indicate that he was graciously willing to patronize their bucolic festivities. There would have been something almost pathetic in his carefully preserved dignity had it not been so obtrusively out of place; and when they stood watching him for a moment or

two, Gordon expressed Nasmyth's thoughts.

"How a man of that kind ever came to be Laura Waynefleet's father is more than I can figure out!" he said. "It's a question that worries me every time I look at him. Guess she owes everything to her mother; and Mrs. Waynefleet must have been a mighty patient woman."

Nasmyth smiled, but Gordon went on reflectively: "You folks show your sense when you dump your freaks into this country," he said. "It never seems to strike you that it's a little rough on us. What's the matter with men like Waynefleet is that you can't teach them sense. I'd have told him what I thought of him once or twice when I saw the girl doing his work up at the ranch if I'd figured it would have made any impression."

"I expect it would have been useless," remarked Nasmyth. "After all, I'm not sure that it's exactly your business."

Gordon watched Laura Waynefleet as she swung through a waltz on the arm of a sinewy rancher, and his eyes softened curiously.

"Only on the girl's account," he admitted. "I'm sorry for her. Stills the blamed old image isn't actively unkind."

Then he saw the sudden contraction of Nasmyth's face, and turned toward him. "Now," he said, "I want you to understand this thing. If it would be any comfort to her, I'd let Miss Waynefleet wipe her boots on me, and in one way that's about all I'm fit for. I know enough to realize that she'd never waste a moment thinking of a man like me, even if I hadn't in another way done for myself already."

"Still," Nasmyth replied quietly, "some women can forgive a good deal."

Gordon's face hardened, and he seemed to straighten himself. "Well, there are men—any way, in this country—who have too much grit in them to go crawling, broken, to any woman's feet, and to expect her to pick them up and mend them. Now you have heard me, and I guess you understand."

Nasmyth merely made a little gesture of sympathy. After all, he had the average Englishman's reticence, and the free speech of that country still jarred upon him now and then. He knew what Gordon had meant to impress on him, and he was touched by generosity of the motive, but for all that he felt relieved when Gordon abruptly moved away. He danced another dance, and then sauntered towards the dynamo room, where the manager had set up a keg or two of heady Ontario cider. Several men were refreshing themselves there, but they did not see

him when he approached the door.

“The only thing that’s out of tone about this show is Waynefleet,” said one of them who had once worked for the rancher. “What do we want that blamed old dead-beat round here for, when he can’t speak to anyone but the Crown land-agent and the mill manager?”

One of the others laughed, but Nasmyth saw venomous hatred in the big axeman’s face. It was, however, not his business, and Waynefleet was a man for whom he had no great liking. He was about to turn away when the chopper went on again.

“Waynefleet’s a blamed old thief, as everybody knows,” he said. “Him being what he is, I guess you couldn’t blame his daughter——”

Nasmyth, whom they had not noticed yet, could not quite hear what followed; but when somebody flung a sharp, incredulous question at the speaker, he stood fast in the doorway, with one hand clenched.

“Well,” said the man, with a suggestive grin, “what I mean’s quite plain. Is there any other girl, round this settlement who’d make up to that dam-builder as she’s doing, and slip quietly into his shanty alone?”

Nasmyth never learned what grievance against Waynefleet or his daughter had prompted this virulence, nor did it appear to matter. There was just sufficient foundation for the man’s insinuation to render it perilous if it was once permitted to pass unchallenged, and Nasmyth realized that any attempt to handle the affair delicately was not likely to be successful. He was afterwards greatly astonished that he could think clearly and impose a certain command upon himself; but he understood exactly what it was most advisable for him to do, and he set about it with a curious cold quietness which served his purpose well.

There was a gasp of astonishment from one of the group as he stepped forward into the light and looked with steady eyes at the man who had spoken.

“Jake,” he said, “you are a d—— liar.”

It was what the others had expected, and they rose and stood back a little from the pair, watching expectantly; for they recognized that the affair was serious, and, though Nasmyth had their sympathy, an impartial attitude was the correct one now. Jake was tall and lean and muscular; but perhaps the dam-builder’s quietness disconcerted him, or his bitterness had only extended to the rancher.

“Now,” Jake growled, “you light out of this. I don’t know that I’ve anything against—you.”

Nasmyth had his back to the door, and he did not see the grizzled Mattawa, who was supposed to be one of the strongest choppers about the settlement, standing a little behind him, and watching him and Jake attentively. Still, one of the others did, and made a sign to Mattawa that any support he might feel disposed to offer his employer would not be tolerated in the meanwhile. Nasmyth, however, realized that there was only one course open to him, and he drew back one hand as he met the uneasy eyes of the man in front of him.

“You are going to back down on what you said?” he asked, with incisive

quietness.

“Not a d—— word,” the other man assured him.

“Then,” said Nasmyth, “you must take the consequences.”

He swung forward on his left foot, and there was a thud as his scarred knuckles landed heavily in the middle of the detractor’s face. He struck with an unexpected swiftness and all the force that was in him, for he had learned that the rules of the trial by combat are by no means so hard and fast in British Columbia as they are in England. As a matter of fact, it is not very frequently resorted to there; but when men do fight, their one object is to disable their opponents as soon as possible and by any means available.

Jake reeled backwards a pace or two, and the spectators said afterwards there was no reason why Nasmyth should have permitted him to recover himself, as he did. Two axes which the carpenters had been using stood against the wall, and Jake caught up the nearest of them. He swung the gleaming blade high, while the blood trickled from his cut lips and the swollen veins rose on his forehead. This, however, was going further than the others considered admissible, and there was a protesting shout, while one sturdy fellow cautiously slid along the wall to get in behind the man who had the axe.

Still, for a second or two, which might have proved fatal to him, Nasmyth had only his own resources to depend upon, and he did the one thing that was possible. The Canadian axe-haft is long, and he sprang straight in at the man. As he did so, the big blade came down, and flashed by a hand’s breadth behind his shoulders. He felt a burning pain on the outside of his thigh, but that did not seem to matter, and he was clutching at his opponent’s throat when he was bodily flung aside. Then, as he fell against the log wall, he had a momentary glimpse of Jake bent backwards in Mattawa’s arms. There was a brief floundering scuffle as the two men reeled towards the black opening in the wall, and after that a splash in the darkness outside, and Mattawa stepped back into the room alone.

“The d—— hog is in the flume,” he said.

That did not appear to trouble any of the others. The sluice was not deep, and, though it was certainly running hard, it was scarcely likely that a stalwart Bushman would suffer greatly from being washed along it.

“Guess it will cool him off,” said one of them. “If it doesn’t, and he comes back to make a fuss, we’ll heave him in again.”

Then they turned and looked at Nasmyth, who sat down somewhat limply on a cider keg. The blood, which was running down his leg, made a little pool at his feet. Mattawa, who crossed over to him, asked for a knife, and when a man produced one, he slit Nasmyth's trousers up to the hip. Then he nodded.

"Boys," he said, "one of you will slip out kind of quiet and bring Mr. Gordon along. Two more of you will stand in the door there and not let anybody in."

They obeyed him, and Mattawa looked down at Nasmyth again.

"I guess the thing's not serious," he commented.

"Well," said Nasmyth ruefully, "in one way, I think it is. You see, store clothes are dear, and this is the only pair of trousers I've got."

There was a little laugh from the others, and he knew he had done wisely, when they clumsily expressed their satisfaction at his escape. He had, at least, discredited Jake, and it was evident that if the man made any more assertions of a similar nature, which was very unlikely, no one would listen to them.

In the meanwhile, nobody else seemed to be aware that anything unusual was going on. All had happened in a minute or two, and the clanging of the fiddle and the patter of the dancers' feet had drowned any sound that rose from the dynamo-room. Nasmyth had not long to wait before Gordon stepped in and quietly set about his surgical work, after someone had dipped up a little water from the sluice.

"Yes," said Gordon, "it's quite a nice clean slice, and I guess it's not going to trouble you much, though you won't walk very far for a week or two. As soon as we can get you to the dam, I'll put a proper dressing on." Then he looked up sharply. "In the meanwhile, I don't quite see how you cut yourself like that."

"As a matter of fact, I didn't," said Nasmyth, with evident reluctance. "I suppose you will have to be told." He looked round at the others. "Boys, I particularly don't want this thing to go any further."

He related what had happened, and one of the men stood up. "I wouldn't worry over that," he replied. "We're not going to talk, and if Jake does, one of us will pound a little sense into him. Now I'll slip out and get Highton's team."

After that they gave Nasmyth some cider, and a few minutes later he limped out through the opening in the wall and across the plank they laid above the sluice to the waiting waggon. It was not far to the dam, and before very long Gordon was back again at the mill. It naturally happened, though he was anxious to avoid her,

that Laura Waynefleet was the first person who accosted him.

“Have you seen Mr. Nasmyth?” she asked.

“Oh, yes,” said Gordon. “I saw him a little while ago. You are wanting him?”

Laura laughed. “I believed I promised him another dance. It’s a little curious he hasn’t come for it.”

“In one way it’s deplorably bad taste.”

The girl was quick to notice that his gaze was not quite frank, and he winced when for a moment she laid her hand upon his arm, for he saw the veiled anxiety in her eyes.

“Something has been going on,” she said. “You don’t want to tell me where Mr. Nasmyth is.”

“He has just gone back to the dam. He got hurt—a trifling cut—nothing more than that. Still, I insisted on tying it up.”

“Ah,” cried Laura sharply, “you evidently don’t wish me to know how he got it!”

“It is just what I don’t mean to do. Any way, it’s not worth while troubling about. Nasmyth’s injury isn’t in the least serious.”

“It doesn’t seem to strike you that I could ask him myself.”

Gordon would have liked to warn her to keep away from the dam, but he did not see how it could be done unless he offered some reason, and that was a thing he shrank from.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “you certainly could.” Then he glanced down at her hands. “Those are unusually pretty gloves you have on.”

His answer was, as it happened, almost as injudicious as he could have rendered it, since it left the girl determined to sift the matter thoroughly. She, however, only smiled just then.

“I think there isn’t a nicer pair of gloves in Canada than these,” she said.

Gordon took himself away, wondering what she could have meant by that; and Laura waited until next day, when, although there was, as usual, a good deal to be done about the ranch, she went down to find out what was the matter with Nasmyth.

The injured man was sitting in his shanty, with his foot upon a chair, but he rose when she came in, and stood leaning rather hard upon the table.

“It is very kind of you to come,” he said, taking her hand. He made shift to limp to the door, whence he called for Mattawa.

“Bring those two chairs out, Tom, and put them in the sun,” he said.

The old axeman shook his head severely. “You sit right down again. What in the name of wonder are you on your legs for, any way?” he asked. Then he saw Laura, and made a little gesture of resignation. “Well, I guess it will have to be done.”

The sudden change in his attitude was naturally not lost upon the girl, but she kept her astonishment to herself, and waited until Mattawa had made Nasmyth as comfortable as possible. Then she turned to him.

“I am very sorry you are hurt,” she said. “I understand it was an axe cut. How did it happen?”

Nasmyth appeared to reflect. “Well,” he answered, “I suppose I was a little careless—in fact, I must have been. You see, some of the building gang had left their axes in the dynamo-room.”

“That,” said Laura dryly, “certainly accounts for the axe being there. I’m not sure it goes very much further.”

“It really wasn’t very much of a cut.” Nasmyth’s desire to escape from the topic was a trifle too plain, as he added, “Isn’t it nice out here?”

It occurred to Laura that it was uncomfortably cold, for there was a nip of frost in the air, though the sun hung coppery red above the sombre pines.

“I almost fancied you were not overjoyed to see me,” she remarked.

Nasmyth appeared momentarily embarrassed, but his expression suddenly changed, and Laura felt a faint thrill when he laid his hand upon her arm.

“That,” he said, “is a fancy you must never entertain again.”

In one respect Laura was fully satisfied, and, though there was still a great deal upon which she meant to be enlightened, she talked about other matters for almost half an hour, and then rose with a little shiver.

“I must get back to the settlement, where I have left the team,” she said, and glanced down at him for a moment with solicitude in her eyes. “You will be very careful.”

Nasmyth let her go, but he did not know that she signed to Mattawa, who was then busy hewing out a big redwood log. The axeman strolled after her into the

Bush, and then stopped to look hard at her as he uttered an inquiring, “Well?”

“Tom,” said the girl, “can’t you understand that it would be very much wiser if somebody told me exactly how Mr. Nasmyth got hurt?”

The axeman nodded. “Yes,” he admitted, with a wink, “that’s just how it strikes me, and I’m going to. The boss has no more arms and legs than he’s a use for anyway.”

Laura gazed at him in bewilderment, but the man’s expression was perfectly grave. “Now,” he added, “I guess one can talk straight sense to you, and the fact is I can’t have you coming round here again. Just listen about two minutes, and I’ll try to make the thing clear to you.”

He did so with a certain graphic force that she had not expected from him, and the colour crept into her cheeks. Then, to Mattawa’s astonishment, she smiled.

“Thank you,” she said simply. “But the other man?”

“Well,” replied Mattawa, “if he goes round talking, somebody will ’most pound the life out of him.”

Then he swung round abruptly, for he was shrewd, and had his primitive notions of delicacy; and Laura went on through the stillness of the Bush, with a curious softness in her eyes. Mattawa had been terse, and, in some respects, his observations had not been tactful, but nobody could have impressed her more in Nasmyth’s favour. Indeed, at the moment, she scarcely remembered how the aspersions Jake had made might affect herself. As it happened, she met Gordon near the settlement, and he stopped a moment. He had come upon her suddenly, and had looked at her with a suggestive steadiness, but she smiled.

“Yes,” she said, “I have been to the dam. After the way in which you made it evident that you didn’t want me to go there, it was, perhaps, no more than you could have expected.”

“Ah!” rejoined Gordon, with a look of anxiety, “you probably got hold of Mattawa. Well, after all, I guess he has done the wise thing.” Then after a pause he observed, “There is very little the matter with your courage.”

“I fancy,” observed Laura half wistfully, “that is, in several respects, fortunate.”

Then she went on again, and though Gordon felt exceedingly compassionate, he frowned and closed one hand.

“It’s a sure thing I’ll have to tell Waynefleet what kind of a man he is,” he said.

CHAPTER IX

GORDON SPEAKS HIS MIND

It was a nipping morning, and the clearing outside the ranch was flecked with patches of frozen snow, when Waynefleet sat shivering in a hide chair beside the stove. The broken viands upon the table in front of him suggested that he had just made a tolerable breakfast, but his pose was expressive of limp resignation, and one could have fancied from the look in his thin face that he was feeling very sorry for himself. Self-pity, in fact, was rather a habit of his, and, perhaps, because of it, he had usually very little pity to spare for anybody else. He looked up when, flushed and gasping, his daughter came in with two heavy pails of water. She shivered visibly.

“It would be a favour if you would shut that door as soon as you can,” said Waynefleet. “As I fancy I have mentioned, this cold goes right through me. It occurred to me that you might have come in a little earlier to see if I was getting my breakfast properly.”

Laura, who glanced at the table, thought that he had acquitted himself reasonably well, but she refrained from pointing out the fact, and, after shutting the door, crossed the room to her store-cupboard, and took out a can of fruit which she had set aside for another purpose. Waynefleet watched her open it and made a little sign of impatience.

“You are very clumsy this morning,” he said.

The girl’s hands were wet and stiff with cold, but she quietly laid another plate upon the table before she answered him.

“Charly is busy in the slashing, and I don’t want to take him away, but there are those logs in the wet patch that ought to be hauled out now the ground is hard,” she said. “I suppose you don’t feel equal to doing it to-day?”

“No,” said Waynefleet with querulous incisiveness, “it is quite out of the question. Do I look like a man who could reasonably be expected to undertake

anything of that kind just now?”

It occurred to Laura that he did not look as if there was very much the matter with him, and she stood still a minute considering. As Gordon had said, it was she who managed the ranch, and she recognized that it was desirable that the trees in question should be dragged out of the soft ground while the frost lasted. Still, there was the baking and washing, and it would be late at night before she could accomplish half she wished to do, if she undertook the task in question. While she thought over it her father spoke again.

“I wish you would sit down,” he said. “I feel I must have quietness, and your restless habits jar upon me horribly.”

That decided her, and slipping into her own room, she put on an old blanket coat, and went out quietly. She walked through the orchard to the little log stable where the working oxen stood, and, after patting the patient beasts, shackled a heavy chain to the yoke she laid upon their brawny necks. Then, picking up a handspike, she led them out, and for an hour walked beside them, tapping them with a long pointed stick, while they dragged the big logs out of the swamp. Now and then it taxed all her strength to lift the thinner end of a log on the chain-sling with a handspike, but she contrived to do it until at length one heavier than the others proved too much for her. She could hear the ringing of the hired man’s axe across the clearing, but there was a great deal for him to do, and, taking up the handspike again, she strained at it.

She heard footsteps behind her, and she straightened herself suddenly. She turned and saw Gordon watching her with a curious smile. Tall and straight and supple, with a ruddy, half-guilty glow on her face, she stood near the middle of the little gap in the Bush, the big dappled oxen close at her side. The wintry sunlight, which struck upon her, tinted the old blanket dress a shining ochre, and the loose tress of red-gold hair, which had escaped from beneath her little fur cap, struck a dominant tone of glowing colour among the pale reds and russets of the fir-trunks and withered fern.

Gordon shook his head reproachfully. “Sit down a minute or two, and I’ll heave that log on to the sling,” he said. “This is not the kind of thing you ought to be doing.”

Laura, who was glad of the excuse, sat down on one of the logs, while the man leaned against a fir and gravely regarded her.

“The work must be done by somebody, and my father is apparently not very well again,” she explained. “Charly has his hands full in the slashing. We must get it

cleaned up, if it is to be ploughed this spring."

"Nasmyth contrived to look after all these things. Why didn't you keep him? The man didn't want to go away."

The colour deepened in Laura's face, and Gordon, who saw it, made a sign of comprehension. "Well," he added, "I suppose that wasn't a thing one could expect you to tell me, though I don't quite see why you shouldn't think of yourself now and then. You know it wasn't on your own account you sent him away."

"How does this concern you?" she asked.

Gordon flung one hand out. "Ah," he said, "how does it concern me?" Then he seemed to lay a restraint upon himself. "Well, it does in one sense, anyway. After all, I am a doctor, and a friend of yours, and I'm going to warn you against attempting things women weren't meant to do. If that doesn't prove efficacious, I'll say a word or two to Nasmyth, and you'll have him back here again. It's a sure thing your father would be glad to get him."

"If you do, I shall never forgive you," warned Laura, with a flash in her eyes.

She was sorry she had spoken so plainly when she saw that Gordon winced. She had guessed more or less correctly what the man felt for her, and she had no wish to pain him. Except for that, however, the admission she had made did not greatly matter, since she fancied that he was quite aware why she had sent Nasmyth away. Gordon changed the subject abruptly.

"There are very few of those blanket dresses this side of the Rockies," he said. "You probably got it back East."

The girl's eyes had a wistful look as she answered: "We spent our first winter in Montreal, and we had some friends who were very kind to us. I like to look back upon those first few months in Canada."

Gordon nodded. "Oh, yes," he replied. "I know—sleigh-rides, snowshoe meets, skating-rinks, toboggan-slides. Quite as lively as a London season, and considerably more invigorating; I guess you've been through that, too. In one way it's a pity you didn't stay in Montreal."

He saw her sudden embarrassment, and fancied that she could have stayed there, if she had wished to do so, but he felt that he must speak frankly, and he shook his head severely.

"Do you never think of your own advantage at all?" he inquired. "Have you

none of the ambitions that most women seem to have?”

“Aren’t you forgetting?” Laura asked with sudden quietness. “My father found it would not be advisable for him to settle in Montreal—for the same reason that afterwards led us to leave Victoria—and we went West. Perhaps he could have faced the trouble and lived it down, but I could not leave him alone.”

Gordon sat silent a moment or two. He knew, though she very rarely mentioned it, how heavy was the burden that had been laid upon her, and he was divided between a great pity for her and anger against her father. Then he rose slowly to his feet.

“Miss Waynefleet,” he said, “if I have said anything that hurt you, I’m sorry, but there are times when I must talk. I feel I have to. In the meanwhile I’ll heave those logs up on a skid so that you can slip the chain round them.”

For the next half-hour he exerted himself savagely, and when at last he dropped the handspike, his face was damp with perspiration. He smiled grimly when Laura, who had hauled one or two of the logs away, came back tapping the plodding oxen.

“Now,” he said, “I’m going in to see your father. Custer happened to tell me he was feeling low again, and it’s going to afford me a good deal of pleasure to prescribe for him.”

He swung off his wide hat, and, when he turned away, Laura wondered with a few misgivings what had brought the little snap into his eyes. Three or four minutes later he entered the house, where Waynefleet lay beside the stove with a cigar in his hand.

“I ran across Custer at the settlement, and I came along to see how you were keeping,” said Gordon.

Waynefleet held out a cigar-box. “Make yourself comfortable,” he answered hospitably. “We’ll have dinner a little earlier than usual.”

The sight of the label on the box came near rousing Gordon to an outbreak of indignation. “I’m not going to stay,” he declared. “It seems to me Miss Waynefleet has about enough to do already.”

He saw Waynefleet raise his eyebrows, and he added: “I guess it’s not worth while troubling to point out that it’s not my affair. Now, if you’ll get ahead with your symptoms.”

Waynefleet looked hard at him for a moment. The older man was not

accustomed to being addressed in that brusque fashion, and it jarred upon him, but, as a matter of fact, he was not feeling well, and, as he not infrequently pointed out, he had discovered that one had to put up with many unpleasant things in that barbarous country. He described his symptoms feelingly, and was rather indignant when Gordon expressed neither astonishment nor sympathy.

“That’s all right,” said Gordon. “The thing’s quite plain—especially the general lassitude you complain of. The trouble is that if you don’t make an effort it’s going to become chronic.”

Again Waynefleet looked at him in astonishment, for Gordon’s tone was very suggestive.

“Yes,” added the medical adviser, “it’s a complaint a good many men, who haven’t been raised to work, are afflicted with. Well, I’ll mix you up a tonic, and you’ll drive down for it yourself. The thing won’t be half as efficacious if you send the hired man. Then you’ll set to every morning soon as breakfast’s over, and do a couple of hours’ smart chopping for a week. By that time you’ll find it easy, and you can go on an hour or two in the afternoon. Nobody round here will recognize you, if you keep it up for the next three months.”

Waynefleet’s thin face grew red, but Gordon’s imperturbable demeanour restrained him from betraying his indignation.

“You don’t understand that I couldn’t swing an axe for five minutes together,” he objected.

“The trouble,” answered Gordon, “is that you don’t want to.”

Waynefleet made an attempt to rise, but his companion laid a hand upon his arm and pressed him down again.

“You were anxious for my advice, and now I’m going to prescribe,” Gordon continued. “Two hours’ steady chopping every day, to be raised by degrees to six. Then I’d let up on smoking cigars of that kind, and practise a little more self-denial in one or two other respects. You could make things easier for Miss Waynefleet with the money you save.”

He rose with a laugh. “Well, I’m going. All you have to do is to carry out my suggestions, and you may still make yourself and your ranch a credit to the district. In the meanwhile, this place would be considerably improved by a little ventilation.”

He went out, and left Waynefleet gazing in indignant astonishment at the door he

carefully fixed open. It seemed to Waynefleet almost incredible that such words should have been spoken to him, and the suggestion that at the cost of a painful effort he should endeavour to make himself a credit to that barbarous neighbourhood rankled most of all. He had felt, hitherto, that he had conferred a favour on the community by settling there. He lay still until his daughter came in and glanced at him inquiringly.

“You have seen Mr. Gordon?” she queried.

“I have,” answered Waynefleet with fine disdain. “You will understand that if he comes back here, he must be kept away from me. The man is utterly devoid of refinement or consideration.”

In the meanwhile Gordon was riding, circumspectly, down the rutted trail, and it was an hour later when he dismounted at the shanty of Nasmyth’s workmen, and shared a meal with the gang employed on the dam. After that he sat with Nasmyth, who still limped a little, in the hut, from which, as the door stood open, they could see the men stream up into the Bush and out along the dam. The dam now stood high above the water-level, for the frost had bound fast the feeding snow upon the peaks above, though the stream roared and frothed through the two big sluice-gates. By-and-by, the ringing of axes and the clink of drills broke through the sound of the rushing waters. Gordon, who stretched himself out on a deer-hide lounge, smiled at Nasmyth as he lighted his pipe.

“I’ve been talking a little sense to Waynefleet this morning. I felt I had to, though I’m afraid it’s not going to be any use,” he announced.

“Whether you were warranted or not is, of course, another matter,” said Nasmyth. “Perhaps you were, if you did it on Miss Waynefleet’s account. Anyway, I don’t altogether understand why you should be sure it will have no effect.”

Gordon looked at him with a grin. “Well,” he remarked oracularly, “it’s easy to acquire an inflated notion of one’s own importance, though it’s quite often a little difficult to keep it. Something’s very apt to come along and prick you, and you collapse flat when it lets the inflation out. In some cases one never quite gets one’s self-sufficiency back. The scar the prick made is always there, but it’s different with Waynefleet. He is made of self-closing jelly, and when you take the knife out the gap shuts up again. It’s quite hard to fancy it was ever there.”

Nasmyth nodded gravely, for there was an elusive something in his comrade’s tone that roused his sympathy.

“Gordon,” he said, “is it quite impossible for you to go back East again?”

Gordon leaned back in his chair, and glanced out across the toiling men upon the dam, at the frothing river and rugged hillside, with a look of longing in his eyes.

“In one way it is, but I want you to understand,” he replied. “I might begin again in some desolate little town—but I aimed higher—and was once very nearly getting there. As it is, if I made my mark, the thing I did would be remembered against me. We’ll let it go. As a surgeon of any account I’m done for.”

“Still, it’s a tolerably big country, and folks forget. You might, at least, go so far, and that would, after all, give you a good deal—a competence, the right to marry.”

Gordon laughed, but his voice was harsh.

“This is one of the days on which I must talk. I feel like that, now and then,” he said. Then he looked at Nasmyth hard. “Well, I’ve seen the one woman I could marry, and it’s certain that, if I dare make her the offer, she would never marry me.”

“Ah,” said Nasmyth, “you seem quite sure of that?”

“Quite,” declared Gordon, and there was, for a moment or two, an almost uncomfortable silence in the shanty.

Then he made a little forceful gesture as he turned to his companion again.

“Well,” he said, “after all, what does it count for? Is it man’s one and only business to marry somebody? Of course, we have folks back East, who seem to act on that belief, and in your country half of them appear to spend their time and energies philandering.”

“I don’t think it’s half,” said Nasmyth dryly.

“It’s not a point of any importance, and we’ll let it go. Anyway, it seems perilously easy for a man who gets the woman he sets his mind upon to sink into a fireside hog in the civilized world. Now and then, when things go wrong with folks of that kind, they come out here, and nobody has any use for them. What can you do with the man who gets sick the first time he sleeps in the rain, and can’t do without his dinner? Oh, I know all about the preservation of the species, but west of the Great Lakes we’ve no room for any species that isn’t tough and fit.”

He broke off for a moment. “After all, this is the single man’s country, and—

we—know that it demands from him the best that he was given, from the grimmest toil of his body to the keenest effort of his brain. Marriage is a detail—an incident; we're here to fight, to grapple with the wilderness, and to break it in, and that burden wasn't laid upon us only for the good of ourselves. When we've flung our trestles over the rivers, and blown room for the steel track out of the cañon's side, the oat-fields and the orchards creep up the valleys, and the men from the cities set up their mills. Prospector, track-layer, chopper, follow in sequence here, and then we're ready to hold out our hands to the thousands you've no use or food for back yonder. I'm not sure it matters that the men who do the work don't often share the results of it. We bury them beside our bridge trestles and under tons of shattered rock, and, perhaps, when their time comes, some of them aren't sorry to have done with it. Anyway, they've stood up to man's primeval task."

He rose with another half-deprecatory laugh, but his eyes snapped. "You don't talk like that in your country—it would hurt some of you—but if we spread ourselves now and then, you can look round and see the things we do." Then he touched Nasmyth's shoulder. "Oh, yes, you understand—for somebody has taught you—and by-and-by, you're going to feel the thing getting hold of you."

He moved towards the doorway, but turned as he reached it. "Talking's cheap, and I have several dozen blamed big firs to saw up, as well as Waynefleet's tonic to mix. He'll come along for it when that prick I gave him commences to heal."

CHAPTER X

THE CALLING CAÑON

There were four wet and weary men in the Siwash canoe that Nasmyth, who crouched astern, had just shot across the whirling pool with the back feathering stroke of his paddle which is so difficult to acquire. Tom from Mattawa, grasping a dripping pole, stood up in the bow. Gordon and Wheeler, the pulp-mill manager, knelt in the middle of the boat. Wheeler's hands were blistered from gripping the paddle-haft, and his knees were raw, where he had pressed them against the bottom of the craft to obtain a purchase. It was several years since he had undertaken any severe manual labour, though he was by no means unused to it, and he was cramped and aching in every limb. He had plied pole or paddle for eight hours, during which his companions had painfully propelled the craft a few miles into the cañon. He gasped with relief when Mattawa ran the bow of the canoe in upon the shingle, and then rose and stretched himself wearily. The four men stepped ashore. Curiously they looked about them, for they had had little opportunity for observation. Those who undertake to pole a canoe up the rapids of a river on the Pacific slope usually find it advisable to confine their attention strictly to the business in hand.

Immediately in front of them the river roared and seethed amid giant boulders, which rose out of a tumultuous rush of foam, but while it was clearly beyond the power of flesh and blood to drive the canoe up against the current, a strip of shingle, also strewn with boulders and broken by ledges of dripping rock, divided the water from the wall of the cañon. The cañon, a tremendous slope of rock with its dark crest overhanging them, ran up high above their heads; but they could see the pines clinging to the hillside which rose from the edge of the other wall across the river, so steep that it appeared impossible to find a foothold upon it.

The four men were down in the bottom of a great rift in the hills, and, though it would be day above for at least two hours, the light was faint in the hollow and dimmed by drifting mist. It was a spot from which a man new to that wild

country might well have shrunk, and the roar of water rang through it in tremendous, nerve-taxing pulsations. Nasmyth and his companions, however, had gone there with no particular purpose—merely for relaxation—though it had cost them hours of arduous labour, and the journey had been a more or less hazardous one. Wheeler, the pulp-mill manager, was waiting for his machinery, and, Nasmyth had finished the dam. When they planned the journey for pleasure, Mattawa and Gordon had gone with them ostensibly on a shooting trip. There are game laws, which set forth when and where a man may shoot, and how many heads he is entitled to, but it must be admitted that the Bush-rancher seldom concerns himself greatly about them. When he fancies a change of diet, he goes out and kills a deer. Still, though all the party had rifles no one would have cared very much if they had not come across anything to shoot at.

Now and then a vague unrest comes upon the Bushman, and he sets off for the wilderness, and stays there while his provisions hold out. He usually calls it prospecting, but as a rule he comes back with his garments rent to tatters, and no record of any mineral claim or timber rights, but once more contentedly he goes on with his task. It may be a reawakening of forgotten instincts, half-conscious lust of adventure, or a mere desire for change, that impels him to make the journey, but it is at least an impulse with which most men who toil in those forests are well acquainted.

Nasmyth and Mattawa pulled the canoe out, and when they sat down and lighted their pipes, Wheeler grinned as he drew up his duck trousers and surveyed his knees, which were raw and bleeding. Then he held up one of his hands that his comrades might notice the blisters upon it. He was a little, wiry man with dark eyes, which had a snap in them.

“Well,” he observed, “we’re here, and I guess any man with sense enough to prefer whole bones to broken ones would wonder why we are. It’s most twelve years since I used to head off into the Bush this way in Washington.”

Gordon glanced at him with a twinkle in his eyes. “Now,” he observed, “you’ve hit the reason the first time. When you’ve done it once, you’ll do it again. You have to. Perhaps it’s Nature’s protest against your axiom that man’s chief business is dollar-making. Still, I’m admitting that this is a blamed curious place for Nasmyth to figure on killing a wapiti in. Say, are you going to sleep here to-night, Derrick?”

It was very evident that none of the big wapiti—elks, as the Bushman incorrectly calls them—could have reached that spot, but Nasmyth laughed.

“I felt I’d like to see the fall—I don’t know why,” he said. “It’s scarcely another mile, and I’ve been up almost that far with an Indian before. There’s a ravine with young spruce in it where we could sleep.”

“Then,” announced Wheeler resolutely, “we’re starting right now. When I pole a canoe up a place of this kind I want to see where I’m going. I once went down a big rapid with the canoe-bottom up in front of me in the dark, and one journey of that kind is quite enough.”

They dumped out their camp gear, and took hold of the canoe, a beautifully modelled, fragile thing, hollowed out of a cedar log, and for the next half-hour hauled it laboriously over some sixty yards of boulders and pushed it, walking waist-deep, across rock-strewn pools. Then they went back for their wet tent, axes, rifles, blankets, and a bag of flour, and when they had reloaded the canoe, they took up the poles again. It was the hardest kind of work, and demanded strength and skill, for a very small blunder would have meant wreck upon some froth-lapped boulder, or an upset into the fierce white rush of the river, but at length they reached a deep whirling pool, round which long smears of white froth swung in wild gyrations. The smooth rock rose out of the pool without even a cranny one could slip a hand into, and the river fell tumultuously over a ledge into the head of it. The water swept out of a veil of thin white mist, and the great rift rang with a bewildering din. One felt that the vast primeval forces were omnipotent there. As the men looked about them with the spray on their wet faces and the white mist streaming by, Mattawa, who stood up forward, dropped suddenly into the bottom of the canoe.

“In poles,” he said. “Paddle! Get a move on her!” Nasmyth, who felt his pole dip into empty water, flung it in and grabbed his paddle, for the craft shot forward suddenly with the swing of the eddy towards the fall. He did not know whether the stream would sweep them under it, but he was not desirous of affording it the opportunity. For perhaps a minute they exerted themselves furiously, gasping as they strained aching arms and backs, and meanwhile, in spite of them, beneath the towering fall of rock, the canoe slid on toward the fall. It also drew a little nearer to the middle of the pool, where there was a curious bevelled hollow, round which the white foam spun. It seemed to Nasmyth that the stream went bodily down.

“Paddle,” said Mattawa hoarsely. “Heave her clear of it.”

They drove furiously between the white-streaked shoot of the fall and that horribly suggestive whirling; then, as they went back towards the outrush from

the pool, they made another desperate, gasping effort. For several moments it seemed that they must be swept back again, and then they gained a little, and, with a few more strokes, reached the edge of the rapid. They let the canoe drive down the rapid while the boulders flashed by them, for there was the same desire in all of them, and that was to get as far as possible away from that horrible pool. At last Mattawa, standing up forward, poled the canoe in where a deep ravine rent the dark rock's side, and the party went ashore, wet and gasping. Wheeler looked back up the gorge and solemnly shook his head.

"If you want to see any more of it, you've got to do it alone. I've had enough," he declared. "A man who runs a pulp-mill has no use for paddling under that kind of fall. I'm not going back again."

Mattawa and Gordon set the tent up in the hollow of the ravine, while Wheeler hewed off spruce branches with which to make the beds; but Nasmyth did nothing to assist any of them. Thinking hard, he sat on a boulder, with his unlighted pipe in his hand. The throbbing roar of water rang about him; and it was then that the great project crept into his mind. It was rapidly growing dark in the bottom of the great rift, but he could still see the dim white flashing of the fall and the vast wall of rock and rugged hillside that ran up in shadowy grandeur, high above his head, and as he gazed at it all he felt his heart throb fast. He was conscious of a curious thrill as he watched and listened to that clash of stupendous forces. The river had spent countless ages cutting out that channel, hurling down mighty boulders and stream-driven shingle upon the living rock; but it was, it seemed to him, within man's power to alter it in a few arduous months. He sat very still, astonished at the daring of his own conception, until Wheeler strolled up to him.

"How much does the river drop at the fall?" he asked.

"About eight feet in the fall itself," answered Wheeler. "Seems to me it falls much more in the rush above. Still, I can't say I noticed it particularly—I had something else to think about."

"It's a short rapid," remarked Nasmyth reflectively. "There is, no doubt, a great deal of the hardest kind of rock under it, which is, in one or two respects, unfortunate. I suppose you don't know very much about geology?"

"I don't," confessed the pulp-miller. "Machines are my specialty."

"Well," said Nasmyth, "I'm afraid I don't either, and I believe one or two of these cañons have puzzled wiser folks than I. You see, the general notion is that the rivers made them, but it doesn't seem quite reasonable to imagine a river

tilting at a solid range and splitting it through the middle. In fact, it seems to me that some of the cañons were there already, and the rivers just ran into them. One or two Indians have come down from the valley close to the fall, and they told me the river was quite deep there. The rock just holds it up at the fall. It's a natural dam—a dyke, I think they call it."

"I don't quite understand what all this is leading to," observed Wheeler.

Nasmyth laughed, though there was, as his companion noticed, a curious look in his eyes. "I'll try to make it clearer when we get into the valley. We're going there to-morrow."

It was almost dark now, and they went back together to the little fire that burned redly among the spruces in the ravine. There Mattawa and Gordon had a simple supper ready. The others stretched themselves out, rolled in their blankets, soon after they had eaten, but Nasmyth lay propped up on one elbow, wide awake, listening to the roar of water until well into the night. The stream drowned the faint rustling of the spruces in a great dominant note, and he set his lips as he recognized its depth of tone and volume. He had once more determined to pit all his strength of mind and body against the river. Still, he went to sleep at last, and awakening some time after it was dawn on the heights above, roused his comrades. When breakfast was over he started with them up the ravine to cross the range.

It was afternoon before they accomplished the climb, though the height was not great and a ravine pierced the crest, and they had rent most of their clothes to tatters when they scrambled down the slope into the valley. Those pine-shrouded hillsides are strewn with mighty fallen trees, amid which the tangled underbrush grows tall and rank, and, where the pines are less thickly spaced, there are usually matted groves of willows, if the soil is damp. They pitched camp on the edge of the valley, and Gordon and Nasmyth prepared supper, while Wheeler cut firewood and Mattawa went out to prospect for the tracks of feeding deer. The axeman came back to say there were no signs of any wapiti, though the little Bush deer were evidently about, and it was decided to try for one that night with the pitlight, a mode of shooting now and then adopted when the deer are shy.

They ate their supper, and afterwards lay down with their blankets rolled about them, for it grew very cold as darkness crept up the valley. Like most of the other valleys, this one was walled in by steep-sided, pine-shrouded hills; but in this case there were no trees in the bottom of it, which, while very narrow, appeared several miles long. It was also nearly level, and the river wound

through it in deep, still bends. There are not many valleys in that country in which heavy timber fails to grow, and those within reach of a market have been seized upon; for all ranch produce is in excellent demand, and the clearing of virgin forest is a singularly arduous task. In fact, there was only one reason why this strip of natural prairie had not already been claimed. Most of it was swamp. Nasmyth, who was quieter than usual, watched the filmy mist creep about it as the soft darkness rolled down the hillsides.

Gordon rose and hooked a pitlight into his hat. This pitlight consists simply of a little open miner's-lamp, which has fixed beneath it a shield cut out of any convenient meat-can. The lamp is filled with seal oil. Once a man has fastened it upon his head, the light is cut off from his person, so that he stands invisible, and the little flame appears unsupported. Deer of any kind are endued with an inquisitiveness which frequently leads to their destruction, and when they notice the twinkling light flitting through the air they approach it to ascertain the reason for such an unusual thing. Then the rancher shoots, as soon as their shining eyes become visible.

The party divided. Gordon and Nasmyth, who kept near each other, fell over several rotting trees, and into what appeared to be crumbling drains. They floundered knee-deep through withered timothy, which is not a natural grass. For an hour or two nobody saw any deer. Then Gordon, who was cautiously skirting another drain, closed in on Nasmyth until he touched his comrade. Nasmyth heard a crackling rustle among the withered grass. Gordon made a little abrupt movement.

"If we both blaze off, we double the odds on our getting it," he said.

Nasmyth only just heard him, for his heart was beating with excitement; but as he stood knee-deep in the grass, with both hands ready to pitch the heavy rifle up, it seemed to him that Mattawa could not have been correct when he said that there were only the Bush deer about. Judging by the noise it was making, the approaching beast, he thought, must be as big as a wapiti. Then he saw two pale spots of light, which seemed curiously high above the ground.

"I'm shooting," he said, and in another moment the butt was into his shoulder.

He felt the jar of it, but, as usual in such cases, he heard no detonation, though the pale flash from Gordon's rifle was almost in his eyes. He, however, heard the thud of the heavy bullet, and a moment or two later, a floundering amidst the grass.

"That can't be a Bush deer!" he cried.

“It sounds ’way more like an elephant,” said Gordon, with a gasp.

They ran forward until they stopped a few yards short of something very big and shadowy that was still struggling in the grass. Gordon cautiously crept up a little nearer.

“Those aren’t deer’s horns, anyway,” he announced. “Plug it quick. The blamed thing’s getting up.”

Nasmyth flung the rifle up to his shoulder, and twice jerked a fresh cartridge into the chamber, but this time there was silence when the crash of the heavy Marlin died away among the woods. They crept forward a little further circumspectly, until Gordon stopped again with a gasp of consternation.

“Well,” he said, “I guess it couldn’t be either a Bush deer or a wapiti.”

They were still standing there when their comrades came running up, and Mattawa, who took down his light, broke into a great hoarse laugh.

“A steer!” he said, and pointed to a mark on the hide. “One of Custer’s stock. Guess he’ll charge you quite a few dollars for killing it.”

Nasmyth smiled somewhat ruefully, for he was by no means burdened with wealth, but he was, after all, not greatly astonished. Few of the small ranchers can feed their stock entirely on their little patches of cleared land, and it is not an unusual thing for most of the herd to run almost wild in the Bush. Now and then, the cattle acquire a somewhat perilous fondness for wrecking road-makers’ and prospectors’ tents, which explains why a steer occasionally fails to be found and some little community of axemen is provided with more fresh meat than can well be consumed.

“I’m afraid it’s rather more than likely I’ll have to pay a good price,” said Nasmyth. “Do you feel anxious for any more shooting to-night, Wheeler?”

“No,” said the pulp-miller, with a grin, as he surveyed his bemired clothes. “Guess it’s going to prove expensive, and I’ve had ’most enough. I don’t feel like poling that canoe any farther up-river, either. What’s the matter with camping right where we are until we eat the steer?”

There was, however, as Mattawa pointed out, a good deal to be done before they could make their first meal off the beast, and none of them quite relished the task, especially as they had only an axe and a couple of moderately long knives. Still, it was done, and when they carried a portion of the meat out of the swamp, and had gone down to wash in the icy river, they went wearily back to their tent

among the firs.

CHAPTER XI

THE GREAT IDEA

The night was cold, and a frost-laden wind set the fir branches sighing as Nasmyth and his comrades sat about a snapping fire. The red light flickered upon their faces, and then grew dim again, leaving their blurred figures indistinct amid the smoke that diffused pungent, aromatic odours as it streamed by and vanished between the towering tree-trunks.

The four men were of widely different type and training, though it was characteristic of the country that they sat and talked together on terms of perfect equality. Two of them were exiles, by fault and misfortune, from their natural environment. One had forced himself upwards by daring and mechanical genius into a station to which, in one sense, he did not belong, and Mattawa, the chopper, alone, pursued the occupation which had always been familiar to him. Still, it was as comrades that they lived together in the wilderness, and, what was more, had they come across one another afterwards in the cities, they would have resumed their intercourse on exactly the same footing. After all, they were, in essentials, very much the same, and, when that is the case, the barriers men raise between themselves do not count for much in the West, at least. Wheeler, the pulp-mill builder, who had once sold oranges on the railroad cars, led up to a conversation that gave Nasmyth an opportunity for which he had been waiting.

“You and Mattawa are about through with that slashing contract,” he said. “You will not net a great pile of money out of it, I suppose?”

“My share is about thirty,” answered Nasmyth, with a little laugh. “My partner draws a few dollars more. He got in a week when the big log that rolled on my cut leg lamed me. I seem to have a particularly unfortunate habit of hurting myself. Are you going back to Ontario when we get that money, Mattawa?”

“No,” the big axeman replied slowly; “anyway, not yet, though I was thinking of it. The ticket costs too much. They’ve been shoving up their Eastern rates.”

“You ought to have a few dollars in hand,” remarked Nasmyth, who was quite

aware that this was not exactly his business. “Are you going to start a ranch?”

Mattawa appeared to smile. “I have one half cleared back in Ontario.”

“Then what d’you come out here for?” Gordon broke in.

“To give the boy a show. He’s quite smart, and we were figuring we might make a doctor or a surveyor of him. That costs money, and wages are ’way higher here than they are back East.”

It was a simple statement, made very quietly by a simple man, but it appealed forcibly to those who heard it, for they could understand what lay behind it. Love of change or adventure, it was evident, had nothing to do with sending the grizzled Mattawa out to the forests of the West. He had, as he said, merely come there that his son might be afforded opportunities that he had never had, and this was characteristic, for it is not often that the second generation stays on the land. Though teamsters and choppers to the manner born are busy here and there, the Canadian prairie is to a large extent broken and the forest driven back by young men from the Eastern cities and by exiled Englishmen. Their life is a grim one, and when they marry they do not desire their children to continue it. Yet, they do not often marry, since the wilderness, in most cases, would crush the wives they would choose. The men toil on alone, facing flood, and drought, and frost, and some hate the silence of the winter nights during which they sit beside the stove.

“Then,” inquired Wheeler, “who runs the ranch?”

“The wife and the boy. That is, when the boy’s not chopping or ploughing for somebody.”

There were reasons why Nasmyth was stirred by what he had heard, and with his pipe he pointed to Mattawa, as the flickering firelight fell upon the old axeman’s face.

“That,” he said, “is the man who didn’t want his wages when I offered them to him, though he knew it was quite likely he would never get them afterwards unless I built the dam. He’d been working for me two or three months then, in the flooded river, most of the while. Now, is there any sense in that kind of man?”

Mattawa appeared disconcerted, and his hard face flushed. “Well,” he explained, “I felt I had to see you through.” He hesitated for a moment with a gesture which seemed deprecatory of his point of view. “It seemed up to me.”

“You’ve heard him,” said Gordon dryly. “He’s from the desolate Bush back East,

and nobody has taught him to express himself clearly. The men of that kind are handiest with the axe and drill, but it has always seemed to me that the nations are going to sit round and listen when they get up and speak their mind some day."

He saw the smile in Nasmyth's eyes, and turned to Wheeler, who was from the State of Washington. "It's a solid fact that you, at least, can understand. It's not so very long since your folks headed West across the Ohio, and it's open to anyone to see what you have done." Then he flung his hand out towards the east. "They fancy back yonder we're still in the leading-strings, and it doesn't seem to strike them that we're growing big and strong."

It was characteristic that Wheeler did not grin, as Nasmyth certainly did. What Gordon had said was, no doubt, a trifle flamboyant, but it expressed the views of others in the West, and after all it was more or less warranted. Mattawa, however, gazed at them both as if such matters were beyond him, and Wheeler, who turned to Nasmyth, changed the subject.

"Well," he said, "what are you going to strike next?"

Nasmyth took out his pipe, and carefully filled it before he answered, for he knew that his time had come, and he desired greatly to carry his comrades along with him.

"I have," he said quietly, "a notion in my mind, or, anyway, the germ of one, for the thing will want some worrying out. It's quite a serious undertaking. To begin with, I'll ask Gordon who cut these drains we've been falling into, and what he did it for?"

"An Englishman," Gordon answered. "Nobody knew much about him. He was probably an exile, too. Anyway, he saw this valley, and it seemed to strike him that he could make a ranch in it."

"Why should he fix on this particular valley?"

"The thing's plain enough. How many years does a man usually spend chopping a clearing out of the Bush? Isn't there a demand for anything that you can eat from our miners and the men on our railroads and in our mills? Why do we bring carloads of provisions in? Can't you get hold of the fact that a man can start ranching right away on natural prairie, if he can once get the water out of it?"

"Oh, yes," assented Nasmyth. "The point is that one has to get the water out of it. I would like Mattawa and Wheeler to notice it. You can go on."

“Well,” said Gordon, “that man pitched right in, and spent most of two years cutting four-foot trenches through and dyking up the swamp. He went on every day from sun-up to dark, but every time the floods came they beat him. When he walked over the range to the settlement, the boys noticed he was getting kind of worn and thin, but there was clean grit in that man. He’d taken hold of the contract, and he stayed with it. Then one day a prospector went into the valley after a big freshet and came across his wrecked shanty. The river had got him.”

Wheeler nodded gravely. “It seems to me this country was made by men like that,” he commented. “They’re the kind they ought to put up monuments to.”

There was silence for a moment or two after that, except for the sighing of the wind among the firs and the hoarse murmur that came up, softened by the distance, from the cañon. It was not an unusual story, but it appealed to those who heard it, for they had fought with rock and river and physical weariness, and they could understand the grim patience and unflinching valour of the long struggle that had resulted, as such struggles sometimes do, only in defeat. Still, the men who take those tasks in hand seldom capitulate. Gordon glanced at Nasmyth.

“Now,” he said, “if you have anything to say, you can get it out.”

Nasmyth raised himself on one elbow. “That Englishman put up a good fight, but he didn’t start quite right,” he said. “I want to point out that, in my opinion, the river has evidently just run into the cañon. It’s slow and deep until you reach the fall, where it’s merely held up by the ridge of rock the rapid runs across. Well, we’ll call the change of level twelve to sixteen feet, and, as Gordon has suggested, a big strip of natural prairie is apt to make a particularly desirable property, once you run the water out of it. You can get rid of a lot of water when you have a fall of sixteen feet.”

“How are you going to get it?” asked Wheeler.

“By cutting the strip of rock that holds the river up at the fall. I think one could do it with giant-powder.”

Again there was silence for a few moments, and Nasmyth looked at his comrades quietly, with the firelight on his face and a gleam in his eyes. They sat still and stared at him, for the daring simplicity of his conception won their admiration. Mattawa slowly straightened himself.

“It’s a great idea,” he declared. “Seen something quite like it in Ontario; I guess it can be done.” He turned to Nasmyth. “You can count me in.”

Wheeler made a sign of concurrence. “It seems to me that Mattawa is right. In a general way, I’m quite open to take a share in the thing, but there’s a point you have to consider. Most of the work could be done only at low water, and a man might spend several years on it.”

“Well?” said Nasmyth simply.

Wheeler waved his hand. “Oh,” he said, “you’re like that other Englishman, but you want to look at this thing from a business point of view. Now, as you know, the men who do the toughest work on this Pacific slope are usually the ones who get the least for it. Well, if you run the river down, you’ll dry out the whole valley, and you’ll have every man with a fancy for ranching jumping in, or some d—— land agency’s dummies grabbing every rod of it. It’s Crown land. Anybody can locate a ranch on it.”

“You have to buy the land,” said Nasmyth. “You can’t pre-empt it here.”

“How does that count?” Wheeler persisted. “If you started clearing a Bush ranch, you’d spend considerably more.”

Nasmyth smiled. “I fancy our views coincide. The point is that the Crown agents charge the usual figure for land that doesn’t require making, which is not the case in this particular valley. Well, before I cut the first hole with the drill, they will either have to sell me all I can take up on special terms, or make me a grant for the work I do.”

Gordon laughed. “Are you going to hammer your view of the matter into the Crown authorities? Did you ever hear of anyone who got them to sanction a proposition that was out of the usual run?”

“Well,” said Nasmyth, “I’m going to try. If they won’t hear reason, I’ll start a syndicate round the settlement.”

Wheeler, leaning forward, dropped a hand on his shoulder. “Count on me for a thousand dollars when you want the money.” He turned and looked at Gordon. “It’s your call.”

“I’ll raise the same amount,” said Gordon, “though I’ll have to put a mortgage on the ranch.”

Mattawa made a little diffident gesture. “A hundred—it’s the most I can do—but there’s the boy,” he said.

Nasmyth smiled in a curious way, for he knew this offer was, after all, a much more liberal one than those the others had made.

“You,” he said severely, “will be on wages. Yet, if we put the thing through, you will certainly get your share.”

He looked round at the other two, and after they had expressed their approval, they discussed the project until far into the night, and finally decided to recross the range, and look at the fall again, early next morning. It happened, however, that Mattawa, who went down to the river for water, soon after sunrise, found a Siwash canoe neatly covered with cedar branches. This was not an astonishing thing, since the Indians, who come up the rivers in the salmon season, often hew out a canoe on the spot where they require it, and leave it there until they have occasion to use it again. After considering the matter at breakfast, the four men decided to go down the cañon. They knew that one or two Indians were supposed to have made the hazardous trip, but that appeared sufficient, for they were all accustomed to handling a canoe, and an extra hazard or two is not often a great deterrent to men who have toiled in the Bush.

They had a few misgivings when the hills closed about them as they slipped into the shadowy entrance of the cañon. No ray of sunlight ever streamed down there, and the great hollow was dim and cold and filled with a thin white mist, though a nipping wind flowed through it. For a mile or two the hillsides, which rose precipitously above them, were sprinkled here and there with climbing pines, that on their far summits cut, faintly green, against a little patch of blue. By-and-by, however, the canoe left these slopes behind, and drifted into a narrow rift between stupendous walls of rock, though there was a narrow strip of shingle strewn with whitened driftwood between the side of the cañon and the river. Then this disappeared, and there was only the sliding water and the smooth rock, while the patch of sky seemed no more than a narrow riband of blue very high above.

Fortunately, the river flowed smoothly between its barriers of stone, and, sounding with two poles lashed together, the men got no bottom, and as the river swept them on, they began to wonder uneasily how they were to get back upstream. Once, indeed, Wheeler suggested something of the kind, but none of the others answered him, and he went on with his paddling.

At last a deep, pulsating roar that had been steadily growing louder, swelled suddenly into a bewildering din, and Mattawa shouted as they shot round a bend. There was a whirling haze of spray into which the white rush of a rapid led close in front of them, and for the next minute they paddled circumspectly. Then Mattawa ran the canoe in between two boulders at the head of the rapid, and they got out and stood almost knee-deep in the cold water. The whirling haze of spray

which rose and sank was rent now and then as the cold breeze swept more strongly down the cañon, and it became evident that the rapid was a very short one. The walls of rock stood further apart at this point, and there was a strip of thinly-covered shingle and boulders between the fierce white rush of the flood and the worn stone. Mattawa grinned as the others looked at him.

“I’m staying here to hang on to the canoe,” he said. “Guess you don’t feel quite like going down that fall.”

They certainly did not, and they hesitated a moment until Nasmyth suddenly moved forward.

“We came here to look at the fall, and I’m going on,” he said.

They went with him, stumbling over the shingle, and now and then floundering among the boulders, with the stream that frothed about their thighs almost dragging their feet from under them. Each of them gasped with sincere relief when he scrambled out of the whirling pool. They reached a strip of uncovered rock that stretched across part of the wider hollow above the fall, and stood there drenched and shivering for several minutes, scarcely caring to speak as they gazed at the channel which the stream had cut through the midst of it. Wheeler dropped his hand on Nasmyth’s shoulder.

“Well,” he said—and Nasmyth could just hear him through the roar of the fall—“it seems to me the thing could be done if you have nerve enough. Still, I guess if they let you have the whole valley afterwards, you’d deserve it.” Then he seemed to laugh. “I’ll make my share one thousand five hundred dollars. In the meanwhile, if you have no objections, we’ll get back again.”

CHAPTER XII

WISBECH MAKES INQUIRIES

A little pale sunshine shone down into the opening between the great cedar trunks when Laura Waynefleet walked out of the shadowy Bush. The trail from the settlement dipped into the hollow of a splashing creek, just in front of her, and a yoke of oxen, which trailed along a rude jumper-sled, plodded at her side. The sled was loaded with a big sack of flour and a smaller one of sugar, among other sundries which a rancher who lived farther back along the trail had brought up from the settlement in his waggon. Waynefleet's hired man was busy that morning, and as her stores were running out, Laura had gone for the goods herself. Other women from the cities have had to accustom themselves to driving a span of oxen along those forest trails.

The beasts descended cautiously, for the slope was steep, and Laura was half-way down it when she saw that a man, who sat on the little log bridge, was watching her. He was clearly a stranger, and, when she led the oxen on to the bridge, tapping the brawny neck of one with a long stick, he turned to her.

"Can you tell me if Waynefleet's ranch is near here?" he asked.

Laura glanced at him sharply, for there was no doubt that he was English, and she wondered, with a faint uneasiness, what his business was. In the meanwhile the big, slowly-moving beasts had stopped and stood still, blowing through their nostrils and regarding the stranger with mild, contemplative eyes. One of them turned its head towards the girl inquiringly, and the man laughed.

"One could almost fancy they wondered what I was doing here," he remarked.

"The ranch is about a mile in front of you," said Laura in answer to his question. "You are going there?"

"I am," said the man. "I want to see Miss Waynefleet. They told me to ask for her at the store."

Laura looked at him again with some astonishment.

He was a little man, apparently about fifty, plainly dressed in what appeared to be English clothing. Nothing in his appearance suggested that he was a person of any importance, or, indeed, of much education, but she liked the way in which he had laughed when the ox had turned towards her.

“Then,” she replied, “as that is my name, you need not go any further.”

The man made a little bow. “Mine’s Wisbech, and I belong to the Birmingham district, England,” he explained. “I walked over from the settlement to make a few inquiries about a relative of mine called Derrick Nasmyth. They told me at the store that you would probably know where he is, and what he is doing.”

Laura was conscious of a certain resentment against the loquacious storekeeper. It was disconcerting to feel that it was generally recognized that she was acquainted with Nasmyth’s affairs, especially as she realized that the fact might appear significant to his English relative. It would scarcely be advisable, she decided, to ask the stranger to walk on to dinner at the ranch, since such an invitation would probably strengthen any misconceptions he might have formed.

“Mr. Nasmyth is expecting you?” she asked.

“No,” said Wisbech—and a little twinkle, which she found vaguely reassuring, crept into his eyes—“I don’t think he is. In all probability he thinks I am still in England. Perhaps, I had better tell you that I am going to Japan and home by India. It’s a trip a good many English people make since the C.P.R. put their new Empress steamers on, and I merely stopped over at Victoria, thinking I would see Derrick. He is, as perhaps I mentioned, a nephew of mine.”

There was a certain frankness and something whimsical in his manner which pleased the girl.

“You have walked from the settlement?” she asked.

“I have,” answered Wisbech. “It is rather a long time since I have walked as much, and I found it quite far enough. A man is bringing a horse up to take me back, but I am by no means at home in the saddle. That”—and he laughed—“is, I suppose, as great an admission in this country as I have once or twice found it to be at home.”

Laura fancied she understood exactly what he meant. Most of her own male friends in England were accustomed to both horses and guns, and this man certainly did not bear the unmistakable stamp that was upon his nephew.

“Then my father and I would be pleased if you will call at the ranch and have

dinner with us," she said, and continued a trifle hastily: "Anyone who has business at a ranch is always expected to wait until the next meal is over."

Wisbech, who declared that it was evidently a hospitable land, and that he would be very pleased, went on with her; but he asked her nothing about Nasmyth as they walked beside the plodding oxen. Instead, he appeared interested in ranching, and Laura, who found herself talking to him freely and naturally, supplied him with considerable information, though she imagined once or twice that he was unobtrusively watching her. He also talked to Waynefleet and the hired man, when they had dinner together at the ranch, and it was not until the two men had gone back to their work that he referred to the object he had in hand.

"I understand that my nephew spent some time here," he said.

Laura admitted that this was the case, and when he made further inquiries, related briefly how Nasmyth had first reached the ranch. She saw the man's face grow intent, as he listened, and there was a puzzling look in his eyes, which he fixed upon her.

"So you took him in and nursed him," he said. "I wonder if I might ask why you did it? He had no claim on you."

"Most of our neighbours would have done the same," Laura answered.

"That hardly affects the case. I presume he was practically penniless?"

"I wonder why you should seem so sure of that. As a matter of fact, he had rather more than thirty dollars in his possession when he set out from the logging camp, but on the journey he lost the belt he kept the money in."

A queer light crept into Wisbech's eyes. "That is just the kind of thing one would expect Derrick Nasmyth to do. You see, as I pointed out, he is my nephew."

"You would not have lost that belt?"

Wisbech laughed. "No," he said, "I certainly would not. What I meant to suggest was that I am naturally more or less acquainted with Derrick Nasmyth's habits. In fact, I may admit I was a little astonished to hear he had contrived to accumulate those thirty dollars."

Laura did not know exactly why she felt impelled to tell him about the building of the dam, but she did so, and made rather a stirring story of it. She was, at least, determined that the man should realize that his nephew had ability, and it is possible that she told him a little more than she had intended, for Wisbech was

shrewd. Then it suddenly flashed upon her that he had deliberately tricked her into setting forth his nephew's strong points, and was pleased that she had made the most of them.

"The dam seems to have been rather an undertaking, and I am glad he contrived to carry it through successfully," he commented. Then he looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes. "I do not know yet where he got the idea from."

The girl flushed. This was, she felt, regrettable, but she could not help it, for the man's keenness was disconcerting, and she was, also, a little indignant with him. She had recognized that Derrick Nasmyth's character had its defects, but she was by no means prepared to admit it to his relatives.

"Then it didn't occur to you that an idea of that kind was likely to appeal to your nephew?" she said.

"No," declared Wisbech, "to be candid, it didn't." He smiled again. "After all, I don't think we need trouble about that point, especially as it seems he has acquitted himself very well. I, however, can't help feeling it was in some respects fortunate that he fell into your hands."

Laura was usually composed, but he saw her face harden, for she was angry at his insistence. "It is evident," he went on, "that he would not have had the opportunity of building the dam unless you had nursed him back to health and taken him into your employment."

"It was my father who asked him to stay on at the ranch."

"I am not sure that the correction has any very great significance. One would feel tempted to believe that your father is, to some extent, in the habit of doing what you suggest."

Laura sat still a moment or two. She was certainly angry with the stranger, and yet, in spite of that fact, she felt that she liked him. There was a candour in his manner which pleased her, as his good-humoured shrewdness did, though she would have preferred not to have the shrewdness exercised upon herself. It may be that he guessed what she was thinking, for he smiled.

"Miss Waynefleet," he said, "I almost fancy we should make excellent friends, but there is a point on which I should like you to enlighten me. Why did you take the trouble to make me understand that you were doing nothing unusual when you asked me to dinner?"

Laura laughed. "Well," she said, "if one must be accurate, I do not exactly know.

I may have been a little unwise in endeavouring to impress it on you. Why did you consider it worth while to explain you had very seldom been in the saddle?"

Wisbech's manner became confidential. "It's a fact that has counted against me now and then. Besides, I think you noticed my accent—it's distinctly provincial, and not like yours or Derrick's—as soon as I told you I was a relative of his. You see, I know my station. In fact, I'm almost aggressively proud of it." He spread out his hands in a forceful fashion. "It's a useful one."

He reached out, and, to the girl's surprise, took up a bowl from the table, and appeared to weigh it in his hands. It was made of the indurated fibre which is frequently to be met with in the Bush ranches.

"This," he said, "is, I suppose, the kind of thing they are going to turn out at that wood-pulp mill. You have probably observed the thickness of it?"

"I believe it is, though they are going to make paper stock, too."

"Well," pursued Wisbech; "it may meet the requirements of the country, but it is a very crude and inartistic production. I may say that it is my business to make enamelled ware. The Wisbech bowls and cups and basins are justly celebrated—light and dainty, and turned out to resemble marble, granite, or the most artistic china. They will withstand any heat you can subject them to, and practically last for ever."

He broke off for a moment with a chuckle. "I can't detach myself from my business as some people seem to fancy one ought to do. After all, it is only by marriage that Derrick Nasmyth is my nephew." His manner became grave again. "I married his mother's sister—very much against the wishes of the rest of the family. As Derrick has lived some time here, the latter fact will probably not astonish you."

Laura said nothing, though she understood exactly what he meant. She was becoming more sure that she liked the man, but she realized that she might not have done so had she met him before she came out to Canada, where she had learned to recognize the essential points in character. There were certainly respects in which his manner would once have jarred upon her.

Her expression was reassuring when he turned to her again.

"I was a retail chemist in a little pottery town when I discovered the properties of one or two innocuous fluxes, and how to make a certain leadless glaze," he said. "Probably you do not know that there were few more unhealthy occupations than the glazing of certain kinds of pottery. I was also fortunate enough to make a

good deal of money out of my discovery, and as I extended its use, I eventually started a big enamelling works of my own. After that I married; but the Nasmyths never quite forgave me my little idiosyncrasies and some of my views. They dropped me when my wife died. She"—his face softened curiously—"was in many ways very different from the rest of them."

He broke off, and when he sat silent a moment or two Laura felt a curious sympathy for him.

"Won't you go on?" she said.

"We had no children," said the man. "My own folks were dead, but I contrived to see Derrick now and then. My wife had been very fond of him, and I liked the lad. Once or twice when I went up to London he insisted on making a fuss over me—took me to his chambers and his club, though I believe I was in several ways not exactly a credit to him."

Laura liked the little twinkle that crept back into his eyes. It suggested the genial toleration of a man with a nature big enough to overlook many trifles he might have resented.

"Well," he continued, "his father died suddenly, and, when it became evident that his estate was deplorably involved, Derrick went out to Canada. None of his fastidious relatives seemed inclined to hold out a hand to him. Perhaps this was not very astonishing, but I was a little hurt that he did not afford me the opportunity. In one way, however, the lad was right. He was willing to stand on his own feet. There was pluck in him."

He made an expressive gesture. "Now I'm anxious to hear where he is and what he is doing."

Laura was stirred by what he had said. She had imagination, and could fill in many of the points Wisbech had only hinted at. Nevertheless, she was not quite pleased to recognize that he seemed to consider her as much concerned about his nephew as he was himself.

"He is"—she tried to speak in an indifferent tone—"He is at present engaged in building a difficult trestle bridge on a railroad. It is not the kind of work any man, who shrank from hazardous exertion, would delight in; but I believe there is a reason why the terms offered were a special inducement. He has a new project in his mind, though I do not know a great deal about it."

"I think you might tell me what you do know."

Laura did so, though she had never been in the cañon. The man listened attentively.

“Well,” he said, “I fancy I can promise that he shall, at least, have an opportunity of putting that project through. You haven’t, however, told me where the railroad bridge is.”

The girl made him understand how he could most easily reach it, and, while she was explaining the various roads he must follow, there was a beat of hoofs outside. Wisbech rose and held out his hand.

“I expect that is the man with my horse, and I’m afraid I have kept you talking a very long while.” He pressed her hand as he half apologized. “I wonder if you will permit me to come back again some time?”

Laura said it would afford her and her father pleasure, and she did not smile when he went out and scrambled awkwardly into his saddle. The man who had brought the horse up grinned broadly as he watched Wisbech jolt across the clearing.

“I guess that man’s not going to make the settlement on that horse. He rides ’most like a bag of flour,” he remarked, with evident enjoyment of the stranger’s poor horsemanship.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE TRESTLE

It was with difficulty that Wisbech reached the railroad track upon which Laura Waynefleet had told him Nasmyth was occupied. From the winding waggon-road, he was forced to scramble down several hundred feet through tangled undergrowth, and over great fallen logs. Then he had to walk along the ties, which were spaced most inconveniently apart, neither far enough for a long stride nor close enough for a short one. It is, in fact, unless one is accustomed to it, a particularly wearying thing to walk any distance along a Western railroad track; since local ticket rates are usually high on the Pacific slope, and roads of any other kind are not always available, the smaller ranchers and other impecunious travellers frequently tramp miles upon the ties.

Wisbech, however, had not very far to go, and, though it entailed an occasional stumble, he endeavoured to look about him. He was progressing along the side of the wonderful Fraser gorge, which is the great channel clearly provided by Nature for the commerce of the mountain province, and he was impressed by the spectacle upon which he gazed. In front of him rose great rocky ramparts, with here and there a snow-tipped peak cutting coldly white against the glaring blue. Beneath these the climbing pines rolled down in battalions to the brink of a vast hollow, in the black depths of which the river roared far below. Wisps of gauzy mist clung to the hillside, and out of them the track came winding down, a sinuous gleaming riband that links the nations with a band of steel. There were, as he knew, fleet steamers ready at either end of it, in Vancouver Inlet, and at Montreal, two thousand four hundred odd miles away, for this was the all-British route round half the world from London to Yokohama and Hong-Kong.

That fact had its effect on Wisbech as he plodded painfully along the ties. He had Democratic notions, but he was an Imperialist, too, which was, perhaps, after all, not surprising, for he knew something of England’s great dependencies. There are a good many men with similar views in the Dominion, and they have certainly lived up to them. Men undoubtedly work for money in Western

Canada, but one has only to listen to their conversation in saloon and shanty to recognize the clean pride in their manhood, and their faith in the destiny of the land to which they belong. They have also proved their faith by pitting their unshrinking courage and splendid physical strength against savage Nature, and, among their other achievements, that track blown out of the living rock, flung over roaring rivers, and driven through eternal snow, supplies a significant hint of what they can bear and do. They buried mangled men in roaring cañon and by giddy trestle, but the rails crept always on.

Wisbech came to the brink of a gorge which rent the steep hillside. He could not tell how deep it was, but it made him dizzy to look down upon the streak of frothing water far below. The gorge was spanned by the usual Western trestle bridge, an openwork fabric of timber just wide enough to carry the single track rising out of the chasm on tapering piers that looked ethereally fragile in that wilderness of towering trees and tremendous slopes of rock. The chunk of axes and ringing of hammers jarred through the roar of the stream, and he could see men clinging in mid-air to little stages slung about the piers, and moving among the pines below. A man in a ragged duck suit strode by him with an axe on his shoulder, and Wisbech half-diffidently ventured to inquire if he could tell where Derrick Nasmyth could be found. The man, who paid no attention to him, stopped close by, and shouted to some of his comrades below.

“You ought to get that beam fixed before the fast freight comes through, boys. There’s no sign of her yet,” he called in a loud voice.

Somebody answered him, and the man turned to Wisbech.

“Now, sir,” he replied tardily, “you were asking for Nasmyth?”

Wisbech said he wished to see Derrick Nasmyth, and the man nodded.

“Well,” said he, “you’ll have to wait a few minutes, I guess he’s busy. There’s a log they want to put into the trestle before the train comes along. It’s not his particular business, but we’re rather anxious to get through with our contract.”

“Ah,” returned Wisbech, “then I fancy I know who you must be. In fact, I’m rather glad I came across you. You are evidently the man who looked after my nephew when he was ill, and from what Miss Waynefleet told me, Derrick owes you a good deal.”

Gordon looked at Wisbech with a little smile, as he recalled what Nasmyth had said about the man who had sent him the draft.

“Well,” he remarked, as he pointed to the hillside, “it would be quite hard to

fancy there was very much the matter with him now."

Wisbech agreed with Gordon when he saw a man, who was running hard, beside four brawny oxen that were hauling a great dressed fir-log by a chain. They came from an opening between the pines, and rushed along the rude trail, which had a few skids across it. The trail led downhill just there, and man and oxen went down the slope furiously in the attempt to keep ahead of the big log that jolted over the skids behind them. Wisbech had never seen cattle of any kind progress in that fashion before, but he naturally did not know that the Bush-bred ox can travel at a headlong pace up and down hills and amidst thickets a man would cautiously climb or painfully crawl through. As they approached the level at the foot of the slope, the man who drove them ran back, and slipping his handspike under it, swung the butt of the log round an obstacle. Wisbech gazed at his nephew with astonishment when Nasmyth came up with the beasts again. His battered wide hat was shapeless, his duck trousers were badly rent, and the blue shirt, which was all he wore above the waist, hung open half-way down his breast. He was flushed and gasping, but the men upon the trestle were evidently urging him to fresh exertion.

"Oh, hit her hard!" shouted one of them; and a comrade clinging to a beam high above the river broke in: "We're waiting. Get a hump on. Bring her right along."

It was evident that Nasmyth was already doing all that reasonably could have been expected of him, and in another moment or two, four more men, who ran out of the Bush, fell upon the log with handspikes, as the beasts came to a long upward slope. They went up it savagely, and Wisbech was conscious of a growing amazement as he watched the floundering oxen and gasping men.

"Do you always work—like this?" he asked.

Gordon laughed. "Well," he answered, "it isn't the bosses' fault when we don't. As it happens, however, a good many of us are putting a contract through, and the boys want to get that beam fixed before the fast freight comes along. If they don't, it's quite likely she'll shake it loose or pitch some of them off the bridge. It has stood a few years, and wants stiffening."

"A few years!" said Wisbech. "There are bridges in England that have existed since the first railways were built. I believe they don't require any great stiffening yet."

"Oh, yes," said Gordon. "It's quite what one would expect. We do things differently. We heave our rails down and fill up the country with miners and farmers while you'd be worrying over your parliamentary bills. We strengthen

our track as we go along, and we'll have iron bridges over every river just as soon as they're wanted."

Wisbech smiled. It seemed to him that these men would probably get exactly what they set their minds upon in spite of every obstacle.

"Why don't they stop the train while they get the beam into place?" he inquired.

"Nothing short of a big landslip is allowed to hold that fast freight up," Gordon replied. "It's up to every divisional superintendent between here and Winnipeg to rush her along as fast as possible. Half the cars are billed through to the Empress liner that goes out to-morrow."

In the meanwhile the men and oxen had conveyed the big log up the slope, and, while Nasmyth drove the beasts back along the skidded track, it swung out over the chasm at the end of a rope. Men leaning out from fragile stages clutched at and guided it, and when one of them shouted, Nasmyth cast the chain to which the rope was fastened loose from his oxen. Then little lithe figures crawled out along the beams of the trestle, and there was a ringing of hammers. Gordon, who gazed up the track, swung his arm up in warning.

"You've got to hump yourselves, boys," he admonished.

The faint hoot of a whistle came ringing across the pines, and a little puff of white smoke broke out far up the track from among their sombre masses. It grew rapidly larger, and the clang of the hammers quickened, while Wisbech watched the white trail that swept along the steep hillside until there was a sudden shouting. Then he turned and saw his nephew running across the bridge.

"Somebody has forgotten a bolt or a big spike," said Gordon.

Wisbech felt inclined to hold his breath as he watched Nasmyth climb down the face of the trestle, but in another minute or two he was clambering up again with several other men behind him. There was another hoot of the whistle, and, as Wisbech glanced up the track, a great locomotive broke out from among the pines. It was veiled in whirling dust and flying fragments of ballast, and smoke that was grey instead of white, for the track led down-grade, and the engineer had throttled the steam. The engine was a huge one, built for mountain hauling, and the freight cars that lurched out of the forest behind it were huger still. Wisbech could see them rock, and the roar which they made and which the pines flung back grew deafening. Most of the cars had been coupled up in the yards at Montreal, and were covered thick with the dust that had whirled about them along two thousand four hundred miles of track, and they were still speeding on

through the forests of the West, as they had done through those of far-off Ontario.

It seemed to Wisbech as he gazed at the cars that they ran pigmy freight trains in the land he came from, and he was conscious of something that had a curious stirring effect on him in the clang and clatter of that giant rolling stock, as the engineer hurled his great train furiously down-grade. It was man's defiance of the wilderness, a symbol of his domination over all the great material forces of the world. The engineer, who glanced out once from his dust-swept cab, held them bound and subject in the hollow of the grimy hand he clenched upon the throttle. With a deafening roar, the great train leapt across the trestle, which seemed to rock and reel under it, and plunged once more into the forest. A whistle sounded—a greeting to the men upon the bridge—and then the uproar died away in a long diminuendo among the sombre pines.

It was in most respects a fortuitous moment for Wisbech's nephew to meet him, and the older man smiled as Nasmyth strode along the track to grasp his outstretched hand.

"I'm glad to see you, Derrick," said Wisbech, who drew back a pace and looked at his nephew critically.

"You have changed since I last shook hands with you in London, my lad," he continued. "You didn't wear blue duck, and you hadn't hands of that kind then."

Nasmyth glanced at his scarred fingers and broken nails.

"I've been up against it, as they say here, since those days," he replied.

"And it has done you a world of good!"

Nasmyth laughed. "Well," he said, "perhaps it has. Any way, that's not a point we need worry over just now. Where have you sprung from?"

Wisbech told him, and added that there were many things he would like to talk about, whereupon Nasmyth smiled in a deprecatory manner.

"I'm afraid you'll have to wait an hour or two," he said. "You see, there are several more big logs ready for hauling down, and I have to keep the boys supplied. I'll be at liberty after supper, and you can't get back to-night. In the meanwhile you might like to walk along to where we're getting the logs out."

Wisbech went with him and Gordon, and was impressed when he saw how they and the oxen handled the giant trunks. He, however, kept his thoughts to himself, and, quietly smoking, sat on a redwood log, a little, unobtrusive, grey-clad

figure, until Gordon, who had disappeared during the last hour, announced that supper was ready. Then Wisbech followed Nasmyth and Gordon to their quarters, which they had fashioned out of canvas, a few sheets of corrugated iron, and strips of bark, for, as their work was on the hillside, they lived apart from the regular railroad gang. The little hut was rudely comfortable, and the meal Gordon set out was creditably cooked. Wisbech liked the resinous scent of the wood smoke that hung about the spot, and the faint aromatic odour of the pine-twig beds and roofing-bark. When the meal was over, they sat a while beneath the hanging-lamp, smoking and discussing general topics, until Nasmyth indicated the canvas walls of the hut and the beds of spruce twigs with a wave of his hand.

“You will excuse your quarters. They’re rather primitive,” he said.

Wisbech’s eyes twinkled. “I almost think I shall feel as much at home as I did when you last entertained me at your club, and I’m not sure that I don’t like your new friends best,” he said. “The others were a trifle patronizing, though, perhaps, they didn’t mean to be. In fact, it was rather a plucky thing you did that day.”

A faint flush crept into Nasmyth’s bronzed face, but Wisbech smiled reassuringly as he glanced about the hut.

“The question is what all this is leading to,” he observed with inquiry in his tone.

Gordon rose. “I’ll go along and talk to the boys,” he announced. “I won’t be back for an hour or two.”

Nasmyth glanced at Wisbech before he turned to his comrade.

“I would sooner you stayed where you are,” he said. Then he answered Wisbech. “In the first place, if we are reasonably fortunate, it should lead to the acquisition of about a couple of hundred dollars.”

“Still,” said Wisbech, “that will not go very far. What will be the next thing when you have got the money?”

“In a general way, I should endeavour to earn a few more dollars by pulling out fir-stumps for somebody or clearing land.”

Wisbech nodded. “No doubt they’re useful occupations, but one would scarcely fancy them likely to prove very remunerative,” he said. “You have, it seems to me, reached an age when you have to choose. Are you content to go on as you are doing now?”

Nasmyth’s face flushed as he saw the smile in Gordon’s eyes, for it was evident that Wisbech and Laura Waynefleet held much the same views concerning him. They appeared to fancy that he required a lot of what might be termed judicious prodding. This was in one sense not exactly flattering, but he did not immediately mention his great project for drying out the valley. He would not hasten to remove a wrong impression concerning himself.

“Well,” resumed Wisbech, seeing he did not answer, “if you care to go back and take up your profession in England again, I think I can contrive to give you a fair start. You needn’t be diffident. I can afford it, and the thing is more or less my duty.”

Nasmyth sat silent. There was no doubt that the comfort and refinement of the old life appealed to one side of his nature, and there were respects in which his present surroundings jarred on him. It is also probable that, had the offer been made him before he had had a certain talk with Laura Waynefleet, he would have profited by it, but she had roused something that was latent in him, and at the same time endued him with a vague distrust of himself, the effect of which was largely beneficial. He had realized then his perilous propensity for what she had called drifting, and, after all, men of his kind are likely to drift fastest when everything is made pleasant for them. It was characteristic that he looked inquiringly at Gordon, who nodded.

“I think you ought to go, if it’s only for a year or two,” said Gordon. “It’s the life you were born to. Give it another trial. You can come back to the Bush again if you find it fails.”

Nasmyth appeared to consider this, and the two men watched him intently, Wisbech with a curious expression in his shrewd eyes. Then, somewhat to their surprise, Nasmyth broke into a little harsh laugh.

“That there is a possibility of my failing seems sufficient,” he said. “Here I must fight. I am, as we say, up against it.” He turned to Wisbech. “Now if you will listen, I will tell you something.”

For the next few minutes he described his project for running the water out of the valley, and when he sat silent again there was satisfaction in Wisbech's face.

"Well," said Wisbech, "I am going to give you your opportunity. It's a thing I insist upon, and, as it happens, I'm in a position to do it more or less effectually. I have letters to folks of some importance in Victoria—Government men among others—and you'll go down there and live as you would have done in England just as long as appears advisable while you try to put the project through. It is quite evident that you will have to get one of the land exploitation concerns to back you, and no doubt a charter or concession of some kind will have to be obtained from the Crown authorities. The time you spend over the thing in Victoria should make it clear where your capacities lie—if it's handling matters of this kind in the cities, or leading your workmen in the Bush. I purpose to take a share in your venture, and I'm offering you an opportunity of making sure which is the kind of life you're most fitted for."

"I guess you ought to go," remarked Gordon quietly.

Nasmyth smiled. "That," he agreed, "is my own opinion."

"Then we'll consider it as decided," said Wisbech. "It seems to me I could spend a month or two in this province very satisfactorily, and we'll go down to Victoria together, as soon as you have carried out this timber-cutting contract."

They talked of other matters, while now and then men from the railroad gang dropped in and made themselves pleasant to the stranger. It must be admitted that there are one or two kinds of wandering Englishmen, who would not have found them particularly friendly, but the little quiet man with the twinkling eyes was very much at home with them. He had been endued with the gift of comprehension, and rock-cutter and axeman opened their minds to him. In fact, he declared his full satisfaction with the entertainment afforded him before he lay down upon his bed of springy spruce twigs.

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE MOONLIGHT

There was a full moon in the clear blue heavens, and its silvery light streamed into the pillared veranda where Nasmyth sat, cigar in hand, on the seaward front of James Acton's house, which stood about an hour's ride from Victoria on the Dunsmer railroad. Like many other successful men in that country, Acton had begun life in a three-roomed shanty, and now, when, at the age of fifty, he was in possession of a comfortable competence, he would have been well content to retire to his native settlement in the wilderness. There was, however, the difficulty that the first suggestion of such a course would have been vetoed by his wife, who was an ambitious woman, younger than he, and, as a rule, at least, Acton submitted to her good-humouredly. That was why he retained his seat on several directorates, and had built Bonavista on the bluff above the Straits of Georgia, instead of the ranch-house in the Bush he still hankered for.

Bonavista had cost him much money, but Mrs. Acton had seen that it was wisely expended, and the long wooden house, with its colonnades of slender pillars, daintily sawn scroll-work, shingled roof, and wide verandas, justified her taste. Acton reserved one simply furnished room in it for himself, and made no objections when she filled the rest of it with miscellaneous guests. Wisbech had brought him a letter from a person of consequence, and he had offered the Englishman and his nephew the freedom of his house. He would not have done this to everybody, though they are a hospitable people in the West, but he had recognized in the unostentatious Wisbech one or two of the characteristics that were somewhat marked in himself, and his wife, as it happened, extended her favour to Nasmyth as soon as she saw him. She had been quick to recognize something she found congenial in his voice and manner, though none of the points she noticed would in all probability have appealed to her husband. Acton leaned upon the veranda balustrade, with a particularly rank cigar in his hand, a gaunt, big-boned man in badly-fitting clothes. It was characteristic of him that he had not spoken to Nasmyth since he stepped out from one of the windows five

minutes earlier.

“It’s kind of pretty,” he said, indicating the prospect with a little wave of his hand.

Nasmyth admitted that it was pretty indeed, and his concurrence was justified. Sombre pinewoods and rocky heights walled in the wooden dwelling, but in front of it the ground fell sharply away, and beyond the shadow of the tall crags a blaze of moonlight stretched eastwards athwart the sparkling sea.

“Well,” said Acton, “it’s ’most as good a place for a house as I could find anywhere the cars could take me into town, and that’s partly why we raised it here.”

Then he glanced down at the little white steamer lying in the inlet below. “That’s one of my own particular toys. You’re coming up the coast with us next week for the salmon-trolling?”

Nasmyth said that he did not know what his uncle’s intentions were, but he was almost afraid they had trespassed on their host’s kindness already. Acton laughed.

“We have folks here for a month quite often—folks that I can’t talk to and who don’t seem to think it worth while to talk to me. Now I can get along with your uncle; I can mostly tell that kind of man when I see him. You have got to let him stay some weeks yet. It would be in one way a kindness to me. What makes the thing easier is the fact that Mrs. Acton has taken to you, and when she gets hold of anyone she likes, she doesn’t let him go.”

Nasmyth was content to stay, and he felt that it would be a kindness to his host. Acton appeared willing to fall in with the views of his wife, but Nasmyth fancied that he was now and then a little lonely in his own house.

“Both of you have done everything you could to make our stay pleasant,” Nasmyth declared.

“It was quite easy in your case,” and a twinkle crept into his host’s eyes. “Your uncle’s the same kind of a man as I am, and one can see you have been up against it since you came to this country. That’s one of the best things that can happen to any young man. I guess it’s not our fault we don’t like all the young men they send us out from the Old Country.” He glanced down at his cigar. “Well, I’ve pretty well smoked this thing out. It’s the kind of cigar I was raised on, but I’m not allowed to use that kind anywhere in my house.”

In another moment Acton swung round, and stepped back through an open window. He generally moved abruptly, and was now and then painfully direct in conversation, but Nasmyth had been long enough in that country to understand and to like him. He was a man with a grip of essential things, but it was evident that he could bear good-humouredly with the views of others.

Nasmyth sat still after Acton left him. There were other guests in the house, and the row of windows behind him blazed with light. One or two of the big casements were open, and music and odd bursts of laughter drifted out. Somebody, it seemed, was singing an amusing song, but the snatches of it that reached Nasmyth struck him as pointless and inane. He had been at Bonavista a week, but, after his simple, strenuous life in the Bush, he felt at times overwhelmed by the boisterous vivacity with which his new companions pursued their diversions. There are not many men without an occupation in the West, but Mrs. Acton knew where to lay her hands on them, and her husband sometimes said that it was the folks who had nothing worth while to do who always made the greatest fuss. But Nasmyth found it pleasant to pick up again the threads of the life which he had almost come to the conclusion that he had done with altogether. It was comforting to feel that he could sleep as long as he liked, and then rise and dress himself in whole, dry garments, while there was also a certain satisfaction in sitting down to a daintily laid and well-spread table when he remembered how often he had dragged himself back to his tent almost too worn out to cook his evening meal. On the whole, he was glad that Acton had urged him to remain another week or two.

Then he became interested as a girl stepped out of one of the lighted windows some little distance away, and, without noticing him, leaned upon the veranda balustrade. The smile in her eyes, he fancied, suggested a certain satisfaction at the fact that what she had done had irritated somebody. Why it should do so he did not know, but it certainly conveyed that impression. In another minute a man appeared in the portico, and the manner in which he moved forward, after he had glanced along the veranda, was more suggestive still. The girl who leaned on the balustrade no doubt saw him, and she walked towards Nasmyth, whom, apparently, she had now seen for the first time. Nasmyth thought he understood the reason for this, and, though it was not exactly flattering to himself, he smiled as he rose and drew forward another chair. He believed most of Mrs. Acton’s guests were acquainted with the fact that he was an impecunious dam-builder.

The girl, who sat down in the chair he offered, smiled when he flung his half-smoked cigar away, and Nasmyth laughed as he saw the twinkle in her eyes, for

he had stopped smoking with a half-conscious reluctance.

“It really was a pity, especially as I wouldn’t have minded in the least,” she observed.

Nasmyth glanced along the veranda, and saw that the man, who had discovered that there was not another chair available, was standing still, evidently irresolute. Probably he recognized that it would be difficult to preserve a becoming ease of manner in attempting to force his company upon two persons who were not anxious for it, and were sitting down. Nasmyth looked at the girl and prepared to undertake the part that he supposed she desired him to play. She was attired in what he would have described as modified evening dress, and her arms and neck gleamed with an ivory whiteness in the moonlight. She was slight in form, and curiously dainty as well as pretty. Her hair was black, and she had eyes that matched it, for they were dark and soft, with curious lights in them, but, as she settled herself beside him in the pale moonlight it seemed to him that “dainty” did not describe her very well. She was rather elusively ethereal.

“I really don’t think you could expect me to make any admission of that kind about my cigar, Miss Hamilton,” he said. “Still, it would perhaps have been excusable. You see, I have just come out of the Bush.”

Violet Hamilton smiled. “You are not accustomed to throw anything away up there?”

“No,” answered Nasmyth, with an air of reflection; “I scarcely think we are. Certainly not when it’s a cigar of the kind Mr. Acton supplies his guests with.”

He imagined that his companion satisfied herself that the man she evidently desired to avoid had not gone away yet, before she turned to him again.

“Aren’t you risking Mrs. Acton’s displeasure in sitting out here alone?” she inquired. “You are probably aware that this is not what she expects from you?”

“I almost think the retort is obvious.” And Nasmyth wondered whether he had gone further than he intended, when he saw the momentary hardness in his companion’s eyes. It suggested that the last thing her hostess had expected her to do was to keep out of the way of the man who had followed her on to the veranda. He accordingly endeavoured to divert her attention from that subject.

“Any way, I find all this rather bewildering now and then,” he said, and indicated the lights and laughter and music in the house behind him with a little movement of his hand. “This is a very different world from the one I have been accustomed to, and it takes some time to adapt oneself to changed conditions.”

He broke off as he saw the other man slowly turn away. He looked at the girl with a smile. “I can go on a little longer if it appears worth while.”

Violet Hamilton laughed. “Ah,” she said, “one should never put one’s suspicions into words like that. Besides, I almost think one of your observations was a little misleading. There are reasons for believing that you are quite familiar with the kind of life you were referring to.”

It was clear to Nasmyth that she had been observing him, but he did not realize that she was then watching him with keen, half-covert curiosity. He was certainly a well-favoured man, and though his conversation and demeanour did not differ greatly from those of other young men she was accustomed to; there was also something about him which she vaguely recognized as setting him apart from the rest. He was a little more quiet than most of them, and there were a certain steadiness in his eyes, and a faint hardness in the lines of his face, which roused her interest. He had been up against it, as they say in that country, which is a thing that usually leaves its mark upon a man. It endues him with control, and, above all, with comprehension.

“Oh,” he said, “a man not burdened with money is now and then forced to wander. He naturally picks up a few impressions here and there. I wonder if you find it chilly sitting here?”

The girl rose, with a little laugh. “That,” she said, “was evidently meant to afford me an opportunity. I think I should like to go down to the Inlet.”

Nasmyth, who understood this as an invitation, went with her, and, five minutes later, they strolled out upon the crown of the bluff, down the side of which a little path wound precipitously. Nasmyth held his hand out at the head of it, and they went down together cautiously, until they stood on the smooth white shingle close by where the little steamer lay. The girl looked about her with a smile of appreciation.

A lane of dusky water, that heaved languidly upon the pebbles, ran inland past them under the dark rock’s side, and it was very still in the shadow of the climbing firs. On the further shore a flood of silvery radiance, against which the dark branches cut black as ebony, streamed down into the rift, and beyond the rocky gateway there was brilliant moonlight on the smooth heave of sea. The girl glanced at it longingly, and then, though she said nothing, her eyes rested on a little beautifully modelled cedar canoe that lay close by. In another moment Nasmyth had laid his hands on it, and she noticed how easily he ran it down the beach, as she had noticed how steady of foot he was when she held fast to his

hand as they came down the bluff. With a curious little smile that she remembered afterwards, he glanced towards the shadowy rocks which shut in the entrance to the Inlet.

“Shall we go and see what there is out yonder beyond those gates?” he asked.

“Ah,” replied the girl, “what could there be? Aren’t you taking an unfair advantage in appealing to our curiosity?”

Nasmyth made a whimsical gesture as he answered her, for he saw that she could be fanciful, too. “Unsubstantial moonlight, glamour, mystery—perhaps other things as well,” he said. “If you are curious, why shouldn’t we go and see?”

She made no demur, and helping her into the canoe, he thrust the light craft off, and, with a sturdy stroke of the paddle, drove it out into the Inlet. It was a thing he was used to, for he had painfully driven ruder craft of that kind up wildly-frothing rivers, and the girl noticed the powerful swing of his shoulders and the rhythmic splash of his paddle, though there were other things that had their effect on her—the languid lapping of the brine on shingle, and the gurgle round the canoe, that seemed to be sliding out towards the moonlight through a world of unsubstantial shadow. She admitted that the man interested her. He had a quick wit and a whimsical fancy that appealed to her, but he had also hard, workman’s hands, and he managed the canoe as she imagined one who had undertaken such things professionally would have done.

When the shimmering blaze of moonlight lay close in front of them, he let his paddle trail in the water for a moment or two, and, turning, glanced back at the house on the bluff. Its lower windows blinked patches of warm orange light against the dusky pines.

“That,” he said, “in one respect typifies all you are accustomed to. It stands for the things you know. Aren’t you a little afraid of leaving it behind you?”

“I think I suggested that you were accustomed to them, too!”

Nasmyth laughed. “Oh,” he said, “I was turned out of that world a long while ago. We are going to see a different one together.”

“The one you know?”

“Well,” returned the man reflectively, “I’m not quite sure that I do. It’s the one I live in, but that doesn’t go very far after all. Now and then I think one could live in the wilderness a lifetime without really knowing it. There’s an elusive something in or behind it that evades one—the mystery that hides in all grandeur

and beauty. Still, there's a peril in it. Like the moonlight, it gets hold of you."

The girl fancied that she understood him, but she wondered how far it was significant that they should slide out into the flood of radiance together when he once more drove the light craft ahead.

The smooth sea shimmered like molten silver about the canoe, and ran in sparkling drops from the dripping paddle. The bluff hung high above them, a tremendous shadowy wall, and the sweet scent of the firs came off from it with the little land breeze. They swung out over the smooth levels that heaved with a slow, rhythmic pulsation, and Nasmyth wondered whether he was wise when he glanced at his companion. She sat still, looking about her dreamily, very dainty—almost ethereal, he thought—in that silvery light, and it was so long since he had talked confidentially to a woman of her kind, attired as became her station. Laura Waynefleet's hands, as he remembered, were hard and sometimes red, and the stamp of care was plain on her; but it was very different with Violet Hamilton. She was wholly a product of luxury and refinement, and the mere artistic beauty of her attire, which seemed a part of her, appealed to his imagination.

He did not remember how she set him talking, but he told her whimsical, and now and then grim, stories of his life in the shadowy Bush, and she listened with quick comprehension. She seemed to endow him with that quality, too, since, as he talked, he began to realize, as he had never quite comprehended before, the something that lay behind the tense struggle of man with Nature and all the strenuous endeavour. Perhaps he expressed it in a degree, for now and then the girl's eyes kindled as he told of some heroic grapple with giant rock and roaring river, gnawing hunger, and loneliness, and the beaten man's despair. He found her attention gratifying. It was certainly pleasant, though he had not consciously adopted the pose, to figure in the eyes of such a girl as one who had known most of the hardships that man can bear and played his part in the great epic struggle for the subjugation of the wilderness. As it happened, she did not know that those who bear the brunt of that grim strife are for the most part dumb. Their share is confined to swinging the axe and gripping the jarring drill.

It was an hour after they left the Inlet when the land breeze came down a little fresher, and swinging the canoe round, he drove it back over a glittering sea that commenced to splash about the polished side of the light craft. Then both of them ceased talking until, as they approached the shadowy rift in the rock, the girl looked back with a laugh.

“It is almost a pity to leave all that behind,” she said softly.

Nasmyth nodded as he glanced up at the lighted windows of the house. “In one sense it is. Still, it’s rather curious that I think I never appreciated it quite so much before.” He let his paddle trail as he wondered whether he had gone too far. “I suppose you are going up the coast with Mrs. Acton in the steamer?” he inquired.

“Yes,” answered Violet Hamilton, with an air of reflection; “I was not quite sure whether I would or not, but now I almost think I will.”

Nasmyth was sensible of a little thrill of satisfaction, for he knew it was understood at Bonavista that he was going too. He decided that he could certainly go. He dipped his paddle strongly, and laughed as they slid forward into the shadow.

“Now,” he said, “you are safely back in your own realm again.”

“You called it a world a little while ago,” said the girl.

“I did,” replied Nasmyth. “Still, I almost think the word I substituted is justifiable.”

Violet Hamilton said nothing as they climbed the bluff, but she wondered how far the change he had made was significant. All the men at Bonavista were her subjects, but until that night, at least, Nasmyth had in that sense stood apart from them, and it is always more or less gratifying to extend one’s sovereignty.

CHAPTER XV

MARTIAL’S MISADVENTURE

There was not a breath of wind, and the night was soft and warm, when Nasmyth lay stretched upon the *Tillicum’s* deck, with his shoulder against the saloon skylights and a pipe in his hand. The little steamer lay with her anchor down under a long forest-shadowed point, behind which a half-moon hung close above the great black pines. Some distance astern of her, a schooner lay waiting for a wind with the loose folds of her big mainsail flapping black athwart the silvery light, and her blinking anchor-light flung a faint track of brightness across the sliding tide. There was only the soft lap of the water along the steamer’s side and the splash of the little swell upon the beach to break the stillness, for the sea was smooth as oil.

The *Tillicum* would not have compared favourably with an English steam-yacht. She had been built for the useful purpose of towing saw-logs, and was sold cheap when, as the mill she kept supplied grew larger, she proved too small for it. Acton, however, was by no means a fastidious person, and when he had fitted her with a little saloon, and made a few primitive alterations below, he said she was quite good enough for him. For that matter, anyone fond of it might navigate the land-locked waters of Puget Sound and the Straits of Georgia in an open whaleboat with satisfaction in summer-time. There are islands everywhere, wonderful rock-walled inlets that one can sail into, beaches to which the primeval forest comes rolling down, and always above the blue waters tower tremendous ramparts of never-melting snow.

On the evening in question, Acton was not on board. He had taken his wife and guests ashore that morning for an excursion to a certain river where there was excellent trout-fishing, and, as a hotel had lately been built for the convenience of sportsmen visitors, it was uncertain whether they would return that night. Nasmyth had not made one of the party because there was scarcely room for everybody in the gig, and six miles, which was the distance to the river mouth, was rather far to row in the dinghy. Another guest called Martial also had been

left behind, and afterwards had been rowed ashore to visit a ranching property somewhere in the neighbourhood. He was the man who had followed Miss Hamilton out on to the veranda one night, and Nasmyth, who did not like him, understood that he was connected with a big land exploitation agency.

Nasmyth felt more or less contented with everything, as he lay upon the *Tillicum's* deck listening to the faint murmur of the swell upon the boulder beach. He had made certain propositions to the Crown lands authorities, which he believed they would look into, and while he waited he found the customs and luxuries of civilization pleasant. He found the society of Violet Hamilton more pleasant still, and the demeanour of the man, Martial, was almost the only thing that ruffled him. Martial had constituted himself Miss Hamilton's special attendant, and though Nasmyth fancied Mrs. Acton connived at this, it was by no means as evident that the girl was pleased with it. Indeed, he surmised that she liked the man as little as he did. Martial was brusque in mariner, and, though that is not usually resented in British Columbia, he now and then went even further than is considered permissible in that country, and he had gained the sincere dislike of the red-haired George, who acted as the *Tillicum's* deck-hand, cook, and skipper.

George sat upon the skylights sucking at his pipe, and it presently became evident that his thoughts and Nasmyth's were very much alike. There was nobody else on board, for the man who fired and drove the engines was ashore.

"I guess you can catch trout?" the skipper remarked.

"Oh yes," answered Nasmyth indifferently. "As a matter of fact, I've had to, when there was very little else to eat."

George, who was big and lank, and truculent in appearance, nodded.

"Juss so!" he rejoined. "You've been up against it in the Bush. Anybody could figure on that by the look of you and the way you use your hands. A city man takes holds of things as if they were going to hurt him. That's kind of why I froze on to you."

Nasmyth took this as a compliment, and smiled his acknowledgment, for George was a privileged person, and most of his recent companions held democratic views. He, however, said nothing, and George went on again.

"Mrs. Acton's a mighty smart woman, but she plays some fool tricks," he commented. "Where's the blame use in taking a boatload of folks after trout when none of them but the boss knows how to fish?" Then he chuckled. "You'd

have gone with the rest this morning if she wanted you to. Guess the gig would have carried another one quite nicely."

Nasmyth fancied that this was possible, though he naturally would not admit it to his companion. The fact that his hostess had somewhat cleverly contrived to leave him behind had its significance, since it seemed to indicate that she recognized that Miss Hamilton regarded him with a certain amount of favour.

"Well," said George reflectively, "the boss is quite smart, too! Mrs. Acton crowded you out of the gig. The boss says nothing, but he knocks off that blame Martial. That makes the thing even, and, unless he does it, none of them gets any fish. Now, it kind of seems to me that for a girl like Miss Hamilton to look at a man like Martial is a throwing of herself away. I guess it strikes you like that, too?"

This was rather too pointed a question for Nasmyth to answer, but, so far as it went, he could readily have agreed with the skipper. As a matter of fact it suggested the query why he should object to Miss Hamilton throwing herself away.

"Well," he observed, "I'm not quite sure that it's any concern of mine."

George's grin was expressive of good-natured toleration. "Oh!" he replied, "I guess that's plain enough for me. You're not going to talk about the boss's friends. Still, one man's as good as another in this country, and, if I wasn't way better than Martial, I'd drown myself. That's the kind of pernicious insect a decent man has no use for. What's he come on board for with three bags ram full of clothes, when many a better man humps his outfit up and down the Bush in an old blanket same as you have done? It's a sure thing that no man with a conscience wants to get into the land agency business. It's an institution for selling greensuckers ranching land that's rock and gravel and virgin forest. Besides, I heard the blame insect telling Miss Hamilton that nobody not raised in the hog-pen could drink my coffee."

It seemed to Nasmyth that there was a little reason in the skipper's observations, though he thought that Martial's strictures upon the coffee accounted for most of them.

"I guess it might have been wiser if Martial had kept on good terms with the skipper," he laughingly rejoined.

George chuckled softly. "Well," he declared, "when anyone up and says my coffee's only fit for the hog-pen, I'm going to get even with him. I kind of feel I

have to. It’s up to me.”

He said nothing further for some little time, and Nasmyth, who fancied that he would sooner or later carry out his amiable intentions, lay prone upon the deck smoking placidly. Nasmyth was one who adapted himself to his environment with readiness, and on board the *Tillicum* the environment was particularly comfortable. Through Acton’s hospitality, he was brought into contact with the luxuries of civilization without the galling restraints. Miss Hamilton had been gracious to him of late. That was a cause for satisfaction in itself. The days when he swung the heavy axe, or, drenched with icy water, stood gripping the drill had slipped far away behind him. For the time, at least, he could bask in the sunshine with ears stopped against the shrill trumpet-call to action that he had heard in the crash of rent trees and the turmoil of the wild flood.

A faint cry came from the shore out of the stillness of the woods, and George listened carefully.

“That can’t be the boss. Guess he’s stopping at the hotel,” he said. “It’s quite likely it’s that blame insect Martial coming back. Those ranchers he has been trying to freeze off their holding have no use for him.”

The cry rose again, a trifle louder, and George nodded complacently.

“Oh, yes,” he exulted, “it’s Martial sure! We’ll let him howl. Any way, he can walk down the beach until he’s abreast of us. When anybody expects me to hear him, he has got to come within half a mile.”

It seemed to Nasmyth that Martial would not have a pleasant walk in the dark, for most of the beach lay in the black shadow of the pines, and beneath highwater mark was covered with the roughest kind of boulders. Above the tide-line, a ragged mass of driftwood interspersed with undergrowth separated the water from the tangled Bush. Both George and Nasmyth were aware that one could readily tear one’s clothes to pieces in an attempt to struggle through such a labyrinth. Judging by the shouts he uttered at intervals, Martial appeared to be floundering along the beach, and presently Nasmyth laughed.

“He appears to be getting angry,” he said. “After all, it’s only natural that he doesn’t want to sleep in the woods all night.”

George filled his pipe, apparently with quiet satisfaction, but, some time later, he stood up suddenly with an exclamation.

“The blame contrary insect means swimming off,” he announced.

Nasmyth, glancing shorewards, saw a dim white object crawling on all-fours towards the water where the moonlight streamed down upon a jutting point, and it was then that the idea which had results that neither of them anticipated first dawned on the skipper, who broke into a hoarse chuckle.

“I guess he wouldn’t want Miss Hamilton to see him like that,” he said. “Some folks look considerably smarter with their clothes on.”

“How’s she going to see him when she isn’t here?”

George grinned again. “Her dresses are, so’s her hat and her little mandolin. If you were pulled in tight you’d have quite a figure.”

It was clear to Nasmyth that the scheme was workable, though he was quite aware that the thing he was expected to do was a trifle discreditable. Still, he had lived for some time in the Bush, where his comrades’ jests were not particularly delicate, and Martial once or twice had been aggressively unpleasant to him. What was more to the purpose, he felt reasonably sure that Miss Hamilton would be by no means sorry to be free of Martial, and it was probable that their victim would never relate his discomfiture, if their scheme succeeded.

As the result of these reflections he went down with George to the little saloon. The skipper, who left him there a few minutes, came hack with an armful of feminine apparel. They had no great difficulty in tying on the big hat with the veil, but when Nasmyth had stripped his jacket off there was some trouble over the next proceeding. Indeed, Derrick did not feel quite comfortable about appropriating Miss Hamilton’s garments, but he had committed himself, and it was quite clear that his companion would not appreciate his reasons for drawing back.

“Hold your breath while I get this blame hook in,” said the skipper.

Nasmyth did so; but he could not continue to hold it indefinitely, and in a few moments there was a suggestive crack, and George desisted in evident dismay.

“Come adrift from the stiffening quite a strip of it,” he said. “Well, I guess I can somehow fix the thing up so as nobody will notice it. It should be easier than putting a new cloth in a topsail, and I’ve a mending outfit in the locker.”

Nasmyth was by no means sure of George’s ability to make the damage good, but he permitted the skipper to tie on the loose skirt, and then to hang the beribboned mandolin round his neck. When this was done George surveyed him with a grin of satisfaction.

“Well,” said George, “I guess you’ll do. Now you’ll keep behind the skylights, and only get up and bang that mandolin when Martial wants to come on board. Guess when he sees you he’ll feel ’most like jumping right out of his skin. Miss Hamilton’s not going to mind. I’ve seen her looking at him as if she’d like to stick a big hatpin into him.”

They went up, and Nasmyth, who felt guilty as he crouched in the shadow, could see a black head and the flash of a white arm that swung out into the moonlight and disappeared again. Martial was swimming pluckily, and the tide was with him, for his head grew larger every minute, and presently the gleam of his skin became visible through the pale shining of the brine. His face dipped as his left arm came out at every stroke, and the water frothed as his feet swung together like a flail. He paddled easily while the tide swept him on until he reached the *Tillicum*. Then his voice rose, breathless and cautious.

“Anchor watch,” he called. “Anybody else on board?”

George, who kept out of sight, did not answer. Martial called again.

“Don’t let anybody out of the companion while I get up,” he commanded.

The *Tillicum* had a high sheer forward, and he could not reach her rail, but as the tide swept him along he raised himself to clutch at it where it was lower abreast of the skylights.

“Now,” said George softly, “you can play the band.”

Nasmyth rose and swept his knife-haft across the strings of the mandolin. For a moment he saw something like horror in Martial’s wet face, and then the man, who gasped, went down headforemost into the water. Martial was nearly a dozen yards astern when his head came out again, and he slid away with the tide, with his white arm swinging furiously. George sat down upon the deck, and expressed his satisfaction by drumming his feet upon the planking while he laughed.

“He’s off,” he said. “Might have a high-power engine inside of him. Guess he’s going to scare those schooner men ’most out of their lives. It’s quite likely they won’t keep anchor watch when they’re lying snug in a place of this kind.”

Nasmyth managed to control his laughter, and went down to divest himself of his draperies. When he came up again, George reported that he had just seen Martial crawling up the schooner’s cable, and in another few moments what appeared to be a howl of terror rose from the vessel. It was not repeated, and shortly afterwards Nasmyth went to sleep.

Martial remained on board the schooner that night, and Nasmyth was not surprised when he failed to appear next morning. Acton had come back with his party when a man dropped into the boat astern of the schooner, and pulled towards the *Tillicum* leisurely. Everybody was on deck when he slid alongside, and, standing up in his boat, laid hold of the rail.

“I’ve a message for Mr. Acton,” he said, holding up a strip of paper.

Acton, who took the paper from him, was a trifle perplexed when he glanced at it.

“It seems that Martial didn’t stay at that ranch last night as I thought he had done,” he remarked.

Mrs. Acton, who sat next to Miss Hamilton, looked up sharply. She was a tall woman with an authoritative manner.

“Where is he?” she inquired.

“Gone back to Victoria,” said her husband, who handed her the note. “It’s kind of sudden, and he doesn’t worry about saying why he went. There’s a little remark at the bottom that I don’t quite like.”

George naturally had been listening, and Nasmyth saw his subdued grin, but he saw also Mrs. Acton’s quick glance at Miss Hamilton, which seemed to suggest that she surmised the girl could explain why Martial had departed so unceremoniously. There was, however, only astonishment, and, Nasmyth fancied, a trace of relief in Violet Hamilton’s face. Mrs. Acton turned to her husband with a flush of resentment in her eyes.

“I should scarcely have believed Mr. Martial would ever write such a note,” she said. “What does he mean when he says that he does not appreciate being left to sleep in the woods all night?”

“That,” answered Acton, “is what I don’t quite understand. If he’d hailed anchor watch loud enough, George would have gone off for him. Still, we’re lying quite a way out from the beach.”

Then he remembered the man from the schooner, who still gripped the rail.

“How did you come to get this note?” he asked.

“The man who came off last night gave it to the skipper,” said the schooner’s deck-hand with a very suggestive grin.

“How’d he come off?” Acton asked. “Did you go ashore for him?”

“We didn’t!” said the man. “He must have swum off and crawled up the cable. Any way, when he struck the skipper he hadn’t any clothes on him.”

There was a little murmur of astonishment, and Mrs. Acton straightened herself suddenly, while Nasmyth saw a gleam of amusement creep into Acton’s eyes. The schooner man evidently felt that he had an interested audience, for he leaned upon the rail as he began to tell all he knew about the incident.

“I was asleep forward, when the skipper howled as if he was most scared out of his life,” he said. “I got up out of the scuttle just as quick as I could, and there he was crawling round behind the stern-house with an axe in his hand, and the mate flat up against the rail.

“‘Shut that slide quick,’ says the skipper. ‘Shut it. He’s crawling up the ladder.’

“‘I guess you can shut it yourself if you want it shut.’ He asked for whisky. ‘Tell him where it is,’ says the mate.”

There was no doubt that the listeners were interested, and the man made an impressive gesture. “It was kind of scaring. There was a soft flippety-flop going on in the stern-house, and I slipped out a handspike. Then the skipper sees me.

“‘There’s a drowned man crawling round the cabin with water running off him,’ he says.

“Then a head came out of the scuttle and a wet arm, and a voice that didn’t sound quite like a drowned man’s says, ‘Oh you——’”

Acton raised his arm restrainingly, and the narrator made a sign of comprehension.

“He called us fools,” the man explained, “and for ’most a minute the skipper was going to take the axe to him. Then he hove it at the mate for being scared instead, and they all went down together, and I heard them light the stove. After that I went back and dropped off to sleep, and the skipper sent me off at sun-up to fetch the stranger’s clothes. We set him ashore as soon as he’d got some breakfast into him.”

The man rowed away in another minute or two, and, as he had evidently told his story with a relish, Nasmyth wondered whether Martial had contrived to offend him by endeavouring to purchase his silence. There are, of course, men one can offer a dollar to on that coast, but such an act requires a certain amount of circumspection.

Acton’s eyes twinkled, and the men who were his guests looked at one another

meaningly.

“Well,” answered one of them, “I guess there is an explanation, though I didn’t think Martial was that kind of man.”

Nasmyth said nothing, but he saw Mrs. Acton’s face flush with anger and disdain, and surmised that it was most unlikely that she would forgive the unfortunate Martial. The women in the party evidently felt that it would not be advisable to say anything further about the matter, and when George broke out the anchor the *Tillicum* steamed away.

It was after supper that night, and there was nobody except the helmsman on deck, when Miss Hamilton approached the forward scuttle where Nasmyth sat with his pipe in his hand. Nasmyth rose and spread out an old sail for her, and she sat down a little apart from him. The *Tillicum* was steaming northwards at a leisurely six knots, with her mastheads swaying rhythmically through the soft darkness, and a deep-toned gurgling at her bows. By-and-by Nasmyth became conscious that Miss Hamilton was looking at him, and, on the whole, he was glad that it was too dark for her to see him very well.

“I wonder if you were very much astonished at what you heard about Mr. Martial?” she asked.

“Well,” said Nasmyth reflectively, “in one way at least, I certainly was. You see, I did not think Martial was, as our friend observed, that kind of man. In fact, I may admit that I feel reasonably sure of it still.”

“I suppose you felt you owed him that?”

“I didn’t want to leave you under a misapprehension.”

There was silence for half a minute, and then Nasmyth turned towards the girl again.

“You are still a little curious about the affair?” he suggested.

“I am. I may mention that I found a certain dress of mine, which I do not remember tearing, had evidently been repaired by somebody quite unaccustomed to that kind of thing. Now there were, of course, only the skipper and yourself on board while we were away.”

Nasmyth felt his face grow hot. “Well,” he replied, “if it’s any consolation to you, I am quite prepared, in one respect at least, to vindicate Martial’s character. In any case, I think I shall have an interview with Mrs. Acton to-morrow.”

His heart beat a little faster, for the girl laughed.

“It really wouldn’t be any consolation at all to me,” she admitted.

“Ah,” said Nasmyth, “then, although you may have certain fancies, you are not dreadfully vexed with me?”

Violet Hamilton appeared to reflect. “Considering everything, I almost think you can be forgiven.”

After that, they talked about other matters for at least an hour, while the *Tillicum*, with engines throbbing softly, crept on through the darkness, and Acton, who happened to notice them as he lounged under the companion scuttle with a cigar in his hand, smiled significantly. Acton had a liking for Nasmyth, and though he was not sure that Mrs. Acton would have been pleased had she known where Miss Hamilton was, the matter was, he reflected, after all, no concern of his.

CHAPTER XVI

ACTON’S WARNING

It was with somewhat natural misgivings, the next afternoon, that Nasmyth strolled forward along the *Tillicum’s* deck toward the place where Mrs. Acton was sitting. Immaculately dressed, as usual, she reclined in a canvas chair with a book, which she had been reading, upon her knee. As Nasmyth approached her he became conscious that she was watching him with a curious expression in her keen, dark eyes. The steamer had dropped anchor in a little land-locked bay, and Nasmyth had just come back in the dinghy, after rowing one or two of the party ashore. Mrs. Acton indicated with a movement of her hand that he might sit upon the steamer’s rail, and then, turning towards him, looked at him steadily. She was a woman of commanding personality, and imperiously managed her husband’s social affairs. If he had permitted it, she probably would have undertaken, also, to look after his commercial interests.

“I wonder why you decided not to visit the Indian settlement with the others?” she inquired.

Nasmyth smiled. “I have been in many places of the kind,” he answered. “Besides, there is something I think I ought to tell you.”

“I almost fancied that was the case.”

“Then I wonder if you have connected me with Martial’s disappearance?”

“I may admit that my husband evidently has.”

“He told you, then?” And Nasmyth realized next moment that the faint astonishment he had displayed was not altogether tactful.

“No,” said Mrs. Acton, with a smile, “he did not. That was, I think, what made me more sure of it. James Acton can maintain a judicious silence when it appears advisable, and there are signs that he rather likes you.”

Nasmyth bowed. “I should be very pleased to hear that you shared his views in

this respect," he observed.

"I am, in the meanwhile, somewhat naturally rather uncertain upon the point," she returned.

"Well," confessed Nasmyth humbly, "I believe I am largely responsible for your guest's sudden disappearance. It was, of course, almost inexcusable, and I could not complain if you were very angry with me."

"I should, at least, like to know exactly what you did."

"That," said Nasmyth, "is a thing I would sooner you did not urge me to explain. After all, I feel I have done Martial sufficient injury, and I do not think he would like you to know. There are," he added somewhat diffidently, "one or two other reasons why I should prefer not to say anything further, but I would like to assure you that the explanation one of your friends suggested is not the correct one. I ventured to make this, at least, clear to Miss Hamilton."

Mrs. Acton regarded him with a suggestive smile. "Mr. Martial was not effusively pleasant to you. The affair was premeditated?"

"My one excuse is that the thing was done on the spur of the moment. I should never have undertaken it if I had reflected." Nasmyth made a gesture of submission. "I am in your hands."

Mrs. Acton sat silent for perhaps a minute gazing at the woods that swept round three sides of the little bay. Great cedars and pines and hemlocks rolled down to the water's edge, and the stretch of smooth green brine between them and the steamer flashed like a mirror.

"Well," she said, after a long pause, "I must admit that at first I was angry with you. Now"—and her eyes grew a bit scornful—"I am angry with Martial, instead. In fact, I think I shall wash my hands of him. I have no sympathy with a man who allows himself to be placed in a ludicrously painful position that reflects upon his friends."

"Especially when he has the privilege of your particular favour," added Nasmyth.

Mrs. Acton laughed. "That," she returned, "was a daring observation. It, at least, laid a certain obligation on Martial to prove it warranted, which he has signally failed to do. I presume you know why he took some little pains to make himself unpleasant to you?"

Nasmyth fancied that she was really angry with Martial, and that he understood

her attitude. She was a capable, strong-willed woman, and had constituted herself the ally of the unfortunate man who had brought discredit on her by permitting himself to be shamefully driven from the field. It was also evident that she resented the fact that a guest from her husband's yacht should have been concerned in any proceedings of the nature that the schooner's deck-hand had described.

"I think I suspect why he was not cordial to me," Nasmyth admitted. "Still, the inference is so flattering that one would naturally feel a little diffident about believing that Martial's suppositions were correct."

"That," replied Mrs. Acton, "was tactfully expressed." She looked at the young man fixedly, and her next remark was characterized by the disconcerting frankness which is not unusual in the West. "Mr. Nasmyth," she said, "unless you have considerable means of your own, it would be wiser of you to put any ideas of the kind you have hinted at right out of your head."

"I might, perhaps, ask you for one or two reasons why I should adopt the course you suggest."

"You shall have them. Violet Hamilton is a lady with possessions, and I look upon her as a ward of my own. Any way, her father and mother are dead, and they were my dearest friends."

"Ah," agreed Nasmyth, "that naturally renders caution advisable. Well, I am in possession of three or four hundred dollars, and a project which I would like to believe may result to my advantage financially. Still, that is a thing I cannot be very sure about."

Mrs. Acton gazed at him thoughtfully. "Your uncle is a man of means."

"I believe he is. He may put three or four thousand dollars into the venture I mention, if he continues pleased with me. That is, I think, the most I could expect from him."

Mrs. Acton sat silent a while, and, though Nasmyth was not aware of it, favoured him with one or two glances of careful scrutiny. He was, as she had naturally noticed, a well-favoured man, and the flannels and straw hat he wore were becoming to him. What was more to the purpose, there was a certain graceful easiness in his voice and manner which were not characteristic of most of her husband's friends. Indeed, well-bred poise was not a characteristic of her own, though she recognized her lack. The polish that she coveted suggested an acquaintance with a world that she had not as yet succeeded in persuading her

husband to enter. Acton was, from her point of view, regrettably contented with his commercial status in the new and crudely vigorous West.

“Well,” she remarked thoughtfully, “none of us knows what there is in the future, and there are signs that you have intelligence and grit in you.” Then she dismissed the subject. “I think you might take me for a row,” she said.

Nasmyth pulled the dinghy alongside, and rowed her up and down the bay, but his intelligence was, after all, not sufficient for him to recognize the cleverness with which she led him on to talk about his uncle and England. He was not aware that he had been particularly communicative, but when he rowed back to the yacht Mrs. Acton was in possession of a great deal of information that was more or less satisfying.

The *Tillicum* steamed away again when the remainder of the party arrived, and she was leisurely swinging over a little froth-flecked sea that night, with the spray flying at her bows, when Acton came upon Nasmyth leaning on the rail.

“I wasn’t quite certain what view Mrs. Acton might take of Martial’s disappearance,” said Acton. “Just now, however, I think that she is rather pleased with you.”

“The fact,” replied Nasmyth, “is naturally a cause for satisfaction.”

Acton appeared amused. “Well,” he said, “to some extent it depends upon what views she has for you. Mrs. Acton is a capable woman.”

Acton strolled forward, leaving Nasmyth thoughtful. The hint was reasonably plain, but the younger man was not quite sure that he would be willing to fall in with the strong-willed woman’s views. There was no doubt that Violet Hamilton attracted him—he admitted that without hesitation—for she had grace and wit and beauty, but she had, also, large possessions, which might prove a serious obstacle. Besides, he was sensible of a tenderness for the woman who had given him shelter and a great deal more than that in the lonely Bush. Laura, however, was still in the wilderness, and Miss Hamilton, whose society he found very pleasant, was then on board the *Tillicum*, facts that had their significance in the case of a man liable to be swayed by the impulses of the moment. By-and-by, he started, for while he thought about her, Miss Hamilton came out of the little companion-way, and stood looking round her, with her long light dress rustling in the breeze, until she moved forward as her eyes rested on him.

Nasmyth fancied that there was a particular significance in the fact that she appeared just then. He walked to meet her, and, drawing a low canvas chair into

the shelter of the skylights, sat down with his back against them close at her feet. He did not remember what they talked about, and it was in all probability nothing very material, but they had already discovered that they had kindred views and likes, and they sat close together in the shelter of the skylights with a bright half-moon above them, while the *Tillicum* lurched on over a glittering sea. Both of them were surprised to discover that an hour had slipped by when their companions came up on deck, and Nasmyth was once more thoughtful before he went to sleep that night.

Next day the *Tillicum* brought up off a little mining town, and George, who went ashore, came back with several letters. Among the letters was a note for Nasmyth from a man interested in land exploitation. This man, with whom Nasmyth had been in communication, was then in the mining town, and he suggested that Nasmyth should call upon him at his hotel. Nasmyth showed Acton the letter.

“I understand these folks are straight?” the younger man remarked with inquiry in his tone.

Acton smiled dryly. “Any way,” he said, “they’re as straight as most. It’s not a business that’s conducive to unswerving rectitude. Hutton has come up here to see you about the thing?”

“He says he has some other business.”

“Well,” replied Acton, “perhaps he has.” Then he turned to Wisbech, who sat close by. “I’ll go ashore with Nasmyth. Will you come along?”

“No,” said Wisbech; “I almost think I’ll stay where I am. If Derrick can hold out any reasonable prospect of making interest on the money, it’s quite possible I may put three or four thousand dollars into the thing, but I go no further. It’s his affair. He must handle it himself.”

Acton nodded. “That’s sensible, in one way,” he declared, and one could have fancied there was a certain suggestiveness in the qualification.

Wisbech appeared to notice it, for he looked hard at Acton. Then he made an abrupt gesture.

“It’s my nephew’s affair,” he said.

“Oh, yes!” returned Acton, significantly. “Any way, I’ll go ashore with him, as soon as George has the gig ready.”

Acton and Nasmyth were rowed off together half an hour later, and they walked

up through the hot main street of the little colliery town. It was not an attractive place, with rickety plank sidewalks raised several feet above the street, towering telegraph-poles, wooden stores, and square frame houses cracked by the weather, and mostly destitute of any adornment or paint. Blazing sunshine beat down upon the rutted street, and an unpleasant gritty dust blew along it.

There was evidently very little going on in the town that afternoon. Here and there a man leaned heavy-eyed, as if unaccustomed to the brightness, on the balustrade in front of a store, and raucous voices rose from one or two second-rate saloons, but there were few other signs of life, and Nasmyth was not sorry when they reached the wooden hotel. Acton stopped a moment in front of the building.

“Hutton’s an acquaintance of mine, and if you have to apply to men of his kind, he is, perhaps, as reliable as most,” he said. “Still, you want to remember that in this country it’s every man for himself, especially when you undertake a deal in land.” He smiled suggestively. “And now we’ll go in and see him.”

They came upon a man who appeared a little older than Nasmyth. He was sitting on the veranda, which was spacious, and had one or two wooden pillars with crude scroll-work attached to them in front. Acton nodded to the stranger.

“This is Mr. Nasmyth,” he said. “He came up with me. Doing much round here?”

The question was abrupt, but the man smiled.

“Oh,” he answered, “we endeavour to do a little everywhere.”

“Then I’ll leave you to it, and look round again by-and-by. I guess I may as well mention that Mr. Nasmyth is coming back with me.”

Acton looked hard at Hutton, who smiled again. “Oh, yes,” replied Hutton, “I understand that. It’s quite likely we’ll have the thing fixed up in half an hour or so. A cigar, Mr. Nasmyth?”

Nasmyth took a cigar, and went with Hutton to the little table which had been set out, on the inner side of the veranda, with a carafe of ice-water and a couple of bottles. They sat down at it, and Hutton took out two letters and glanced at them.

“Now,” he said, “we’ll get to work. I understand your proposition is to run the water out of the Cedar Valley. What’s the area?”

“About four thousand acres available for ranching land, though it has never been surveyed.”

“And you want to take up as many acres beforehand as you can, and can’t quite raise the capital?”

Nasmyth said that was very much the state of affairs, and Hutton drummed his fingers on the table. He was a lean-faced man, dressed quietly and precisely, in city fashion, but he wore a big stone in a ring on one hand, which for no very evident reason prejudiced his companion against him.

“Well,” he averred, “we might consider going into the thing and finding part of the capital. It’s our business, but naturally we would want to be remunerated for the risk. It’s rather a big one. You see, you would have to take up the whole four thousand acres.”

“Then,” replied Nasmyth, “what’s your proposition?”

“We’ll put up what money you can’t raise, and our surveyor will locate land at present first-class Crown land figure. We’ll charge you bank rate until the land’s made marketable when you have run the water out. In a general way, that’s my idea of the thing.”

Nasmyth laid down his cigar and looked at him. “Isn’t it a little exorbitant? You get the land at cost value, and a heavy charge on that, while I do the work?”

Hutton laughed. “Well,” he said, “it’s money we’re out for, and unless you take it all up, your claim’s no good. Anybody else could jump right in and buy a few hundred acres. Then he could locate water rights and stop you running down the river, unless you bought him out.”

“The difficulty is that the Crown authorities haven’t been selling land lately, and would sooner lease. They seem inclined to admit that this is a somewhat exceptional case; in fact, they have granted me one or two privileges.”

“What you would call a first option?”

Nasmyth remembered Acton’s manner when he had mentioned his acquaintance with his companion, and one or two things he had said.

“No,” he said, “not exactly that. I merely mentioned certain privileges.”

“Then, what’s to stop me or anybody going right down to Victoria and buying the whole thing up to-morrow?”

“I’m inclined to fancy you would discover one or two things that would make it difficult,” answered Nasmyth dryly. “For another thing, I hardly think you would get any of the regular rock-cutting or mine-sinking people to undertake the work

about the fall at a figure that wouldn't make the risk too big. It's not a place that lends itself to modern methods or the use of machinery. Besides, after approaching you to a certain extent in confidence, it wouldn't be quite the thing."

Hutton waved the hand which bore the ring. "Well," he said, "we'll get back to our original offer. If it isn't good enough, how much more do you want?"

Nasmyth explained his views, and they discussed each proposition point by point, gradually drawing nearer to an agreement. Nasmyth was quite aware that in a matter of this kind the man who provides the capital usually takes the lion's share, but, after all, the project was his, and he naturally wanted something for himself. At length Hutton leaned forward with both elbows on the table, and a certain intentness in his lean face.

"Now," he said, "I've gone just about as far as I can. You have either got to close with my proposition or let it go."

Nasmyth said nothing, and there was silence for almost a minute while he lay back in his chair gazing at the weather-cracked front of the store across the street, and thinking hard. There was, he was quite aware, a very arduous task in front of him—one that he shrank from at times, for it could only be by strenuous toil that he could succeed in lowering the level of the river, and it was clear that if he accepted Mutton's offer, his share of the proceeds would not be a large one. Still, he must have more capital than he could see the means of raising, and once or twice he was on the point of signifying his concurrence. His face grew grimmer, and he straightened himself a trifle, but he did not see that the man who could supply the money was watching him with a smile.

Then it seemed to Nasmyth that he heard a footstep in the room behind him, but it was not particularly noticeable, and Hutton touched his arm.

"Well," said the promoter, "I'll just run over our terms again." He did so rapidly, and added: "If that doesn't take you, we'll call it off."

Nasmyth made a gesture which was vaguely expressive of resignation, and in another moment would have closed the bargain, but the footsteps grew plainer, and, as he turned round, Acton appeared at the open window close behind them. He stood still, looking at them with amusement in his shrewd eyes, and then, stepping out, dropped heavily into the nearest chair.

"Not through yet? I want a drink," he said.

It was probably not often that Hutton was disconcerted, but Nasmyth saw his

fingers close sharply on his cigar, which crumpled under them, and that appeared significant to him. Acton looked round again as he filled his glass.

“When you’re ready we’ll go along,” he suggested. “You can worry out anything Hutton has put before you to-night. When I’ve a matter of consequence on hand, I generally like to sleep on it.”

Nasmyth rose and turned to Hutton. “I don’t want to keep Mr. Acton, and I’m afraid I can’t decide just yet,” he said. “I’ll let you know when I make up my mind.”

Hutton made a sign of concurrence, but there was a suggestive frown on his face, when he leaned upon the balustrade, as Nasmyth and Acton went down the stairway together. When they were half-way down the street, Acton looked at Nasmyth with a dry smile.

“Well,” he commented, “you have still got most of the wool on you?”

Nasmyth laughed, but there was relief in his voice.

“I was very nearly doing what I think would have been an unwise thing,” he said. “It was fortunate you came along when you did.”

Acton waved his hand. “I’m open to admit that Hutton has a voice like a boring bit. It would go through a door, any way. It’s a thing he ought to remember.”

“There is still a point or two I am not very clear upon;” and Nasmyth looked at him steadily.

Acton smiled again. “The fact is, Mrs. Acton gave me some instructions concerning you. She said I was to see you through.” He made an expressive gesture. “She seemed to figure it might be advisable.”

“Well,” said Nasmyth reflectively, “I fancy she was right.”

They said nothing further, but Nasmyth was unusually thoughtful as they proceeded towards the water-front.

CHAPTER XVII

AN EVENTFUL DAY

It was about eleven o’clock on a cloudy, unsettled morning when Nasmyth stood knee-deep in a swirling river-pool, holding a landing-net and watching Miss Hamilton, who stood on a neighbouring bank of shingle with a light trout-rod in her hand. The rod was bent, and the thin line, which was drawn tense and rigid, ripped through the surface of the pool, while there was also a suggestion of tension in the pose of the girl’s figure. She was gazing at the moving line, with a fine crimson in her cheeks and a brightness in her eyes.

“Oh,” she cried, “I’m afraid I’m going to lose it, after all.”

Nasmyth smiled reassuringly. “Keep the butt well down, and your thumb upon the reel,” he continued. “You have only to keep on a steady strain.”

A big silvery object broke the surface a dozen yards away, and then, while the reel clinked, went down again; but the line was moving towards Nasmyth now, and, in another minute or two, he flung a sharp warning at the girl as he made a sweep with the net. Then he floundered ashore, dripping, with the gleaming trout, which he laid at her feet.

“You ran that fish very well,” he told her. “In fact, there were one or two moments when I never expected you to hold it.”

The colour grew a little plainer in his companion’s face, though whether this was due to his commendation or to elation at her own success was a question. As she had just caught her first big fish, it was, perhaps, the latter.

“Oh,” she said complacently, “it isn’t so very difficult after all. But I wonder what can have become of the others of our party?”

It was at least an hour since Nasmyth had last seen their companions considerably lower down the river. He and Miss Hamilton had pushed on ahead of them into the Bush, which was a thing they had fallen into the habit of doing. The girl sat down on a boulder and seemed to be listening, but there was nothing

to indicate the presence of any of the party. Except for the murmur of the river and the sighing among the pine-sprays high overhead, the Bush was very still, but it seemed to Nasmyth that there was more wind than there had been.

“I suppose we had better go back to them,” observed the girl. The manner in which she spoke conveyed the impression that she would have been more or less contented to stay where she was with him; but next moment she added: “After all, they have the lunch with them, and it must have been seven o’clock when we breakfasted.”

“Yes,” said Nasmyth, “I think it was. Still, until this minute I had quite forgotten it.”

“I certainly hadn’t,” said Violet Hamilton. “I don’t think I ever had breakfast at seven o’clock in my life until this morning.”

The fact had its significance to Nasmyth. It was one of the many little things that emphasized the difference between his life and hers, but he brushed it out of his mind, and they went back together down the waterside. Their progress was slow, for there was no trail at all, and while they laboriously plodded over the shingle, or crept in and out among the thickets, the wail of the breeze grew louder. Half an hour had passed when the faint hoot of the *Tillicum’s* whistle reached them among the trees.

“What can the skipper be whistling for?” asked the girl.

“I fancy the wind is setting inshore moderately fresh, and he wants us to come off before it roughens the water,” said Nasmyth.

They went on as fast as possible after that, though it was remarkably rough travelling; but they saw no sign of their companions, and the whistle, which had shrieked again, was silent, which evidently meant that the gig had already gone off. When they reached the inlet the river fell into, and found only the *Tillicum’s* dinghy lying on the shingle, Nasmyth, looking down the lane of smooth green water somewhat anxiously, noticed that the sea was flecked with white. The *Tillicum*, as he remembered, was also lying well out from the beach.

“We had better get off at once,” he said. “The breeze is freshening, and this dinghy isn’t very big.”

He helped the girl into the boat, and when he had thrust the little craft off sent her flying down the riband of sheltered water; but he set his lips and braced himself for an effort when they slid out past a point of froth-lapped shingle. There was already a white-topped sea running, and the spray from the oar-blades

and the dinghy's bows blew aft into his companion's face in stinging wisps as he drove the plunging craft over it. Now and then an odd bucketful of brine came in and hit him on the back, while Miss Hamilton, who commenced to get very wet, shivered and drew her feet up as the water gathered deeper in the bottom of the boat.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to throw some of that water out," he said. "There is a can to scoop it up with."

The girl made an attempt to do so, but it was not surprising that in a few minutes, when the dinghy lurched viciously, she let the can slip from her fingers. Nasmyth set his lips tighter, and his face was anxious as he glanced over his shoulder. The sea was white-flecked between him and the *Tillicum*, which lay rolling wildly farther down the beach, at least half a mile away. It already taxed all Nasmyth's strength to drive the dinghy off shore, and every sea that broke a little more sharply than the rest splashed into the boat. He held on for another few minutes, glancing over his shoulder and pulling cautiously, for it was evident that he might fill the dinghy up or roll her over if he failed to swing neatly over the crest of some tumbling comber. In spite of his efforts, a wave broke on board, and sitting ankle-deep in water, he waited until there was a slightly smoother patch in front of him, and then swung the dinghy round.

"I'm afraid we'll have to make for the beach," he announced.

He would have preferred to head for the inlet, but that would have brought the little white seas, which were rapidly getting steeper, dangerously on her beam, and the thrust of one beneath her side probably would have been sufficient to turn the diminutive craft over. He accordingly pulled straight for the beach before the wind, and the perspiration dripped from his set face as he strove to hold the dinghy straight, when, with the foam boiling white about her, she swung up on the crest of a comber. Once or twice Nasmyth glanced at Violet Hamilton reassuringly, but she sat, half-crouching, against the transom, gazing forward, white in face, with her wet hair whipping about her. Nasmyth had not noticed it before, but her hat had evidently gone over. Speech was out of the question. He wanted all his breath, and recognized that it was not advisable to divert his attention for a moment from his task, for it depends very largely upon the man at the oars whether a diminutive dinghy keeps right side uppermost in any weight of breeze. Once or twice he risked a glance at the approaching land.

Sombre forest rolled down to the water's edge, and he could see that there was already a broad ribbon of frothy whiteness beneath it, while so far as he had

noticed that beach consisted of rock ledges and very large boulders. It was about the last place he would have chosen to make a landing on, in a light and fragile dinghy.

After that, he looked resolutely astern over his companion's shoulders as she swung up between him and the sea with the slate-green ridges and tumbling white tops of the combers behind her. At length a hazarded glance showed him that they were close inshore, and he wondered for a moment whether he could swing the dinghy round without rolling the boat over. He did not think it could be done, and set his lips as he let her go, careering on a comber's crest, with at least half her length out of the water.

Then there was a white upheaval close alongside, and for a moment a black mass of stone appeared amidst the leaping foam. They swept by it, and he gasped with relief as he looked at Miss Hamilton.

"Get hold of me when she strikes," he said.

The dinghy swung round, twisting broadside-on with the brine pouring into her in spite of all that he could do; and while he tore at one oar, another white sea that curled menacingly rose up astern. It broke right into the boat, and in another moment there was a crash, and Nasmyth, who let the oars drop, stretched out his arms to the girl. He jumped when she clutched him, and found himself standing amid the swirling froth on what seemed to be a ledge of very slippery stone, with both arms about her, while the crushed-in dinghy swept up among the foam-lapped boulders. He sprang down from the stone as another sea came in, and floundered ashore waist-deep with it, after which he set his dripping companion down upon the beach.

"I'm afraid you're rather wet," he said, when he got his breath again. "Still, I really couldn't help it. There was a good deal more sea than I had expected."

Miss Hamilton, who sat down on a boulder with the water dripping from her skirt, looked ruefully at him and the dinghy, which was rolling over in the surf.

"How are we going to get off?" she inquired.

"Not in that dinghy, any way," answered Nasmyth. "She has knocked all one bilge in. They'll probably send the *Tillicum's* gig ashore for us by-and-by."

"But she's going away!" said the girl, with a gasp of consternation.

Nasmyth, who turned round, saw that this was certainly the case. A cloud of steam blew away from beside the yacht's funnel, and in another moment the

shriek of a whistle reached him.

“I don’t think we need worry about that,” he remarked. “They evidently watched us get ashore. You see, with the breeze freshening she couldn’t very well lie where she was. Still, if I remember, there’s an inlet a couple of leagues or so away along the coast where she’d find shelter.”

“But why didn’t they send for us first?”

“The trouble is that there is really a nasty sea, and they couldn’t very well take us off if they knocked a big hole in the gig. I fancy the wisest thing would be to walk towards that inlet along the beach.”

They set off, when Nasmyth had pulled the dinghy out, but the beach was strewn with driftwood which was difficult to flounder over, as well as very rough. They made no greater progress when they tried the Bush. Fallen trees lay across one another, and there were thorny thickets in between, while, here and there, the undergrowth seemed as impenetrable as a wall. By-and-by it commenced to rain, and for an hour or two they plodded on dejectedly through the pitiless deluge. It rains exceedingly hard in that country. At last the girl sat down on a fallen tree. She had already lost her hat, and the water soaked out of Nasmyth’s jacket, which he had tied by the arms about her shoulders. Her drenched skirt clung about her, rent to tatters, and one of her little shoes was caked with mire. The other gaped open.

“How far have we gone?” she asked.

“About a league,” answered Nasmyth quietly. “I think we could make the inlet in another two hours. That is, if the beach isn’t very much rougher.”

The girl leaned against a branch wearily. “I’m afraid I can’t go a step further,” she replied with trembling lips.

The rain beat upon them, and Nasmyth stood still a moment looking at her.

“Well,” he said, “we really can’t stay here. Since there seems no other way, I think I could carry you.”

His diffidence was evident, and Violet smiled. “Have you ever carried anybody—a distance—before?” she asked.

“No,” said Nasmyth, “I certainly haven’t.”

“Then I don’t think there would be much use in trying. You couldn’t carry me for more than four or five minutes. That wouldn’t be worth while, would it?”

Nasmyth said nothing for a minute or two, for he felt compassionate as well as a trifle confused. He had, in fact, already discovered that there are occasions when a young woman is apt to show greater self-possession and look facts in the face more plainly than a man. Then he set to work furiously with a branch which he tore from the fallen tree, ripping off rough slabs of bark, and in the course of half an hour had constructed a shelter about the base of a cedar. It, at least, kept the rain off when Violet sat under it.

“It might be as well if I pushed on for the inlet and brought George or Acton back with me,” he suggested. “We could make something to carry you in, if there was too much sea for the gig.”

A flush crept into the girl’s face, and she looked at him reproachfully.

“How could I stay here alone?” she asked. “Don’t say those foolish things. Come in out of the rain.”

The bark shelter would just hold the two of them, and Nasmyth, dripping, sat down close beside her. She looked very forlorn.

“I’m sorry for you,” he said awkwardly.

The girl showed faint signs of temper. “You have told me that before. Why don’t you do something? You said you had lived in the Bush, and now you have only been a few hours in it. It was seven o’clock when we had breakfast. Can’t you even make a fire?”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” answered Nasmyth deprecatingly. “You see, one has usually an axe and some matches, as well as a few other odds and ends, when one lives in the Bush. A man is a wretchedly helpless being when he has only his hands.”

The fact was borne in upon Violet forcibly as she glanced out at the wet beach, tumbling sea, and dreary, dripping Bush. The Bush rolled back, a long succession of straggling pines that rose one behind the other in sombre ranks, to the rugged hills that cut against the hazy sky. There was, no doubt, all that man required to provide him with warmth and food and shelter in that forest, but it was certain that it was only by continuous and arduous toil that he could render it available. Indeed, since he could not make himself an axe or a saw or a rifle, it was also evident that his efforts would be fruitless unless backed by the toil of others who played their part in the great scheme of human co-operation.

It is, however, probable that Violet did not concern herself with this aspect of the matter, but she had led a sheltered life, and it was curiously disconcerting to find herself brought suddenly face to face with primitive realities. She was wet

through and worn out, and although evening was not far away, she had eaten nothing since seven o'clock that morning. The momentary petulance deserted her.

"Oh!" she cried, "they mayn't be able to send off for us for perhaps a day or two."

"It is quite likely that the breeze will drop at sunset," Nasmyth replied cheerfully. "These westerly breezes often do. Anyway, the rain seems to be stopping, and I may be able to dry my matches. In the meanwhile I might come across something to eat. There are oysters on some of these beaches."

Violet glanced at the Bush apprehensively, and once more it was evident that she did not wish him to leave her. This sent a little thrill of satisfaction through him, and although he half-consciously contrasted her with Laura Waynefleet, it was not altogether to her disadvantage. It is a curious fact that some men, and probably women, too, feel more drawn to the persons upon whom they confer a benefit than to those from whom they receive one. Laura Waynefleet, he realized, would have urged him to make some attempt to reach the *Tillicum*, and in all probability would have insisted on taking a share in it, while his companion desired only to lean on him. After all, Laura's attitude was more pleasant to the subconscious vanity that was in his nature, and in this respect he probably differed but little from most of his fellows.

"You won't be very long away?" she said.

Nasmyth reassured her upon this point, and floundered down to the beach, where he carefully laid out to dry the little block of sulphur matches that he carried. Then he crawled among the boulders near low-water mark, and, since oysters are tolerably plentiful along those beaches, succeeded in collecting several dozen of them. After that he sat down and gazed seaward for a minute or two. There was no sign of the *Tillicum*, only a strip of dingy, slate-green sea smeared with streaks of froth, which shone white beneath a heavy, lowering sky. Close in front of him the sea hove itself up in rows of foam-crested ridges, which fell upon the boulders and swirled over them and among them a furious white seething. He fancied that it was near sunset, and it was clear that the breeze was a little lighter. It seemed to him just possible that four capable seamen might keep the gig afloat close enough to the beach for one to wade out to her, though there would be a certain peril in such a proceeding. Still, there were not four capable seamen on board the *Tillicum*!

Gathering up his matches, which had dried, Nasmyth went back to the bark

shelter. He was pleasantly conscious of the relief in Miss Hamilton's eyes when he reached it, and fancied that she was too overwrought and anxious to care whether he noticed it or not; but he set about making a fire, and she helped him to collect brittle undergrowth and fallen branches. Then they sat down and ate the oysters that he had laid among the embers. He thought they were not in season, and they were certainly burnt and shrivelled, as well as somewhat gritty; but one is glad to eat anything after a long day of exertion, and Nasmyth watched his companion with quiet appreciation as she handled the rough shells daintily with little delicate fingers. Her evident reliance upon him had its effect.

He carried an armful of branches to the beach, and started another fire where it could be seen from seawards, after which he went back and sat outside the shelter near Miss Hamilton, while darkness crept up from the eastwards across the Bush. It grew dim and solemn, and the doleful wailing of the pines was curiously impressive. The girl shivered.

"The wind is very chilly," she said, with a tremor in her voice. "You will stay here where I can see you. You won't go away?"

"Only to keep up the fire on the beach," Nasmyth answered reassuringly.

She crept into the shelter, and he could see her dimly when the flickering light blazed up, but he could never remember how many journeys he made to the fire upon the beach before his eyes grew heavy as he sat amid the whirling smoke. He endeavoured to keep awake, and resolutely straightened himself once or twice, but at last his eyes closed altogether, and he did not hear the shriek of the *Tillicum's* whistle ring far across the shadowy Bush. Indeed, he did not waken when Acton and Wisbech came floundering into the light of the fire; and the two men looked at each other when they stopped beside it and saw him lying there, and then discovered the girl inside the shelter. Acton raised his hand warningly, while a faint twinkle crept into his eyes.

"I guess there's no reason why anybody else should hear of this," he said. "It seems to me that Miss Hamilton would be just as well pleased if we were not around when she awakens."

He stooped and shook Nasmyth's shoulder as Wisbech disappeared among the shadows.

"Get up," said Acton. "Wait until I get away, and then waken her."

It was a minute before Nasmyth, who stood up stiffly, quite understood him, and then the blood rose to his face as he crept into the shelter and touched the girl.

She sprang to her feet with a little cry and clutched his arm. Then she suddenly let her hand fall back, and her cheeks flushed crimson.

“The steamer’s close by,” said Nasmyth reassuringly. “They have sent for us at last.”

They went out together, and it was a minute or two later when they came upon Wisbech and Acton in the Bush. Nasmyth entered into confused explanations as they proceeded towards the beach. The sky was a little lighter when they reached it, and standing near the sinking fire, they could dimly see the gig plunging amidst the froth and spray. Then George’s voice reached them.

“Can’t you let us have them, Mr. Acton? It’s most all we can do to keep her off the beach,” he said.

Acton glanced at the strip of tumbling foam—through which he had waded waist-deep—between them and the boat, and Nasmyth turned towards Miss Hamilton, who, to his astonishment, recoiled from him. Acton, however, made him a sign of command.

“I guess,” he said, “she’d be safer with you.”

Nasmyth said nothing, but he picked the girl up, as unconcernedly as he could, for the second time that day, and staggered down the rough beach with her. He contrived to keep his footing when a frothing sea broke against him, and, floundering through the seething water, reached the lurching boat. George seized his burden, and gently deposited it in one of the seats. Scrambling on board, Nasmyth groped for an oar, and in another minute or two they laboriously drove the gig out towards the blinking lights of the *Tillicum*.

CHAPTER XVIII

TRANQUILLITY

The afternoon was very hot when Nasmyth plodded down a steep hillside through the thick red dust of the waggon trail. A fire had swept the undergrowth away, and there was no shade among the trees which, stripped of their branches, towered about him, great charred and blackened columns. Close ahead the primeval Bush rose in an unbroken sombre mass, and Nasmyth, who quickened his pace a trifle, sat down with a gasp of satisfaction when he reached the first of the shadow. It was fresh and cool there. The Bush was scented with the odours of pine and cedar, and filled with the soft murmur of falling water, while he knew that just beyond it Bonavista stood above the sparkling sea.

He was on his way from the railroad depôt. It was just a fortnight since he had left the *Tillicum* at the little mining town, on the day after the one he and Violet Hamilton had spent on the beach, and he had not seen her before he went. Now he fancied that a welcome awaited him, and he felt sincerely pleased to be back again. As he sat beneath a great cedar filling his pipe, it seemed to him only appropriate that he should approach Bonavista through that belt of cool, sweet-scented Bush. It made it easier to feel that he had left behind him all that associated him with the strife and bustle of the hot and noisy cities. At Bonavista were leisure, comfort, and tranquillity, which were, after all, things that made a strong appeal to one side of his nature, and he had made no progress in the city. There was also no doubt that both Mr. and Mrs. Acton were glad to entertain him for a time. He sat still a few minutes, and then went on slowly beneath the towering redwoods and cedars until he came out of the forest, and saw the sunlight stream down on the shingled roof of Bonavista close ahead.

The house appeared to be empty, and he had shed his dusty city clothes in his room and had dressed again before he came upon Mrs. Acton, sitting half asleep on a secluded strip of veranda. She roused herself and smiled when she saw him.

“So you have come back at last. We have been expecting you all the past week,”

she said.

“That,” returned Nasmyth, “was remarkably good of you. In fact, I have wondered now and then, with some misgivings, whether you have not seen too much of me already.”

Mrs. Acton laughed. “You needn’t worry yourself on that point. We have all our little hobbies. My husband’s is the acquisition of dollars and the opening of mines and mills. Mine is the amusing of my friends, or, rather, the permitting them to amuse themselves, which is why I had Bonavista built. I make only one stipulation—it is that when you stay with us, you are amused.”

With a little sigh of content, Nasmyth settled himself in a canvas chair, and glanced out between the slender pillars of the cool veranda at the wall of dusky forest and the flashing sea.

“Ah,” he replied, “can you doubt it, my dear lady? After logging camp and mine and city, this is an enchanted land. I think it is always summer afternoon at Bonavista.”

Mrs. Acton smiled at him graciously. “That,” she observed, “was quite nice of you. Things haven’t gone just as you would have liked them to go, in the city?”

“They haven’t,” admitted Nasmyth whimsically. “As a matter of fact, they very seldom do. Still, I wouldn’t like you to think that was the only reason I am glad to get back.”

Mrs. Acton’s eyes twinkled. “I imagine I am acquainted with the other. You were rather tactful in going away.”

“I went because Mr. Acton handed me a letter which said that a business man in Victoria would like a talk with me.”

“In any case, Miss Hamilton seems to be under the impression that it was nice of you.”

“Nice of me to go away?” and Nasmyth’s tone was mildly reproachful.

“One would not resent a desire to save one any little embarrassment.”

“Still,” observed Nasmyth, with an air of reflection, “the trouble is that I couldn’t contrive to keep out of her sight continually even if I wanted to, and”—he lowered his voice confidentially—“as it happens, I don’t.”

Mrs. Acton laughed. “I don’t know of any particular reason why you should do that. Violet has probably quite recovered her equanimity and decided on her

attitude towards you." Then she changed the subject abruptly. "I wonder if I may point out that there has been a change in you, since my husband brought you here. For one thing, you are much more amusing. Even your voice is different."

Nasmyth bowed. "But not my hands," he said; and as he held up one hand, she noticed the scars on it and the coarseness of his nails. "That tells a tale, I think. My dear lady, I scarcely think you quite realize all that you have given me. You have never seen how we lived in the lonely logging camps—packed like cattle in a reeking shed—and you do not know the grim side of our life in the Bush. It would be no great use to tell you that I have now and then limped for days together over the ballast of a railroad track, wondering where my next dollar was to come from. These are the things one could not expect you to understand."

Mrs. Acton's face softened a little. "Still, I think my husband does," she replied. Then she smiled at him. "It almost seems to me that you need never go back to that life again unless you like it. I mean, of course, that, for one thing, your uncle has his views concerning you. He has to some extent taken Mr. Acton into his confidence."

Nasmyth made no comment, and Mrs. Acton sank down a little further into her long chair. "The others are down on the beach," she announced drowsily. "I really think I was going to sleep when you made your appearance."

Nasmyth could take a hint, and he strolled away down the veranda stairway and around the edge of the wide clearing in the shadow of the Bush, until he stood looking down upon the sea from the crown of the bluff. Then he felt a little thrill, for some twenty or thirty feet beneath him was a patch of something white in the shadow of the shrubbery. He went down quietly until he stopped, and, stooping, touched Violet Hamilton's shoulder. She looked around with a start, and a faint trace of embarrassment crept into her face at the sight of him.

"Oh," she said, "I thought you were in Victoria."

Nasmyth stretched himself out upon a ledge of rock near her feet. "Mrs. Acton was good enough to imply that she had been expecting me more or less anxiously for several days," he rejoined in a tone of reproach. "In fact, she used the plural pronoun, which led me to believe that somebody else must have shared her anxiety. She did not, however, point out who it was that she meant."

"Her husband, in all probability. She could, at least, speak for him."

Nasmyth appeared to ponder over this, though his heart was beating faster than usual, for the suggestion of confusion which he had noticed in the girl's manner

had its significance for him.

“Well,” he conceded, “it may have been Acton, but I almost ventured to believe she meant somebody else. In any case, I shouldn’t like to think you were displeased at my reappearance. If you are, I can, of course, go away again.”

“I am not the only person at Bonavista. Wouldn’t anybody else’s wishes count—Mr. Acton’s, for instance?”

“No,” asserted Nasmyth reflectively. “At least, not to anything like the same extent.”

Violet laughed. “The difficulty is that nobody can tell how much you really mean. You are so seldom serious.” She cast a quick glance at him. “You were not like that when you first came here.”

“Then,” said Nasmyth, “you can blame it on Bonavista. As I have been trying to explain to Mrs. Acton, who made a similar observation, there is glamour in this air. It gets hold of one. I was, no doubt, a tediously solemn person when I left the Bush, but you will remember that soon after I arrived here, you and I sailed out together into the realms of moonlight and mystery. I sometimes feel that I must have brought a little of the latter back with me.”

Violet said nothing for half a minute, during which she lay resting on one elbow, looking down upon the cool, green flashing of the water a hundred feet below, and again Nasmyth felt a little thrill run through him. She was so very dainty in speech and thought and person, a woman of the world he had once belonged to, and which it now seemed he might enter again. Her delicately chiselled, half-averted face matched the slight but finely moulded figure about which the thin white draperies clung. She turned and looked at him.

“You certainly can’t be serious now,” she declared.

“I assure you that when I mentioned the glamour and mystery, I was never half so serious in my life. They are, after all, very real things.”

He was, as a matter of fact, grimly serious for the moment as he wondered at the change that had come over him. His life in the silent Bush, the struggle with the icy river, and even Laura Waynefleet, who had encouraged him in his work of rehabilitation, had by degrees become no more than a dim, blurred memory. He knew that he could recall it all, but he had no wish to make the effort, for it was more pleasant to hear the sighing of the summer wind about the firs of Bonavista, and wonder languidly what his companion thought.

“I haven’t thanked you for taking care of me the day we were left behind on the beach,” said Violet.

Nasmyth made a sign of protest. “I don’t think you are under any very great obligation to me. As a matter of fact, my efforts on your behalf nearly resulted in my drowning you. Besides, you see, there was really not the slightest cause for uneasiness. Acton certainly would have sent for us when the wind dropped.”

“But it might have blown for days.”

“Then,” said Nasmyth, with a twinkle in his eyes, “we would have lived on salmon and berries until it stopped. One really can live on them for a considerable time, though they are not remarkably palatable when one has anything else to eat; in fact, it’s a thing I’ve done.”

Salmon is not esteemed in that country, except for the purpose of sending East in cans, and it is seldom that anybody eats it except the Indians. There is probably no diet that more rapidly grows satiating.

“Ah,” exclaimed the girl, with a shiver, “it would have been horrible.”

She was evidently not thinking of the salmon, but of the dreary, dripping Bush, and Nasmyth looked at her with reproach in his eyes.

“I really don’t think it would have been,” he said. “In fact, I believe we could have lived there for a little while very contentedly—that is, when I had fixed things up a bit. After all, there is a certain glamour in the Bush when one gets used to it.”

He saw the faint colour creep into her face, and, though it cost him an effort, laid a restraint upon himself.

“Well,” he said, “I at least would not have felt that I had any cause to complain, though, no doubt, it would have been different with you. You see”—and he made an expressive gesture—“I have had a long tough tussle since I came to Canada, and experiences of that sort have their effect on one. In fact, they set one apart from those who haven’t undergone them. It seems to have struck you that I was prematurely solemn and serious when I came to Bonavista.”

He thought he saw sympathy in Violet Hamilton’s eyes, and her next observation made it clear that her mind was busy with the suggestion that he had conveyed.

“After all,” she said softly, “you cannot be very much older than I am.”

“Four years, perhaps,” returned Nasmyth, with a trace of grimness. “That is, in

one sense. In another, I think I am double your age. You see, you have never been brought into contact with the realities of life. If you had been, you would probably not be so ready to take me for what you think I am, as I believe you have graciously done. After all, you know so very little about me."

He felt that he was doing no more than discharging an obligation in giving her this warning. He desired to afford her every opportunity of satisfying herself concerning him, for he was not a fool, and he had seen for a moment or two a suggestive softness in her face. It is possible that she did not know it had been there, but he felt that if he roused himself and made the effort, he might sweep away the barriers between them.

Violet appeared troubled by his words. She sat silent, while Nasmyth wondered what she would say. He was aware that a good deal depended upon her next remark. Then there were footsteps on the slope behind them, and, turning suddenly, he saw Acton and another man approaching them. He rose with a little start when he recognized the second man as Gordon, who was neatly attired in city clothes. Gordon looked down at Nasmyth with a faint sardonic smile.

"Mr. Gordon turned up half an hour ago," Acton said. "It appears that he was going into the city, and got off the cars to talk over things with you. I believe he had a notion of going on again to-night, but Mrs. Acton won't hear of it."

Gordon bowed in the direction of his host.

"I'd have put up a more vigorous protest against troubling Mrs. Acton than I did, if I had felt it would have been of any use," he said.

"Well," replied Acton, smiling, "I guess they'll be getting supper ready, and we were sent here to bring our friend and Miss Hamilton in."

They went back to the house together, where they found the long table spread. It was characteristic of the owner of Bonavista that he still called the evening meal supper. There were, besides Nasmyth and Wisbech, five or six other guests from Victoria and one of the rising cities on Puget Sound, and Gordon speedily made himself very much at home. Most of his new acquaintances found what he had to say entertaining, but Miss Hamilton was, as Nasmyth noticed, somewhat silent. Nasmyth, on his part, felt slightly restless, for his old comrade's presence had an unsettling effect on him. It was, however, not until an hour or two later that he and Gordon were able to discuss their own affairs. They sat on the veranda looking down upon the sea, while the dusk slowly crept up from the east.

"Now," said Gordon, "I should like to hear what you have done."

“I’m afraid it’s not a great deal,” replied Nasmyth. “The Crown land authorities appear disposed to sell the land instead of leasing it, which of late has been the more usual course; but they insist on counting a certain proportion of the hillside and big timber in. I may get one or two concessions, and I’m still keeping the affair before them. In the meanwhile I’ve been seeing what can be done to raise enough capital to take up all the land, but haven’t met with any great success. The folks I’ve been in communication with, as usual, want all the profit; in fact, I almost fancy it might be as well to raise what money we can around the settlement, and content ourselves with locating a portion of the valley.”

Gordon nodded. “You can’t do much about the fall until after the autumn freshets, anyway, and there’s a good deal you can’t get at until the frost sets in,” he declared. “In the meanwhile the offers Wheeler and I made you hold.”

They discussed the matter until Mrs. Acton appeared on the veranda and shook her head at them.

“What are you two doing here when there are pretty girls in the house waiting for a dance?” she inquired.

“I’m afraid we have been very remiss,” apologized Nasmyth, when they joined her. “Still, we didn’t know, and we had some business to talk about.”

“There will be plenty of time for that to-morrow.”

“The trouble is that I shall be in the city then,” said Gordon.

Mrs. Acton laughed. “Oh, no!” she contradicted. “We are all going for a sail on the straits to-morrow, and we certainly expect you to join us. In the meanwhile, I believe there are two young women waiting for partners.”

She silenced Gordon’s objections as they turned back towards the house. They found the dancing had commenced, and Nasmyth failed to secure Miss Hamilton as a partner for any time in the evening. He could not help a fancy that she had taken some little trouble to bring about this result.

CHAPTER XIX

NASMYTH HEARS THE RIVER

Darkness had settled down on Bonavista next evening when Nasmyth lay in a canvas chair on the veranda, while Gordon leaned against the balustrade in front of him with a cigar in his hand. A blaze of light streamed out from one of the long open windows a few yards away, and somebody was singing in the room behind it, while the splash of the gentle surf came up from the foot of the promontory in a deep monotone. Now and then a shadowy figure strolled into the veranda or crossed it to the terrace below, but for the time being nobody disturbed the two men.

“I haven’t had a word with you since last night,” said Nasmyth. “How are the boys at the settlement?”

“Hustling along as usual.” Gordon laughed. “Is there anybody else you feel inclined to ask about?”

“Yes,” said Nasmyth, “there certainly is. How is Miss Waynefleet?”

Gordon looked down at his cigar. “Well,” he said, “I’m a little worried on her account. She was attempting to do a great deal more than was good for her when I last saw her. They have no longer a hired man at the ranch. Waynefleet, I understand, is rather tightly fixed for money, and, as you know, he isn’t the kind of man who would deny himself. He was talking of selling some stock.”

Nasmyth suddenly straightened himself, and closed one hand rather hard on the arm of his chair.

“What right have you and I to be lounging here when that girl is working late and early on the ranch?” he asked. “Gordon, you will have to buy two or three head of that stock at double value for me.”

“It’s rather a big question;” and Gordon’s tone was serious. “In fact, I fancy it’s one that neither you nor I can throw much light upon. Anyway, I may as well point out that I arrived here only yesterday, and I’m going on again in the

morning. As to the other matter, Laura Waynefleet has friends who will stand by her."

"Don't you count me one of them?" Nasmyth demanded. "That girl saved my life for me."

Gordon glanced round sharply, for there were light footsteps on the veranda, and he almost imagined that a white figure in filmy draperies stopped a moment. It, however, went on again and vanished in the shadow.

"I believe she did," he admitted. "Well, if there's anything that can be done, you may rely on me." He made an abrupt gesture, and as he turned, the light from the window fell upon his face, showing the curious smile on it. "What are you doing here?"

He flung the question at his comrade, and Nasmyth, who knew what he meant, sat for a moment or two with wrinkled forehead. There was no reason why he should not stay there so long as Mr. and Mrs. Acton desired his company, but it did not seem fitting that he should spend those summer days in luxurious idleness while Laura Waynefleet toiled late and early at the lonely ranch. Again, he seemed to see her steady eyes with the quiet courage in them, and the gleam of her red-gold hair. Even then she was, he reflected, in all probability occupied with some severe drudgery. It was a thing he did not like to contemplate, and he almost resented the fact that Gordon should have brought such thoughts into his mind. His comrade had broken in upon his contentment like a frosty wind that stung him to action. Still, he answered quietly.

"I am within easy reach of the city here," he explained. "Acton, who has once or twice given me good advice, is acquainted with most of the folks likely to be of any use to us, and has laid the scheme before one or two of them. That, at least, is one reason why I am staying at Bonavista. It's perfectly evident that it wouldn't be any benefit to Miss Waynefleet if I went back to the Bush."

"No," agreed Gordon grimly; "if you were likely to be of any use or consolation to her, you'd go, if I had to drag you."

Nasmyth smiled. He was too well acquainted with his comrade's manner to take offence at this remark, and the man's devotion to the girl who, he knew, would never regard him as more than a friend also had its effect.

"Well," he said, "since plain speaking seems admissible, you are probably aware that Laura Waynefleet has nothing beyond a kindly interest in me. She is, I needn't point out, a remarkably sensible young lady."

He stopped somewhat abruptly, for Wisbech emerged from the shadows beneath the pillars, and sat down in a chair close by.

“Yes,” said Wisbech, “I heard, and it seems to me Derrick’s right in one respect. Though I don’t know how far it accounts for the other fact he has just impressed on you, Miss Waynefleet certainly possesses a considerable amount of sense. She is also a young lady I have a high opinion of. Still, if he had gone back to the Bush merely because you insisted on it, I think I should have cast him off.”

Gordon appeared to ponder over this, and he then laughed softly. “It’s quite natural, and I guess I sympathize with you,” he remarked. “In one way, however, your nephew’s acquitting himself creditably, considering that there are apparently three people anxious to exert a beneficent influence upon him. The effect of that kind of thing is apt to become a trifle bewildering, especially as it’s evident their views can’t invariably coincide.”

“Three?” said Wisbech, with a twinkle in his eyes. “If you count me in, I almost fancy there are four.”

Nasmyth said nothing, though he felt his face grow hot. Gordon smiled.

“As a matter of fact,” he admitted, “I had a notion that Miss Hamilton resented my being here. Any way, she didn’t take any very noticeable trouble to be pleasant to me to-day. No doubt she considers any influence she may choose to exert should be quite sufficient.”

“It should be,” said Nasmyth. “That is, to any man who happened to be a judge of character, and had eyes in his head.”

Gordon waved one hand. “Oh,” he averred, “she’s very dainty, and I think there’s a little more than prettiness there, which is a very liberal admission, since I’m troubled with an impression that she isn’t quite pleased with me. Still, when the woods are full of pretty girls, I guess it’s wisest of a man who has anything worth while to do in front of him to keep his eyes right on the trail, and go steadily ahead.” He turned to Wisbech deprecatingly. “We don’t mind you, sir. We regard you as part of the concern.”

“Thanks,” said Wisbech, with a certain dryness. “I believe I am interested in it—at least, financially.”

“Well,” said Gordon, “when I break loose, as I do now and then, I quite often say a little more than is strictly advisable without meaning to. It’s a habit some folks have. Your observation, however, switches us off on to a different matter. I’ve been telling your nephew we leave him to handle the thing and stand by our

offers."

"That is precisely what I mean to do. The affair is Derrick's. He must take his own course," declared Wisbech.

Gordon grinned as he turned to Nasmyth. "There will be no reinforcements. You have to win your spurs." Then he looked at Wisbech. "If you will not be offended, sir, I would like to say I'm pleased to notice that your ideas coincide with mine. He'll be the tougher afterwards if you let him put up his fight alone."

"The assurance is naturally satisfactory," said Wisbech with quiet amusement. Then he held up one hand. "It seems to me the person at the piano is playing exceptionally well."

They sat silent while the crashing opening chords rang out from the lighted room, and then Nasmyth, who was a lover of music, found himself listening with a strained attention as the theme stole out of them, for it chimed with his mood. He had been restless and disturbed in mind before Gordon had flung his veiled hints at him, and the reality underlying his comrade's badinage had a further unsettling effect. He did not know what the music was, but it seemed in keeping with the throb of the sea against the crag and the fitful wailing of the pines. There was a suggestion of effort and struggle in it, and, it seemed to him, something that spoke of a great dominant force steadily pressing on; and, as he listened, the splash of the sea grew fainter, and he heard instead the roar of the icy flood and the crash of mighty trees driving down upon his half-built dam. These were sounds which sometimes haunted him against his will, and once or twice he had been a little surprised to find that, now that they were past, he could look back upon the months of tense effort with a curious, half-regretful pleasure. He was relieved when the music, that swelled in a sonorous crescendo, stopped, and he saw Gordon glance at Wisbech.

"I think that man has understanding and the gift of expressing what he feels," said Wisbech. "The music suggested something to you?"

"The fast freight," confessed Gordon.—"When she's coming down the big cañon under a full head of steam. I don't know if that's quite an elegant simile, in one way. Still, if you care to think how that track was built, it's not difficult to fancy there's triumph in the whistles and the roar of the freight-car wheels."

Wisbech made a sign of comprehension, and Gordon looked hard at Nasmyth. "It's your call."

"I heard the river," said Nasmyth. "In fact, I often hear it, and now and then wish

I didn’t. It’s unsettling.”

Gordon laughed in a suggestive fashion. “Well,” he declared, “most of us hear something of that kind at times, and no doubt it’s just as well we do. It’s apt to have results if you listen. You have been most of a month in the city one way or another. You took to it kindly?”

“I didn’t,” Nasmyth answered, and it was evident that he was serious. “I came back here feeling that I had had quite enough of it.”

“Bonavista is a good deal more pleasant?” And there was a certain meaning in Gordon’s tone. “You seemed to have achieved some social success here, too.”

He saw the flush in Nasmyth’s face, and his gaze grew insistent. “Well,” he said, “you’re not going to let that content you, now you can hear the river. You’ll hear it more and more plainly frothing in the black cañon where the big trees come down. You have lived with the exiles, and the wilderness has got its grip on you. What’s more, I guess when it does that it never quite lets go.”

He broke off abruptly, and just then Acton stepped out from the window. “Mr. Gordon,” he said, “it’s my wife’s wish that you should come in and sing.”

Gordon said that he was in Mrs. Acton’s hands, and then turned to Nasmyth.

“I’ve had my say,” he observed. “If there’s any meaning in my remarks, you can worry it out.”

He went away with Acton, and Wisbech looked at his nephew over his cigar.

“Mr. Gordon expresses himself in a rather extravagant fashion, but I’m disposed to fancy there is something in what he says,” he commented.

Nasmyth did not answer him. He was, on the whole, glad that Gordon had gone, but he still seemed to hear the river, and the restlessness that had troubled him was becoming stronger. He retired somewhat early, but he did not sleep quite so soundly as usual that night. As it happened, Gordon rose before him next morning. Gordon went out of doors, and presently came upon Miss Hamilton, who was strolling bareheaded where the early sunshine streamed in among the pines. It struck him that he was not the person whom she would have been most pleased to see, but she walked with him to the crown of the promontory, where she stopped and looked up at him steadily.

“Mr. Gordon,” she inquired, “what is Laura Waynefleet?”

Gordon started, and the girl smiled.

“I crossed the veranda last night,” she told him, when he hesitated before answering her.

The man looked down on her with an unusual gravity. “Well,” he said simply, “Laura Waynefleet is quietness, and sweetness, and courage. In fact, I sometimes think it was to make these things evident that she was sent into this world.”

He thought he saw a gleam of comprehension in the girl’s eyes, and made a gesture of protest. “No,” he assured her, “I’m not fit to brush her little shoes. For that matter, though he is my comrade, Nasmyth isn’t either. What is perhaps more to the purpose, I guess he is quite aware of it.”

A delicate tinge of colour crept into Violet Hamilton’s face, and the man realized that in case his suppositions were correct, what he had implied could hardly be considered as a compliment. He could also fancy that there was a certain uneasiness in her eyes.

“Ah,” she said, “perhaps it is a subject I should not have ventured to inquire into.”

Gordon smiled reassuringly. “I don’t know of any reason why you shouldn’t have done so, but I have scarcely told you anything about her yet. Miss Waynefleet lives at a desolate ranch in the Bush. Sometimes she drives oxen, and I believe she invariably makes her own clothes. I don’t think Nasmyth would feel any great diffidence in speaking about her.”

He believed this, or at least he strove to convince himself that he did, but he was relieved when the appearance of Acton, who strolled towards them, rendered any further confidential conversation out of the question. Gordon set out for Victoria that afternoon, and Nasmyth, who went with him to the railroad, returned to Bonavista in a restless mood, and almost disposed to be angry with his comrade for having rudely broken in upon his tranquillity. In fact, he felt disinclined to face his fellow-guests, which was one reason why he was sauntering towards the inlet when he came upon Wisbech sitting with a book in the shadow of the pines. Wisbech looked up at his moody face.

“You are annoyed because Gordon wouldn’t stay?” he suggested.

“No,” said Nasmyth. “In fact, I’m a little relieved that he has gone away. I naturally like Gordon, but just now he has an unsettling effect on me.”

Wisbech made a gesture of comprehension. “That man,” he said, “is in some respects fortunate. He has a simple programme, and is evidently more or less content with it. His work is plain in front of him. You are not quite sure about

yours yet. To some extent, you feel yourself adrift?”

“I have felt something of the kind.”

Wisbech thought for a moment. “I suppose,” he said, “it hasn’t occurred to you that your classical features—they’re Nasmyth features—might be of some assistance to you in your career?”

Nasmyth felt the blood rise into his face, but he laughed. “They certainly haven’t proved of any great benefit to me hitherto. It is scarcely likely that they will do so either in the cañon.”

“Then you are still determined on directing operations in person? I was commencing to wonder if you had any reason for modifying your plans.”

The man’s tone was dry, but Nasmyth met his gaze, which was now inquisitive.

“If it is in my power to do it, I shall certainly run the water out of the valley,” said Nasmyth.

Then he swung round and strolled away, while Wisbech smiled in a fashion which suggested that he was pleased. It was some little time later when Nasmyth, pacing moodily over the white shingle beside the winding inlet, came upon Violet Hamilton sitting in the shadow of a great boulder. The girl’s light dress matched the rock’s pale tinting, and he did not see her until he was within a yard or two of her. He stopped abruptly, with a deepened colour in his face. Violet made a sign, which seemed to invite him to sit down, and he stretched himself out upon the shingle close in front of her.

“It is very hot in the house this afternoon, but it is cool and quiet here,” she observed.

Nasmyth glanced at the still water and the shadow that the pines which clung in the crevices flung athwart the dark rock’s side.

“Stillness sometimes means stagnation. Miss Hamilton,” he said.

The girl flashed a quick glance at him. “Well,” she rejoined, “I suppose it does; but, after all, that is a question we need not discuss. What were you thinking of so hard as you came along? You didn’t see me until you almost stepped upon my dress.”

“That,” said Nasmyth, with a laugh, “is proof that I was thinking very hard indeed. It’s not a thing I often indulge in, but I was thinking of the Bush.”

“You sometimes feel you would like to be back there?”

“No,” answered Nasmyth reflectively; “I suppose I ought to feel that, but I’m not sure that I do.”

“Ah,” Violet remarked, “you have told me a good deal at one time or another about your life and friends there, but I almost fancied now and then that you were keeping something back. After all”—and she smiled at him—“I suppose that would have been only natural.”

Nasmyth raised himself on one elbow, and looked hard at her. “Well,” he admitted, “there was one thing I did not tell you, though I had meant to do so sooner or later. You see, there was nothing to warrant it in the meanwhile.”

“Ah,” queried the girl, “it concerns Miss Waynefleet?”

Nasmyth’s face grew suddenly grave. He did not ask himself how she came to know. Indeed, for the time being, that did not seem to matter. There was, it seemed, only one course open to him, and he adopted it.

“Yes,” he answered, “I will tell you about her.”

He had meant to be brief and matter-of-fact in his narrative, but as he proceeded, the subject carried him away. Indeed, he was scarcely conscious that Miss Hamilton was intently watching him, for once more he seemed to feel Laura Waynefleet’s eyes fixed upon his face, and they were clear and brave and still. He spoke with a certain dramatic force, and it was a somewhat striking picture he drew of the girl. Violet could realize her personality and the self-denying life that she led. It is possible that Nasmyth had told her more than he intended, when he broke off for a moment with a startling abruptness.

“I believe she saved my life,” he added. “She certainly gave me back my courage, and set me on my feet again.”

Violet looked at him with a strained expression in her eyes. “And because of that she will have a hold upon you while you live.”

Nasmyth seemed to consider this. “I think I shall always realize what I owe to her. Still—and how shall I say it?—that recognition is the most I would venture to offer, or that she would accept from me.”

He stopped for a moment, and then went on a trifle hastily. “Laura Waynefleet could never have taken more than a half-compassionate interest in me,” he asserted. “There could scarcely be any doubt upon that point.”

“You said half-compassionate?”

“Yes,” replied Nasmyth; “I almost think that describes it. You see, I am naturally aware of my own disabilities.”

“Still,” persisted Violet, “she nursed you when you were very ill, and, as you said, set you on your feet again. That would probably count for a good deal with her.”

Nasmyth made a hasty gesture. “You don’t understand. She would no doubt have taken pity on any dumb creature. She did it because she could not help it. One could fancy that kind of thing was born in her.”

Violet did not speak for a moment or two. Although it still remained uncertain whether the girl in the Bush had any tenderness for the man she had set upon his feet again, he had spoken of her in a manner which did not quite please Violet.

“Well,” she ventured, with a little diffident glance at him, “some day you will go back into the Bush.”

Nasmyth nodded. “Yes,” he said, “I think that’s certain. In fact, it’s probable that I shall go back very soon. As it happens, I have undertaken a big and rather difficult thing, which will give me a considerable lift up if I am successful.”

He lay silent for a minute before he turned to her again. “You see, I have been some time in this country, and never have done anything worth mentioning. Chopping trees and driving cattle are no doubt useful occupations, but they don’t lead to anything. I feel that I am, so to speak, on my probation. I have still to win my spurs.”

“I wonder if that is one of the ideas Miss Waynefleet gave you?”

Nasmyth smiled. “I really believe it originated with her, but, as a matter of fact, it might have gone no further, which is an admission. Still, the desire to win those spurs has been growing so strong of late that I can’t resist it. In one way, I scarcely think that is very astonishing.”

Violet looked away from him, for she saw the gleam in his eyes, and fancied she understood what the new motive he had hinted at might be. Still, he did not appear disposed to mention it.

“Then you would have to go away?” she asked.

A flush crept into Nasmyth’s face. She was a woman of his own caste, and probably without intending it, she had shown him in many ways that she was not averse from him. He felt his heart beat fast when for a moment she met his gaze.

“The trouble is that if I do not go I shall never have the right to come back again,” he told her.

“Then,” replied the girl very softly, “you wish to come back?”

“That is why I am going. There are those spurs to win. I have to make my mark.”

“But it is sometimes a little difficult to make one’s mark, isn’t it? You may be ever so long, and it must be a little hazardous in that horrible cañon.”

“If it gives me the right to come back, I think it will be very well worth while.”

“But suppose you don’t succeed, after all?”

“That,” admitted Nasmyth, “is a thing I daren’t contemplate, because, if it happened, it is scarcely likely that any of my friends at Bonavista would ever be troubled with me again.”

Violet looked away from him. “Ah,” she said, “don’t you think that would be a little hard on them? Is it very easy for you to go away?”

The restraint Nasmyth had imposed upon himself suddenly deserted him. He moved a little nearer to her, and seized one of her hands. She sat still, and made no effort to draw it away from him.

“I had never meant to say what I am going to say just now,” he declared. “I had meant to wait until there was something successfully accomplished to my credit. I am, you see, a thriftless, wandering adventurer—one who has taken things as they came, and never has been serious. When I have shown that I can also be something else, I shall ask you formally if you will marry me. Until then the thing is, of course, out of the question.”

He broke off for a moment, and held her silent by a gesture until he went on again. “I have been swept away, and even if you were willing to make it, I would take no promise from you. Until I have won the right to come back you must be absolutely free. Now you know this, it would be very much wiser if I went away as soon as possible.”

“Ah,” the girl answered with a thrill in her voice, “whenever you come back you will find me ready to listen to you.”

Nasmyth let her hand go. “Now,” he asserted, “I think I cannot fail. Still, it must be remembered that you are absolutely free.”

He would have said something more, but there was just then a laugh and a patter of feet on the path above, and, looking up, he saw two of Mrs. Acton’s guests

descending the bluff.

CHAPTER XX

NASMYTH GOES AWAY

Mrs. Acton was sitting on the veranda next morning when Nasmyth, fresh from a swim in the deep cold water of the inlet, came up across the clearing. It had brought a clear glow into his bronzed skin and a brightness to his eyes, and as he flung a word to a man who greeted him, his laugh had a clean, wholesome ring. He walked straight toward the veranda, and Mrs. Acton, sitting still, favoured him with a very keen and careful scrutiny. He was dressed in light flannels, which, she admitted, became him rather well; but it was the lithe gracefulness of his movements that she noticed most. His easy, half-whimsical manner had their effect on her; they won her favour. He was the kind of guest she had pleasure in welcoming at Bonavista.

He went up the veranda stairway, and, stopping near where she was sitting, looked down at her with a curious little glow in his eyes. She started, for she had not expected to see it there so soon.

“You seem unusually satisfied with everything this morning,” she observed. “There is probably some cause for it?”

Nasmyth laughed. “I believe I am. As I dare say you have noticed, tranquil contentment is one of my virtues. It is, however, one that is remarkably easy to exercise at Bonavista.”

“Still, contentment does not, as a rule, carry a young man very far in this country. In fact, it is now and then a little difficult to distinguish between it and something else that is less creditable to the man who possesses it.”

Nasmyth smiled good-humouredly. “Well,” he replied, “I have discovered that if you worry Fortune too much she resents it, and flies away from you. It seems to me there is something to be said for the quietly expectant attitude. After all, one is now and then given much more than one could by any effort possibly deserve.”

Mrs. Acton noticed the faint ring in his voice. “Ah,” she said, “then something of that kind has befallen you? Hadn’t you better come to the point?”

Nasmyth became grave. “Madam,” he said, “I have a confession to make. I am very much afraid I lost my head yesterday, and I should not be astonished if you were very angry with me.”

He spoke with a certain diffidence, and Mrs. Acton, who straightened herself in her chair, watched him steadily while he made his confession. He paused with a gesture of deprecation.

“In one sense, it is a preposterous folly, but I am not quite sure that folly is not now and then better than wisdom,” he added. “It has certainly proved to be so in my case.”

“No doubt.” Mrs. Acton’s tone was suggestive. “It is, however, Miss Hamilton I am most interested in.”

Nasmyth spread one hand out forcibly. “I want you to understand that she is absolutely free. I have only told you because you once mentioned that you considered her a ward of yours. Nothing will be said to anybody else, and, if she should change her mind, I will not complain. In fact, I have decided that it would be most fitting for me to go away.”

“I think,” asserted Mrs. Acton, “you have been either too generous or not quite generous enough. The trouble with men of your kind is that when for once they take the trouble to reflect, they become too cautious.”

“I’m afraid I don’t quite grasp the point of that.”

“You should either have said nothing, which is the course you ought to have adopted, or a little more. I fancy Violet would have been just as pleased if you had shown yourself determined to make sure of her.”

Nasmyth stood silent, and Mrs. Acton, who surveyed him again with thoughtful eyes, was not surprised that he should have appealed to the girl’s imagination. The man was of a fine lean symmetry, and straight of limb. The stamp of a clean life was on him, showing itself in the brightness of his eyes and his clear bronzed

skin, while he had, as Wisbech had said, the classical Nasmyth features. These things, as Mrs. Acton admitted, counted for something, while the faint lines upon his face, and the suggestive hardness that now and then crept into it, were, she decided, likely to excite a young woman's curiosity.

"Well," she said, "I feel myself considerably to blame, and I may admit that I had at first intended to make my husband get rid of you. I really don't know why I didn't. You can make what you like of that."

Nasmyth bowed with a deferential smile, and she laughed.

"Still," she said, "you must go away. Violet must be free to change her mind, and, after all, it's consoling to reflect that she has not seen so very much of you yet. In one way, it would please me if she did. It would free me of a rather heavy responsibility."

She stopped a moment, and looked at him with softening eyes. "Go and run the water out of that valley, or do anything else that will make a mark," she advised.

Nasmyth's face was set as he replied: "If the thing is in any way possible, it shall be done. I think I will go into Victoria again to-day."

He turned away and left her, and it was an hour later when she came upon Violet sitting alone in a shady walk beneath the pines. She looked at the girl severely.

"If I had been quite sure of what was going on, I should have sent that young man away," she remarked. "As it is, I am very glad that he is going to Victoria."

Violet slipped an arm about Mrs. Acton's neck and kissed her shyly. "You would never have been so cruel, and now you are going to be my friend," she said. "I don't want him to go back to that horrible cañon."

Mrs. Acton smiled. "I almost feel that I could shake both of you, but I suppose I shall have to marshal my forces on your behalf."

She set about her plans that evening, when she invaded Acton's smoking-room, and her husband listened to her with a little dry smile.

"I guess this is about the first time I have ever known you to do a real foolish thing," he observed.

"Well," said Mrs. Acton, "it is, perhaps, to my credit that I have done one now. Anyway, I like the man."

Acton nodded. "Oh, yes;" he agreed, "that's quite comprehensible. There's a good deal of tone about him, but except with women that's not a thing that

counts in this country. It's the bulldog grip and grit that goes farthest here—anyway, when a man has no money behind him."

"You wouldn't consider Nasmyth a weak man?"

"Not in one way. When he's right up against it, he'll stiffen himself and fight, but when the strain slackens a little his kind are apt to let go too easily."

This, as a matter of fact, was more or less correct, but Mrs. Acton's intention was not to discuss Nasmyth's character, and she smiled at her husband.

"Well," she announced; "I expect you to take a hand in the thing."

Acton's gesture was expressive of resignation. "I guessed it. However, it seems to me that young man has quite enough friends to give him a shove here and there already. To begin with, there's Wisbech."

"What would Wisbech do?"

"Not much." And Acton smiled understandingly. "He means to let his nephew feel his own feet. He's a sensible man. Then there's that man Gordon from the Bush, and it seems I'm to do my share, too. Guess if I was Nasmyth, I'd say 'thank you,' and go right ahead without listening to one among the crowd of us."

"That," Mrs. Acton said, "isn't quite the question. I think I pointed out what I expect from you."

Acton's eyes twinkled. "You did," he assured her. "I'll try to set things in train the first time I go down to the city."

This was somewhat vague, but Mrs. Acton was satisfied. Nevertheless, she said nothing to Nasmyth on the subject, and next afternoon he left Bonavista for Victoria. A day or two later he called by appointment at the office of a certain land exploitation agency, and found Hutton waiting for him. Hutton, who sat with his elbows on the table, pointed to a chair.

"You have taken my view of the thing?" he said in a questioning tone. "If you'll sit down a minute, I'll call my clerk in, and he'll get the papers ready."

Nasmyth smiled. "I don't think you need trouble to do that just yet. You see, I haven't the least intention of closing with your offer."

It is just possible that Hutton had expected this, but, in any case, he betrayed no astonishment. He leaned forward, regarding his visitor with an almost expressionless face.

"Then," he returned, "I'll hear your proposition."

“What do you think of the one I had the pleasure of making you some time ago?” Nasmyth inquired.

“Quite out of the question.”

Nasmyth smiled. “That,” he remarked, “is in one sense a pity, as I couldn’t repeat it to-day. If we are to do business together, I should have to ask you for a considerably larger share of the profit. In fact, I was wondering if you could see your way to offer half as much again.”

Hutton gazed at him with sardonic amusement. “Oh,” he replied, “has somebody left you a fortune, or are they going to run a railroad through that valley?”

Nasmyth sat silent a moment or two, and it happened that his easy indifference served him tolerably well. Had he been a keener man, the anxiety to get about his work in the cañon, of which he was certainly sensible, might have led to his undoing; but he was not one who often erred through undue precipitancy. The waiting fight was, perhaps, the one for which he was particularly adapted. If anything, he was rather too much addicted to holding out his hand, and he realized that it behooves the man without capital to be particularly wary in his negotiations with the one in possession of money. His recent interview with Violet Hamilton also had a stirring effect on him, and now he sat quietly prepared to hold his own.

“No,” he declared, “there has been no particular change in my affairs. I have only been thinking things over, and it seems to me I ought to get the terms I mentioned.”

“Then you had better try. It won’t be from any of the accredited land agencies.”

Nasmyth noticed the faint ring in his companion’s voice. This, it seemed to him, was not bluff. The man, he believed, meant what he said.

“You seem quite sure of it,” he observed.

As a matter of fact, Hutton was, but he felt annoyed with himself.

“Well,” he said, “I naturally know what they would think of any proposition like the one you made me. Anyway, as I suggested, all you have to do is to try them.”

Again Nasmyth, conscious that his companion was unobtrusively watching him, sat silent a moment or two. He knew that if he broke with Hutton he might have considerable difficulty in raising the money he required from any corporation interested in such matters in that city; but he had also another plan in his mind. He was far from sure that the scheme would prove successful, and it was at least

certain that it would cost him a good deal of trouble to carry it out.

“Then I don’t think I need keep you any longer,” he told Hutton after a long pause. “I’ll leave the thing over for a day or two, and you can send across to my hotel if you wish to discuss it again.”

He rose and reached out for his hat, and Hutton, who watched him cross the room, was once or twice on the point of calling him back. Hutton did not speak, however, since he fancied that Nasmyth would presently return of his own accord—which was an expectation that proved unwarranted.

The office was on the second floor of a big stone building, and, as he descended the stairway, Nasmyth fancied he caught sight of Martial in the entrance-hall. Before he could be quite sure, the man turned down a corridor, and Nasmyth, who did not trouble himself about the matter, went out into the street. He was not altogether satisfied that he had done wisely, but he meant, at least, to wait until events should prove him wrong.

A few minutes later, Martial strolled into the office where Hutton sat, and smiled at him suggestively. He was also, as Acton had once told Nasmyth, interested in the land exploitation business, and it was evident that Hutton had expected him.

“Nasmyth has been here,” Martial observed; “I saw him on the stairway. I suppose you got hold of him?”

Hutton’s gesture was forcibly expressive of annoyance. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t,” he confessed. “The man’s either considerably smarter than I gave him credit for being, or a thick-headed, obstinate fool. The one’s as hard to handle as the other. I don’t know which he is, and it doesn’t greatly matter. The result’s the same.”

“I guess it’s the latter;” and Martial laughed. “Well, since you can’t come to terms, have you any notion what his programme is?”

“It’s not a sure thing that he has one. Anyway, he didn’t mention it. We’ll let him wait a day or two. It’s quite likely he’ll try the Charters people.”

Both of them smiled, for it was then not an unusual thing for the men interested in such affairs to put their heads together and take a joint hand in any deal that seemed to warrant it, and when they did so, the results were not, as a rule, encouraging to the outsider.

Martial looked at his comrade suggestively.

“I had a talk with Charters yesterday,” he said. “He told me that if there was

anything in it, he didn't expect us to let the thing go."

Hutton thought for a moment. "One could sell quite a few ranches in the valley; but it's going to cost considerable to run the water out, and I can't quite put my hand on anybody I'd feel like trusting with the work in the cañon. It's going to be difficult. Besides, Nasmyth has what you might call a first option on the land. Nobody else seems to want it, and the Crown people have evidently given way on a point or two. It's a sure thing they'd make no concession if we show our hands." He broke off for a moment, and flung a quick glance at his visitor. "You don't like the man?"

"I don't," said Martial—"that's a solid fact. Still, it's not going to count for much. This"—and he waved his hand—"is a matter of business."

He sat still for a moment or two, with a curious look in his face; for he had called at the hotel Acton's party had visited on the night that he had endeavoured to crawl unobserved on board the *Tillicum*. He had no difficulty in discovering that Mrs. Acton and Miss Hamilton had spent the night there, which made it evident that the girl could not have been on board the steamer. He had, however, not made the inquiries until business took him to the hotel several weeks afterwards, and Acton's manner, when they met in the city, convinced him that the schooner men had been communicative. On thinking the matter over, it became clear that Nasmyth and the skipper had played a trick on him; and, since it had cost him Mrs. Acton's good-will, without which he could not approach Miss Hamilton, he cherished a bitter grievance against Nasmyth.

"Well," he inquired, "in case he tries to raise the money elsewhere, what do you suggest?"

"I guess we'll let him try," answered Hutton. "He's not going to raise much when things are humming and every man with capital is putting it into mines and mills. Besides, the work in the cañon's evidently a big undertaking, and it's going to run into a long bill for labour. A thing of that kind usually costs four times as much as the man who starts it figures. Well, we'll leave him to it, and when his money runs out we'll chip in."

Martial laughed. "That's very much my notion. Let him do the work, and then jump in and put up our dummies to locate all the land he can't take hold of. Once we get a ranch or two recorded, there would be a dozen ways we could get a grip on him. Between us and Charters, we ought to break him."

They smiled at each other, but in a moment or two Hutton looked thoughtful again.

“You want to understand,” he said, “it’s not my business to break Nasmyth. It’s the money I’m out for. In fact, if there’s an easier way than the one I suggested, I’m going to take it; and with that in view, I’ll send up a man or two I can rely on to investigate.”

“If they get crawling round that cañon and up and down the valley, it will set the blame settlers talking. We want the thing run quietly,” Martial cautioned.

“I guess it can be done,” replied Hutton. “They’ll go camping out for pleasure. In fact, to make the thing more like it, I’ll send them fishing.” Martial rose. “Anyway,” he said, “I’ll leave it with you in the meanwhile.”

CHAPTER XXI

THE MEN OF THE BUSH

A cool shadow fell upon the descending trail that wound in among the towering firs, and Nasmyth checked his jaded horse as he entered on the last league of his long ride from the railroad. The red dust had settled thick upon his city clothes, and for the first time he found the restraint of them irksome. The band of his new hat had tightened unpleasantly about his forehead, and in scrambling up the side of the last high ridge which he had crossed, one neatly-fitting boot had galled his foot, while he smiled with somewhat sinister amusement as he felt the grip of the tight jacket on his shoulders. These were, as he recognized, petty troubles, and he was rather astonished that he should resent them, as he certainly did. He remembered that a little while before he had made no complaint against the restraints of civilization, and had, indeed, begun to shrink from the prospect of going back to the untrammelled life of the wilderness.

But, as he straightened himself in his saddle and gazed down the deep valley through which the trail twisted, he felt the shrinking melt away. After all, there was something in the wilderness that appealed to him. There was vigour in the clean smell of it, and the little breeze that fanned his face was laden with the scent of the firs. The trees rolled away before him in sombre battalions that dwindled far up the rocky sides of the enfolding hills, and here and there a flood of sunlight that struck in through the openings fell in streams of burning gold upon their tremendous trunks. Beyond them the rugged heights rose, mass on mass, against the western sky.

He rode into the shadow, and, though he thought of her, it was curious that Violet Hamilton seemed to become less real to him as he pushed on down the valley. He vaguely felt that he could not carry her with him into the wilderness. She was a part of the civilization upon which he had once more, for a time at least, turned his back, and he could not fit her into the environment of that wild and rugged land. Indeed, he remembered with a compassionate tenderness how she had shrunk from it and clung to him—a forlorn, bedraggled object, in her tattered

dress—the day they floundered through the dripping Bush, and he subconsciously braced himself for conflict as he thought of it. The sooner his work was over, the sooner he could go back to her; but there was, as he remembered, a great deal to be accomplished first.

Wrapped in thought as he was, he was surprised when he saw a faint blue cloud of wood-smoke trailing out athwart the sombre firs in the hollow beneath him. Then two figures became visible, moving upwards along the strip of trail, and he drove the jaded horse forward as he recognized them. He lost sight of them for a few minutes as he turned aside to avoid a swampy spot, but when he had left it behind they were close ahead in the middle of the trail, and it was with a thrill of pleasure that he swung himself stiffly from the saddle.

With a smile on his bronzed face, Gordon stood looking at him. Gordon was dressed in soil-stained garments of old blue duck, with a patch cut from a cotton flour-bag on one of them. Laura Waynefleet stood a little nearer, and there was also a welcome in her eyes. Nasmyth noticed how curiously at home she seemed amidst that tremendous colonnade of towering trunks. He shook hands with her, but it was Gordon who spoke first.

“You have come back to us. We have been expecting you,” he said. “After all, store clothes and three well-laid meals a day are apt to pall on one.”

Nasmyth turned to Laura. “I should like to point out that this is the man who urged me to go,” he said. “One can’t count on him.”

“Oh, yes,” admitted Gordon, “I certainly did urge you, but I guess I knew what the result would be. It was the surest way of quieting you. Anyway, you don’t seem sorry to be back again?”

Nasmyth glanced at Laura.

“No,” he said; “in some respects I’m very glad.”

He became suddenly self-conscious as he saw Gordon’s significant smile. It suggested that he had, perhaps, made too great an admission, and he wondered for the first time, with a certain uneasiness, whether Gordon had mentioned Miss Hamilton to Laura, and, if that was the case, what Miss Waynefleet thought about the subject.

Laura talked to him in her old friendly fashion as they walked on towards the settlement, until Gordon broke in.

“I’ve called the boys together, as you suggested, and fixed up the meeting for to-

night," he said. "They'll be ready to give you a hearing, after supper, in the hotel."

Laura left them on the outskirts of the settlement, and Gordon, stopping a moment, looked hard at Nasmyth.

"I suppose you pledged yourself to that girl at Bonavista before you came away?" he said.

"I did," Nasmyth admitted.

Gordon was silent for a moment or two. "Of course, I partly expected it," he observed. "In fact, when I was talking to Miss Waynefleet about you, I ventured to predict something of the kind."

The two men looked at each other for a moment, and then Nasmyth smiled.

"You haven't anything else to say," he suggested.

"No," answered Gordon,—"at least, nothing that's very material. Anyway, until we're through with the business we have on hand, you'll have to put that girl right out of your mind."

They went on towards the little wooden hotel, and Nasmyth felt unusually thoughtful as he walked beside his jaded horse. He recognized that his comrade's last observation was more or less warranted, and it was to some extent a relief to him when they reached the veranda stairway and Gordon led the horse away toward the stables.

It was rather more than an hour later when a specially invited company of men who had, as they said, a stake in the district assembled in the big general room of the hotel. There was about a dozen of them, men of different birth and upbringing, though all had the same quiet brown faces and steadiness of gaze. For the most part, they were dressed in duck, though Waynefleet and the hotel-keeper wore city clothes. The room was barely furnished, and panelled roughly with cedar-boards; but it had wide casements, from which those who sat in it could look out upon a strip of frothing river and the sombre forest that rolled up the rocky hills. The windows were wide open, and the smell of wood-smoke and the resinous odours of the firs flowed in. A look of expectancy crept into the men's faces, and the murmur of their conversation suddenly fell away, when Nasmyth sat down at the head of the long table with Gordon at one side of him.

"Boys," said Nasmyth, "one or two of you know why Gordon asked you here to meet me, but I had better roughly explain my project before I go any further. I'll

ask you to give me your close attention for the next three or four minutes."

When he stopped speaking there was a very suggestive silence for a moment. Those who heard him had not the quick temperament of the men of the Western cities. They lived in the stillness of the Bush, and thought before they undertook anything, though, when they moved, it was usually to some purpose. One of the men stood up with a deprecatory gesture.

"Well," he declared, "it's a great idea. Boys, wouldn't you call us blame fools for not thinking of it before?"

He sat down suddenly, before anybody answered him, and the men were still again until another of them rose.

"Nasmyth's not quite through yet," he said. "We'll ask him to go ahead."

Gordon leaned forward, and touched his comrade's arm.

"Pitch it to them strong. You're getting hold," he whispered encouragingly.

For another five minutes Nasmyth spoke as he felt that he had never spoken before. He was intent and strung up, and he knew that a great deal depended upon the effect he could make. He had failed with the men of the cities, who wanted all the profit. He felt sure that he would henceforward have one or two of them against him, and it was clear that he must either abandon his project or win over these hard-handed men of the Bush. With them behind him, there was, he felt, little that he need shrink from attempting. A ring crept into his voice as he went on, for he knew that he was getting hold as he saw their lips set and the resolute expression of their eyes. They were men who, by strenuous toil, wrung a bare living out of the forest, and now there was laid before them a scheme that in its sheer daring seized upon their attention.

"Boys," Nasmyth concluded, "I am in your hands. This thing is too big for me to go into alone. Still, it's due to you to say that, while I meant to give you an option of standing in, it seemed to me it would simplify the thing if I raised most of the money before I came to you. Money is usually scarce in the Bush."

"That's a fact," agreed the shrewd-faced hotel-keeper, who also conducted the store. "Anyway, when you have to trade with folks who take twelve months to square up their bills in."

Nobody seemed to heed him, and Nasmyth added:

"Well, I found I couldn't do it—that is, if I wanted to keep anything for myself. I want you to come in, and as soon as I hear you're ready to give it your attention,

I'll lay a proposition before you."

He sat looking at them, in a state of tense anxiety, until one of them rose to his feet.

"I guess you can count upon every one of us," he announced.

A reassuring murmur ran along the double row of men, and Nasmyth felt a thrill of exultation.

"Thank you, boys," he said with evident gratitude. "Now, there are difficulties to be grappled with. To begin with, the Crown authorities would sooner have leased the valley to me, and it was some time before they decided that as a special concession they would sell it in six hundred and forty acre lots at the lowest figure for first-class lands. The lots are to be laid off in rectangular blocks, and as the valley is narrow and winding, that takes in a proportion of heavy timber on the hill bench, and will not include quite a strip of natural prairie, which remains with the Crown. The cost of the land alone runs close on twenty thousand dollars, of which, one way or another, I can raise about eight thousand."

He looked at Wheeler, who sat near the lower end of the table, and he nodded.

"My offer stands," he said.

"You want another twelve thousand dollars," said the hotel-keeper dubiously. "It's quite a pile of money."

There was a little laughter from the men. "Well," said one of them, "I guess we can raise it somehow among us, but it's going to be a pull."

"Then," said Nasmyth, "we have provided for the cost of the land, but before we lower the fall and cut the drainage trenches in the valley we will run up a big bill—that is, if we hire hands. My notion is that we undertake the work ourselves, and credit every man with his share in it to count as a mortgage on the whole land that belongs to us."

Waynefleet stood up and waved his hand. "I want to point out that this is very vague," he objected. "The question will arise where the labour is to be applied. It would, for instance, be scarcely judicious to give a man a claim on everybody else for draining his own land."

He would have said more, but that Tom of Mattawa laid a hard hand on his shoulder and jerked him back into his chair.

“Now,” Tom admonished, “you just sit down. When Nasmyth takes this thing in hand he’ll put it through quite straight. What you’d do in a month wouldn’t count for five dollars, anyway.”

Everybody laughed, and Wheeler spoke again. “We’ll get over that trouble by cutting so many big trenches only for the general benefit. In the meanwhile Mr. Nasmyth said something about trustees.”

“I did,” said Nasmyth. “The Crown will sell in rectangular six hundred and forty acre blocks. My proposition is that we take them up in three separate names. You have to understand that the man who registers in the Crown deed is legal owner.”

“Then we’re sure of two of them,” declared the hotel-keeper. “Nasmyth takes the first block, and Wheeler the other.”

Wheeler laughed. “I guess I stand out. As a United States citizen, I’m not sure I’m eligible to record Crown lands. Still, since Nasmyth and I are putting up a good many of the dollars, I’ll nominate Gordon.”

As one man they decided on that, but there appeared to be a difficulty about the third trustee until Nasmyth turned to them.

“As you don’t seem sure about him, I would like to suggest Mr. Waynefleet, boys,” he said. “He is a man who has an extensive acquaintance with business and legal affairs.”

There was dead silence for several moments, and the men looked at one another uneasily. It was evident that the suggestion was unwelcome to most of them, and Nasmyth was quite aware that he was doing an unpopular thing. In the meanwhile dusk had crept up the valley, and the room was growing dim. Perhaps Waynefleet could not see his companions’ faces very well, but it is also possible that, had he been able to do so, he would not have troubled himself about the hesitation in most of them. There are men of his kind who appear incapable of recognizing the fact that they are not regarded with general favour.

Finally one of the men spoke. “Seeing that the scheme is Nasmyth’s, I guess it’s only reasonable to fall in with his views as far as we can,” he said. “We’ll fix on Waynefleet.”

There was a murmur of very dubious agreement, and Waynefleet, who stood up, smiled on the assembly patronizingly. His manner suggested that he was about to confer a favour.

“Our friend was warranted in mentioning that I have been accustomed to

handling affairs of a somewhat similar nature, but of considerably greater magnitude," he said. "I have pleasure in placing what abilities I possess at your disposal, gentlemen."

Though it was growing dark, Nasmyth saw the amused light in Gordon's eyes. "I'm with you in this," said Gordon. "Still, I scarcely figured the boys would have stood him."

They discussed the scheme at length, and when the assembly broke up, Waynefleet approached the table where Gordon, Nasmyth and Wheeler sat under a big lamp.

"There is a point I did not mention at the time. It seemed to me it was one that could, perhaps, be arranged," said Waynefleet. "It is, of course, usual for a director of any kind to hold a certain financial interest in the scheme."

He looked at Nasmyth, and made a significant gesture. "Unfortunately there are not at the moment more than a very few dollars at my disposal. The fact, you will recognize, is likely to hamper my efforts in an administrative capacity."

"Precisely!" said Nasmyth. "It is a matter I have provided for. You will be placed in possession of a holding of the size the others fixed upon as convenient when the blocks are divided off."

"No larger?"

"No," answered Nasmyth; "I am afraid you will have to be content with that."

Waynefleet went out, and Gordon turned to Nasmyth. "It's going to cost you something," he said. "You can't charge it on the scheme. I'll divide it with you."

There was a slight restraint in Nasmyth's manner. "I'm afraid I can't permit it. It will be charged against my claim. Considering everything, it was a thing I felt I had to do."

Then Wheeler, who had been quietly watching them, broke in.

"What did you put that image up for, anyway?" he asked.

Gordon smiled in a significant fashion. "It's our friend's affair, and I guess he's not going to tell you why he did it. Still, in one sense, I 'most think it was up to him."

Wheeler let the matter drop, and in a few more minutes they went out, and Nasmyth and Gordon turned into the trail that led to Gordon's ranch.

CHAPTER XXII

NASMYTH SETS TO WORK

It was a scorching afternoon on the heights above, where rocky slope and climbing firs ran far up towards the blue heavens under a blazing sun, but it was dim and cool in the misty depths of the cañon. There was eternal shadow in that tremendous rift, and a savage desolation rolled away from it; but on this afternoon the sounds of human activity rang along its dusky walls. The dull thud of axes fell from a gully that rent the mountain-side, and now and then a mass of shattered rock came crashing down, while the sharp clinking of the drills broke intermittently through the hoarse roar of the fall. Wet with the spray of the fall, Nasmyth, stripped to blue shirt and old duck trousers, stood swinging a heavy hammer, which he brought down upon the head of the steel bar that his companion held so many times a minute with rhythmic precision. Though they changed round now and then, he had done much the same thing since early morning, and his back and arms ached almost intolerably; but still the great hammer whirled about his head, and while he gasped with the effort, came down with a heavy jar upon the drill. So intent was he that he did not notice the three figures scrambling along the narrow log-work staging pinned against the rocky side above the fall, until his companion flung a word at him. Turning with a start, he dropped his hammer.

He saw Gordon hold out a hand to Laura Waynefleet, who sprang down from the staging upon the strip of smooth-worn stone that stretched out from the wall of the cañon above the fall. Wheeler was a few paces behind them. Nasmyth looked around for his jacket, and, remembering that he had left it in the gully, he moved forward to shake hands with his visitors.

“I scarcely expected to see any of you here. You must have had a hard scramble,” he said.

Gordon waved his hand. “You don’t say you’re pleased, though after the trouble we’ve taken, it’s a sure thing that you ought to be,” he declared. “Anyway, I’m

not going back up that gully until I've had supper. Wheeler's held up because his folks haven't sent him some machines, and I came along to see if I'd forgotten how to hold a drill. I don't quite know what Miss Waynefleet came for."

Laura laughed good-humouredly. "Oh," she said, "I have my excuse. My father is at Victoria, and I have been staying with Mrs. Potter for a day or two. She lent me a cayuse to ride over to Fenton's ranch, and the trail there leads close by the head of the gully."

Mattawa looked up at Gordon with a grin. "If you want to do some drilling, you can start right now," he remarked. "Guess Nasmyth doesn't know he has a back on him."

Gordon took up the hammer, and, when Wheeler went back to the gully to inquire whether one of the men at work there would undertake some timber-squaring he wanted done at the mill, Laura Waynefleet and Nasmyth were left together. It was wetter than was comfortable near the fall, and, scrambling back across the staging, they sat down among the boulders near the foot of the rapid that swirled out of the pool. Nasmyth looked at Laura, who smiled.

"I am afraid I have taken you away from your work, and I haven't Gordon's excuse," she said. "He, at least, is able to drill."

Nasmyth laughed. "I observe that Tom seems very careful of his hands," he returned. "As to the other matter, I am very glad you did come. After all, drilling isn't exactly a luxurious occupation; and while, as Tom remarked, I'm a little uncertain about my back, I'm quite sure I'm in possession of a pair of arms, because they ache abominably. Besides"—and his gaze was whimsically reproachful—"do you really think any excuse is needed for coming to see me?"

"In any case, I have one; there is something I want to say. You see, I have not come across you since the meeting at the settlement."

"I suppose you object to your father taking any share in our crazy venture?"

A faint flicker of colour crept into Laura's cheek. "You know I don't," she replied. "It is the one thing I could have wished for him; indeed, I shall be thankful if he takes a sustaining interest in the scheme, as he seems disposed to do. It will be of benefit to him in many ways. He grows moody and discontented at the ranch."

She broke off for a moment, and her voice had changed when she went on again. "There is one point that troubles me—you provided my father with the money to take his share in the venture."

“No,” explained Nasmyth; “I think I can say that I didn’t. I have merely set apart for him so many acres of swamp and virgin forest. He will have to earn his title to them by assisting in what we may call the administration, as well as by physical labour.”

Laura looked at Nasmyth with quiet eyes. “Would you or Gordon consider it a good bargain to part with a single acre for all the advice he can offer you?” she asked.

Nasmyth sat silent a moment, gravely regarding her. There was a little more colour in her face, but her composure and her fearless honesty appealed to him. She was attired very plainly in a print dress, made, as he knew, by her own fingers. The gown had somehow escaped serious damage in the scramble down the gully. It harmonized with the pale-tinted stone, and it seemed to him that its wearer fitted curiously into her surroundings. He had noticed this often before, and it had occurred to him that she had acquired something of the strength and unchangeableness of the wilderness. Perhaps she had, though it is also possible that the quiet steadfastness had been born in her, and perfected slowly under stress and strain.

“Well,” Nasmyth broke out impulsively, “if it had been you to whom we made that block over, I could have abdicated with confidence and have left it all to you.”

Laura smiled, and Nasmyth became sensible that his face had grown a deeper red.

“Whatever made you say that?” she asked.

“I don’t quite know.” Nasmyth’s manner was deprecatory. “After all, it’s hardly fair to hold a man accountable for everything he may chance to say. Anyway, I think I meant it.”

Something in his voice suggested that he was of the same mind still, but Laura glanced at him again.

“Aren’t we getting away from the subject?” she queried. “The land you made over to my father must have cost you something. It is a thing I rather shrink from mentioning, but have you any expectation of ever getting the money back?”

Nasmyth did not exactly understand, until a considerable time afterwards, why he was so deeply stirred by what she had said, and he was quite mistaken in fancying that it was merely her courage that touched his heart. In the meanwhile, he was clearly sensible of at least a great pity for her.

“Well,” he told her, “we can look at things openly, and not try to persuade ourselves that they’re something else. I think that is one of the things that you have taught me. Now, suppose I haven’t any expectation of the kind you mention. How does that count? Didn’t you take me in when you found me lying in the snow? Isn’t it practically certain that I owe my life to you? Admitting all that, is there any reason why you shouldn’t permit me to offer you a trifling favour, not for your own sake, but your father’s?”

He broke off for a moment with a forceful gesture. “I might, no doubt, have suppressed all this and made some conventional answer, but, you see, one has to be honest with you. Can you persuade yourself that I don’t know what you have to bear at the ranch, and how your father’s moody discontent must burden you? Isn’t it clear that if he takes an interest in this project and forgets to worry about his little troubles, it will make life easier for both of you?”

Laura looked at him curiously. “After all, it is my life. Why should you be so anxious to make it easier?”

The question troubled Nasmyth. It seemed to go beyond the reason he had offered her a moment or two earlier. Indeed, it flashed upon him that the fact that he certainly owed a good deal to her was not in itself quite sufficient to account for the anxiety he felt.

“Well,” he answered, “if the grounds I mentioned don’t appear to warrant my doing what I did, I can’t at the moment think of anything more convincing. It’s one consolation that you couldn’t upset the little arrangement now, if you wanted to. Your father’s going into the thing headlong.”

Somewhat to his astonishment the girl appeared embarrassed as she glanced away from him. It was a moment or two before she looked around again.

“Ah!” she exclaimed, “I don’t want to upset it. He has not been so well and contented for several years. It has lifted him out of his moodiness.” Then she leaned a little toward him. “I dare not refuse this favour from you.”

Nasmyth was puzzled by a vague something in her manner.

“I certainly can’t see why you should want to; but we’ll talk of something else,” he replied. “As you have noticed, I have set to work, though I expect it will be winter before we make any very great impression.”

Laura glanced up the gloomy cañon, which was filled with the river’s clammy, drifting mist. “Winter,” she said, “will be terrible here. Then you are not going back to the coast or Victoria for some time?”

“Certainly not, if I can help it.”

Nasmyth spoke without reflection, but he felt what he said, and it was a moment before he realized that he might have expressed himself less decisively. He saw the smile on Laura’s lips.

“So you have heard?” he asked. “There was, of course, no reason why Gordon shouldn’t have told you. It was a thing I had meant to do myself, only, as it happened, I haven’t seen you. After that last speech of mine, I must explain that I feel there is a certain obligation on me to stay away. Miss Hamilton, as a matter of fact, is not engaged to me. Nothing can be settled until I carry out this project successfully.”

Laura Waynefleet’s face was very quiet, and he sat silent a moment or two, wondering somewhat uneasily what she was thinking. He was also slightly surprised at himself, for he realized that, after all, he had found it considerably easier to stay away than he had expected. Indeed, during the last few weeks, when every moment of his time had been occupied, he had thought of nothing except the work before him. It occurred to him for the first time that it was curious that he had been able to do so.

“You see,” he made haste to explain, “in the meanwhile I must endeavour to put everything except this scheme out of my mind.”

Again he was troubled by Laura Waynefleet’s little smile.

“Yes,” she said; “in one way, no doubt, that would be the wisest course. I’m not sure, however, that everybody would have sufficient strength of will.”

Nasmyth said nothing further for a while, but—though he was probably not aware of this—his face grew thoughtful as he gazed at the river until his companion spoke again.

“Was it Miss Hamilton’s wish that you should make your mark first?” she inquired.

“No,” answered Nasmyth decisively; “I want you to understand that it was mine. She merely concurred in it.”

He changed the subject abruptly. “Tell me about yourself.”

“There is so little to tell. One day is so much like another with me, only I have been rather busier than usual lately. My father has had to cut down expenses. We have no hired man.”

Nasmyth set his lips and half-consciously closed one hand. It seemed to him an almost intolerable thing that this girl should waste her youth and sweetness dragging out a life of unremitting toil in the lone Bush. Still, while her father lived, there was nothing else she could look forward to, and he could imagine how the long colourless years would roll away with her, while she lost her freshness and grew hard and worn with petty cares and labour that needed a stronger arm than hers. She might grow discontented, he fancied, and perhaps a trifle bitter, though he could not imagine her becoming querulous.

As yet there was a great patience in her steady eyes. Then it became evident that she guessed what he was thinking.

“Sometimes I feel the prospect in front of me is not a very attractive one,” she responded in answer to his thoughts. “Still, one can get over that by not regarding it as a prospect at all. It simplifies the thing when one takes it day by day.”

She smiled at him. “Derrick, you have done wisely. I think you need a sustaining purpose and a woman to work for.”

Nasmyth’s face paled. “Yes,” he agreed dryly; “it is, perhaps, rather a significant

admission, but I really think I do."

It was a relief to both of them that Wheeler came floundering along the shingle just then with a box and a coil of wire in his hand.

"I've brought you a little present, Nasmyth," he announced. "Firing by fuse is going to be uncertain when there's so much spray about, and I sent down for this electric fixing. We can charge it for you at any time at the mill. Have you put in any giant-powder yet?"

Nasmyth said they had not fired a heavy charge about the fall, but that there were several holes ready for filling, and Wheeler's eyes twinkled.

"I'm quite anxious to try this little toy," he said. "When I was young, a rancher gave me an old played-out shot-gun, and I was out at sun-up next morning to shoot something. That's the kind of being a man is, Miss Waynefleet. Put any kind of bottled-up power in his hands, and he feels he must get up and make a bang with it. After all, I guess it's fortunate that he does."

"Are all men like that?" Laura asked with a strange undertone in her voice.

"Most of them," said Wheeler, with an air of reflection. "Of course, you do run across one here and there who would put the bottled power carefully away for fear that, when it went off, it might hurt him or somebody. The trouble is that when a man of that kind at last makes up his mind to use it he's quite likely to find that the power has gradually leaked out of the bottle. Power's a very curious thing. If you don't use it, it has a way of evaporating."

Gordon had joined them in the meanwhile, and Laura looked at him.

"You agree with that?" she asked.

Gordon's smile was suggestively grim. "Oh, yes," he said. "I guess our friend now and then says some rather forceful things. Anyway, he has hit it with this one. For instance, there was that little matter of the man who was sick at his mill. A surgeon with nerve and hands could have fixed him up. We"—and he made an expressive gesture—"packed him out to Victoria."

He laughed harshly as he went on: "Well, that's partly why we're going to set our mark on this cañon, if it's only to make it clear that we're not quite played out yet. You'll ram that hole full of your strongest powder, Derrick."

Nasmyth turned and waved his hand to a man at the foot of the gully.

"Bring me down the magazine!" he ordered. "We're going to split that rock

before supper."

The man, who disappeared, came back again with an iron box, and for the next few minutes Nasmyth, who scrambled about the rocks above the fall, taking a coil of thin wire with him, was busy. When he rejoined his companions, he led them a little further down the cañon until he pointed to a shelf of rock from which they had a clear view of the fall. A handful of men had clambered down the gully, and now they stood in a cluster upon the strip of shingle. Nasmyth indicated them with a wave of his hand before he held a little wooden box with brass pegs projecting from it up to Laura.

"It's the first big charge we have fired, and they seem to feel it's something of an event," he said. "In one way, it's a declaration of war we're making, and there is a good deal against us. You fit this plug into the socket when you're ready."

"You mean me to fire the charge?" inquired Laura.

"Yes," answered Nasmyth quietly. "It's fitting that you should be the one to set us at our work. If it hadn't been for you, I should certainly not have taken this thing up, and now I want to feel that you are anxious for our success."

A faint flush of colour crept into Laura Waynefleet's face. For one thing, Nasmyth's marriage to the dark-eyed girl whom Gordon had described to her depended on the success of this venture, and that was a fact which had its effect on her. Still, she felt, the scheme would have greater results than that, and, turning gravely, she glanced at the men who had gathered upon the shingle. They looked very little and feeble as they clustered together, in face of that almost overwhelming manifestation of the great primeval forces against which they had pitted themselves in the bottom of the tremendous rift. It seemed curious that they did not shrink from the roar of the river which rang about them in sonorous tones, and then, as she looked across the mad rush of the rapid and the spray-shrouded fall to the stupendous walls of rock that shut them in, the thing they had undertaken seemed almost impossible. Wheeler appeared to guess her thoughts, for he smiled as he pointed to the duck-clad figures.

"Well," he declared, "in one way they're an insignificant crowd. Very little to look at; and this cañon's big. Still, I guess they're somehow going through with the thing. It seems to me"—and he nodded to her with sudden recognition of her part in the project—"it was a pretty idea of Nasmyth's when he asked you to start them at it."

Laura remembered that the leader of the men had once said that he belonged to her. She smiled, and raised the hand that held the firing key.

“Boys,” she said, “it’s a big thing you have undertaken—not the getting of the money, but the beating of the river, and the raising of tall oats and orchards where only the sour swamp-grasses grew.” She turned and for a moment looked into Nasmyth’s eyes, as she added simply: “Good luck to you.”

She dropped her hand upon the little box, and in another moment or two a rent opened in the smooth-worn stretch of rock above the fall. Out of it there shot a blaze of light that seemed to grow in brilliance with incredible swiftness, until it spread itself apart in a dazzling corruscation. Then the roar of the river was drowned in the detonation, and long clouds of smoke whirled up. Through the smoke rose showers of stones and masses of leaping rock that smote with a jarring crash upon the walls of the cañon. After that came a great splashing that died away suddenly, and there was only the hoarse roar of the river pouring through the newly opened gap. Laura turned and handed the box to Nasmyth.

“Now,” she said, “I have done my part, and I am only sorry that it is such a trifling one.”

Nasmyth looked at her with a gleam in his eyes.

He answered softly: “You are behind it all. It is due to you that I am making some attempt to use the little power in my possession, instead of letting it melt away.”

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DERRICK

A bitter frost had crept down from the snow-clad heights that shut the cañon in, and the roar of the river had fallen to a lower tone, when Nasmyth stood one morning shivering close by the door of his rude log shanty at the foot of the gully. The faint grey light was growing slightly clearer, and he could see the clustering spruces, in the hollow, gleam spectrally where their dark masses were streaked with delicate silver filigree. Across the river there was a dull glimmer from the wall of rock, which the freezing spray had covered with a glassy crust. Though it had not been long exposed to the nipping morning air, Nasmyth felt his damp deer-hide jacket slowly stiffening, and the edge of the sleeves, which had been wet through the day before, commenced to rasp his raw and swollen wrists.

He stood still for a minute or two listening to the river and stretching himself wearily, for his back and shoulders ached, and there was a distressful stiffness in most of his joints that had resulted from exposure, in spray-drenched clothing, to the stinging frost. This, however, did not greatly trouble him, since he had long realized that physical discomfort must be disregarded if the work was to be carried on. Men, for the most part, toil strenuously in that wild land. Indeed, it is only by the tensest effort of which flesh and blood are capable that the wilderness is broken to man’s domination, for throughout much of it costly mechanical appliances have not as yet displaced well-hardened muscle.

In most cases the Bushman who buys a forest ranch has scarcely any money left when he has made the purchase. He finds the land covered with two-hundred-feet firs, which must be felled, and sawn up, and rolled into piles for burning by his own hand, and only those who have handled trees of that kind can form any clear conception of the labour such work entails. It is a long time before the strip of cleared land will yield a scanty sustenance, and in the meanwhile the Bushman must, every now and then, hire himself out track-grading on the railroads or chopping trails to obtain the money that keeps him in tea and pork

and flour. As a rule, he expects nothing else, and there are times when he does not get quite enough work. Men reared in this fashion grow hard and tireless, and Nasmyth had been called upon to lead a band of them. He had contrived to do it, so far, but it was not astonishing that the toil had left a mark on him.

He heard the drifting ice-cake crackle, as it leapt the fall, and the sharp crash of it upon the boulders in the rapid. It jarred on the duller roar of the river in intermittent detonations as each heavy mass swept down. There was, however, no other sound, and seizing a hammer, he struck a suspended iron sheet until a voice fell across the pines from the shadowy gully.

“Guess we’ll be down soon as it’s light enough,” it said.

Then another voice rose from the shanty.

“The boys won’t see to make a start for half an hour,” it said. “I don’t know any reason why you shouldn’t shut the door and come right in. Breakfast’s ready.”

Nasmyth turned and went into the shanty, conscious that it would cost him an effort to get out of it again. A stove snapped and crackled in the one room, which was cosily warm. Gordon and Waynefleet sat before the two big empty cases that served for table, and Mattawa was ladling pork on to their plates from a blackened frying-pan, Nasmyth sat down and ate hastily, while the light from the lamp hanging beneath the roof-beams fell upon his face, which was gaunt and roughened by the sting of bitter spray and frost. His hands were raw and cracked.

“I want to get that rock-dump hove out of the pool before it’s dark,” he said. “One can’t see to crawl over those ice-crusted rocks by firelight.”

Gordon glanced at Mattawa, who grinned. “Well,” said Mattawa, “it was only yesterday when I fell in, and I figured Charly was going right under the fall the day before. Oh, yes, I guess we’d better get the thing through while it’s light.”

“I have felt inclined to wonder if it wouldn’t be advisable to suspend operations if this frost continues,” said Waynefleet reflectively.

“Our charter lays it down that the work is to be carried on continuously,” answered Gordon. “Still, on due notice being given, it permits a stoppage of not exceeding one month, owing to stress of weather or insuperable natural difficulties. As a matter of fact, even with the fire going, it’s practically impossible to keep the frost out of the stone.”

Nasmyth looked up sharply. “The work goes on. There will be no stoppage of any kind. We can’t afford it. The thing already has cost us two or three times as

much as I had anticipated."

Gordon looked amused, though he said nothing further. Nasmyth was up against it, with his back to the wall, but that fact had roused all the resolution there was in him, and he had shown no sign of flinching. It was evident that he must fight or fail ignominiously, and he had grown grimmer and more determined as each fresh obstacle presented itself while the strenuous weeks rolled on. There was silence for a few minutes, and then Mattawa grinned at Waynefleet.

"I guess you've got to keep that rock from freezing, and the fire was kind of low when I last looked out," he remarked.

With a frown of resignation Waynefleet rose wearily and went out, for it was his part to keep a great fire going day and night. This was one of the few things he could do, and, though it entailed a good deal of sturdy labour with the axe, he had, somewhat to his comrades' astonishment, accomplished it reasonably well. In another minute or two Nasmyth followed him, and when the rest of the men came clattering down from the shanty, higher up the gully, they set to work.

There was just light enough to see by, and no more, for, though the frost was bitter, heavy snow-clouds hung about the hills. Shingle and boulders were covered with frozen spray, and long spears of ice stretched out into the pool below the fall. Now and then a block of ice drove athwart them with a detonating crackle. The pool was lower than it had been in summer, and the stream frothed in angry eddies in the midst of it, where shattered masses of rock rent by the blasting charges lay as they had fallen. It was essential that the rock should be cleared away, and a great redwood log with a rounded foot let into a socket swung by wire rope guys above the pool. Another wire rope with a pair of iron claws at the end of it ran over a block at the head of the log to the winch below, and the primitive derrick and its fittings had cost Nasmyth a great deal of money, as well as a week's arduous labour.

They swung the apparatus over the pile of submerged rock, and, when the claws fell with a splash, they hove at the winch, two of them at each handle, until a mass of stone rose from the stream. Then one guy was slackened, and another hauled upon, until the rock swung over the shingle across the river, where they let it fall. Part of the growing pile would be used to build the road by which they brought supplies down the gully.

In itself the work was arduous enough, since four men alone could toil at the winch, and some of the masses they raised were ponderous. Indeed, there was scarcely room for four persons on the shelf hewn out above the tail of the pool,

and the narrow strip of stone was slippery with ice. Fine spray that froze on all it touched whirled about the workers, and every now and then a heavy fragment that slipped from the claws fell with a great splash. Nasmyth's wrists grew raw from the rasp of the hide jacket, and wide cracks opened in his fingers.

"I remember it as cold as this only once before," he said. "It was during the few days I spent between the logging camp and Waynefleet's ranch."

Mattawa, who hove on the same handle, grinned. "Well," he said, "this is a tolerable sample of blame hard weather while it lasts, but we get months of it back East. Still, I guess we don't work then. No, sir, unless we're chopping, we sit tight round the stove."

Mattawa was right in this. Excepting the loggers and the Northwest Police, men do not work in the open at that temperature back East, nor would they attempt it on the Pacific Slope were the cold continuous. In the western half of British Columbia, however, long periods of severe weather are rare. It is a variable zone, swept now and then by damp, warm breezes, and men tell of sheltered valleys where flowers blow the year round, though very few of those who ramble up and down the Mountain Province ever chance upon them. But there are times when the devastating cold of the Polar regions descends upon the lonely ranges, as it had done upon the frost-bound cañon.

Those who toiled with Nasmyth were hardened men, and they held on with cracked hands clenched on the winch-handles, or they splashed through the icy shallows with the water in their boots, until, a little before their dinner-hour, when three of them stood straining by Nasmyth's side beneath the derrick as a mass of rock rose slowly to the surface of the pool. Mattawa glanced at this weight dubiously, and then up at the wire guy that gleamed with frozen spray high above his head.

"I guess we've dropped on to a big one this time," he said. "She's going to be heavier when we heave her clear of the river."

This, of course, was correct, and it was clear to Nasmyth that it was only by a strenuous effort that his comrades were raising the stone then. Still, it must be lifted, and he tightened his grasp upon the handle.

"Heave! Lift her out!" he said.

The veins rose swollen on their foreheads, and they gasped as they obeyed him, but as the stone rose dripping there was an ominous creaking overhead.

"Guess she's drawing the anchor-bolts," cried one. "We'll fetch the whole thing

down. Shall I let her run?”

Nasmyth flung a sharp glance at the big iron holdfast sunk in the rock above. There would, he knew, be trouble if that or the wire guy gave way, but it was only at some hazard that anything could be done in the cañon.

“Hold on!” he said hoarsely. “Slack that guy, and let her swing.”

There was a clink and jar as the clutch took the weight off them; a wire rope set up a harsh rasping, and as Gordon jerked a guiding-line across the river, the great boom swung, trailing the heavy stone just above the water. Then the ominous creak grew sharper, and one of them shouted.

“Jump!” he said. “She’s going!”

Two of them sprang on the instant into the pool, and washed out with the crackling ice-cake into the rapid at the tail of it. It was precisely what most men who could swim would have done, but Nasmyth stayed, and Mattawa stayed with him. Nasmyth did not think very clearly, but he remembered subconsciously what the construction of that derrick had cost him. There was a lever which would release the load and let it run. He had his hand on it when he turned to his companion.

“Strip that handle, Tom,” he said.

The iron crank that would have hurled him into the river as its span fell with a rattle, and that was one peril gone; but the lever he grasped was difficult to move, and his hands were stiff and numb. Still he persisted, and Mattawa watched him, because there was only room for one, until there was a crash above them, and the tilted top of the great boom came down. Mattawa, flattened against the rock side, held his breath as the mass of timber rushed towards the pool, and next moment saw that Nasmyth was no longer standing on the shelf. Nasmyth lay partly beneath the shattered winch, and his face was grey, except for a red scar down one side of it. His eyes, however, were open, and Mattawa gasped with relief when he heard the injured man speak.

“It cleared my body. I’m fast by the hand,” said Nasmyth.

Three or four minutes had slipped by before the rest scrambled upon the ledge with handspikes, and then it cost them a determined effort before they moved the redwood log an inch or two. Gordon, kneeling by Nasmyth’s side, drew the crushed arm from under it. Nasmyth raised himself on one elbow, and lifted a red and pulpy hand that hung from the wrist. With an effort that set his face awry, he straightened it.

“I can move it,” he said. “I don’t know how it got under the thing, or what hit me in the face.”

“It doesn’t matter, either,” said Gordon quietly. “Can you get up?”

Nasmyth blinked at him. “Of course,” he answered. “As a general thing, I walk with my legs. They’re not hurt.”

Nasmyth staggered to his feet, and, while Gordon grasped his shoulder, floundered over the log staging laid athwart the fall and back to the shanty. Gordon was busy with him there for some time. After the crushed hand had been bound up Gordon flung the door open and spoke to the men outside.

“It’s only his hand, and there’s nothing broken,” he announced. “You can get your dinner. We’ll see about heaving the derrick up when you’ve eaten.”

He went back and filled Nasmyth’s pipe.

“I expect it hurts,” he said.

Nasmyth nodded. “Yes,” he replied, “quite enough.”

“Well,” said Gordon, “I don’t know that it’s any consolation, but if you expose it at this temperature, it’s going to hurt you considerably more. You can’t do anything worth while with one hand, and that the one you don’t generally use, either. There’s a rip upon your face that may give you trouble, too. I’m going to pack you out to-morrow.”

“The difficulty is that I’m not disposed to go.”

“Your wishes are not going to be consulted. If there’s no other way, I’ll appeal to the boys. I’d let you stay if you were a reasonable man, and would lie quiet beside the stove until that hand got better; but since it’s quite clear that nobody could keep you there, you’re starting to-morrow for Waynefleet’s ranch.”

Gordon turned to Waynefleet. “We’ll lay you off for a week. There’s a little business waiting at the settlement, anyway, and you can see about getting the new tools and provisions in.”

Waynefleet’s face was expressive of a vast relief. The few bitter weeks spent in the cañon had taken a good deal of the keenness he had once displayed out of him.

“I certainly think the arrangement suggested is a very desirable one,” he agreed “I am quite sure that Miss Waynefleet will have much pleasure in looking after Nasmyth.”

Gordon turned to Nasmyth. “Now,” he said, “you can protest just as much as you like, but still, as you’ll start to-morrow if we have to tie you on to the pack-horse, it’s not going to be very much use. You can nurse your hand for a week, and then go on to Victoria and see if you can pick up a boring-machine of the kind we want cheap.”

Nasmyth, who was aware that the machine must be purchased before very long, submitted with the best grace he could, and, though his hand was painful, he contrived to sleep most of the afternoon. Now that he was disabled and could not work, he began to feel the strain. He set out with Waynefleet at sunrise next morning, and they passed the day scrambling over the divide, and winding in and out among withered fern and thickets as they descended a rocky valley. Here and there they found an easier pathway on the snow-sheeted reaches of a frozen stream, and only left it to plunge once more into the undergrowth when the ice crackled under them. They had a pack-horse with them, for now and then one of the men made a laborious journey to the settlement for provisions, and in places a fallen tree had been chopped through or a thicket partly hewn away. That, however, did little to relieve the difficulties of the march, for the trail was rudimentary, and the first two leagues of it would probably have severely taxed the strength of a vigorous man unaccustomed to the Bush.

But they pushed on, Waynefleet riding when it was possible, while Nasmyth plodded beside the horse’s head, until a cloud of whirling snow broke upon them as they floundered through a belt of thinner Bush. The snow wrapped them in its filmy folds, gathering thick upon their garments and filling their eyes, and Nasmyth grew anxious as the daylight suddenly died out. They were in a valley, out of which they could not very well wander without knowing it, and they stumbled on, smashing into thickets and swerving round fallen trees, until they struck a clearer trail, and it was with relief that Nasmyth saw a tall split-rail fence close in front of him. He threw a strip of it down, and then turned to Waynefleet when he dimly made out a blink of light in the whirling haze of snow.

“If you will go in and tell Miss Waynefleet, I’ll try to put the horse up,” he said.

Waynefleet swung himself down stiffly and vanished into the snow. He was half frozen, and it did not occur to him that Nasmyth had only one hand with which to loose the harness. It is also possible that he would have made no protest if it had.

Nasmyth reached the stable, and contrived to find and to light the lantern, but he

discovered that it would be difficult to do anything more. His sound hand was numbed. His fingers would not bend, and the buckles of the harness held, in spite of his efforts, but he persisted. The struggle he was waging in the cañon had stirred him curiously, and each fresh obstacle roused him to a half-savage determination. Though the action sent a thrill of pain through him, he laid his bound-up hand upon the headstall, and set his lips as he tore at a buckle. He felt that if the thing cost him hours of effort he would not be beaten.

He had, however, let his hand fall back into the bandage that hung from his neck, when the door opened and Laura Waynefleet came in. She saw him leaning against the side of the stall, with a greyness in his face, which had an angry red scar down one side of it, and her eyes shone with compassion.

“Sit down,” she said. “I will do that.”

Nasmyth, who straightened himself, shook his head. “I can manage it if you will loose the buckles,” he said. “One feels a little awkward with only one hand.”

They did it together, and then Nasmyth sat down, with his face drawn and lined. Laura stood still a moment or two with the lantern in her hand.

“The snow must be deep on the divide, and it is a very rough trail. I suppose you walked all the way?” she said.

Nasmyth contrived to smile. “As it happens, I am used to it.”

There was a flash of indignation in the girl’s eyes, for she had, after all, a spice of temper, and she was naturally acquainted with her father’s character. Her anger had, however, disappeared next moment.

“You are looking ill,” she remarked anxiously.

Nasmyth glanced down at the bandage. “I’ve been working rather hard of late, and this hand is painful.” He made a deprecatory gesture. “I don’t know what excuse to offer for troubling you. Gordon insisted on sending me.”

“You fancy I require one from you?”

Nasmyth looked at her with heavy eyes. “No,” he answered, “it is evident that you don’t. After all, perhaps I shouldn’t have wished to make any excuse. It seems only natural that when I get hurt, or find myself in any trouble, I should come to you.”

He did not see the colour that crept into her face, for his perceptions were not clear then; but he rose with an effort, and together they went back to the house

through the snow. There Nasmyth changed his clothes for the dry garments he had brought in a valise strapped to the pack-saddle, and an hour after supper he fell quietly asleep in his chair. Then Laura turned to her father.

“You let him walk all the way when he is worn-out and hurt!” she said accusingly.

Waynefleet waved his hand. “He insisted on it; and I would like to point out that there is nothing very much the matter with him. We have all been working very hard at the cañon; in fact, I quite fail to understand why you should be so much more concerned about him than you evidently are about me. I am, however, quite aware that there would be no use in my showing that I resented it.”

Laura said nothing further. She felt that silence was wiser, for, after all, her patience now and then almost failed her.

CHAPTER XXIV

REALITIES

Though there was bitter frost in the ranges, it had but lightly touched the sheltered forests that shut in Bonavista. The snow seldom lay long there, and only a few wisps of it gleamed beneath the northern edge of the pines. Mrs. Acton, as usual, had gathered a number of guests about her, and Violet Hamilton sat talking with one of them in the great drawing-room one evening. The room was brilliantly lighted, and the soft radiance gleamed upon the polished parquetry floor, on which rugs of costly skins were scattered. A fire of snapping pine-logs blazed in the big English hearth, and a faint aromatic fragrance crept into the room.

Miss Hamilton leaned back in a softly padded lounge that was obviously only made for two, and a pleasant-faced, brown-eyed young Englishman, who had no particular business in that country, but had gone there merely for amusement, sat at the other end of it, regarding her with a smile.

“After all,” he said reflectively, “I really don’t think I’m very sorry the snow drove us down from our shooting camp in the ranges.”

Violet laughed. She had met the man before he went into the mountains, and he had been at Bonavista for a week or two now.

“It was too cold for you up there?” she queried.

“It was,” answered the man, “at least, it was certainly too cold for Jardine, who came out with me. He got one of his feet nipped sitting out one night with the rifle on a high ledge in the snow, and when I left him in Vancouver the doctor told him it would be a month before he could wear a boot again.”

He laughed. “I have a shrewd suspicion that one has to get hardened to that kind of thing, and, surely, this is considerably nicer.”

“This,” repeated Violet, who fancied she understood what he meant, “is very much the same thing as you are accustomed to in London, except that the houses

are, no doubt, more luxuriously furnished, and the company is more brilliant and entertaining."

"You would not expect me to make any admission of that kind?" and the man looked at her reproachfully. "In any case, it wouldn't be warranted."

"Then," said Violet, "I must have some very erroneous notions of your English mansions."

The man smiled. "Ah!" he said, "I was referring to the company."

He had expressed himself in a similar fashion once or twice before, but Violet did not resent it. She admitted that she rather liked him, and she did not know that, although he had been a week or two at Bonavista, he had only intended to stay there a few days. It had naturally occurred to Mrs. Acton that there might be a certain significance in this, but she was misled by the open manner in which another young woman had annexed him.

There were other guests in the room, and among them was a little bald-headed man, whom Violet had heard had philanthropic tendencies, and was connected with some emigration scheme. This man was talking to Acton. He spoke in a didactic manner, tapping one hand with his gold-rimmed spectacles, and appeared quite content that the rest should hear him.

"There is no doubt that this country offers us a great field," he said. "In fact, I have already made arrangements for settling a number of deserving families on the land. What I am particularly pleased with is the manner in which the man who makes his home here is brought into close contact with Nature. The effect of this cannot fail to be what one might term recuperative. There is a vitality to be drawn from the soil, and I have of late been urging the manifold advantages of the simple life upon those who are interesting themselves in these subjects with me."

Violet glanced at her companion, and saw the amusement in his eyes.

"Do you all talk like that in England?" she inquired.

The man raised his hand reproachfully. "I'm afraid some of us talk a good deal of rubbish now and then. Still, as a matter of fact, we don't round up our sentences in that precise fashion, as he does. Just now we're rather fragmentary. Of course, he's right to some extent. I'm fond of the simple life—that is, for a month or so, when I know that a two days' ride will land me in a civilized hotel. The trouble is that most of the folks who recommend it would certainly go all to bits in a few weeks after they tried it personally. Can you fancy our friend

yonder chopping tremendous trees, or walking up to his knees in snow twelve hours with a flour-bag on his back?"

Violet certainly could not. The man was full-fleshed, plethoric, and heavy of foot, and he spoke with a throaty gasp.

"The tilling of the soil," he went on, apparently addressing anybody who cared to listen, "is man's natural task, and I think Nature's beneficent influences are felt to their fullest extent in the primeval stillness of these wonderful Western woods."

Violet's companion looked up at her with a smile.

"The primeval stillness sounds rather nice, only it isn't still except you go up into the snow upon the peaks," he said. "In most of the other places my trail led through you can hear the rivers, and they make noise enough for anything. Now, there's a man yonder I haven't seen before, who, I fancy, could tell us something about it if he liked. His face suggests that he knows. I mean the one talking to Mrs. Acton."

Violet followed his glance, and saw a man standing beside Mrs. Acton near the great English hearth; but his face was turned away from her, and it was a moment or two before he looked round. Then she started, and the blood crept into her cheeks as she met Nasmyth's gaze.

He had changed since she last saw him—changed, she felt, in an almost disconcerting fashion. He wore plain city clothes, and they hung about him with a suggestive slackness. His face was darkened and roughened by exposure to the winter winds; it had grown sharp and stern, and there was a disfiguring red scar down one side of it. His eyes were keen and intent, and there was a look in them that she did not remember having noticed before, while he seemed to have lost his careless gracefulness of manner. Even his step seemed different as he moved towards her. It was, though neither exactly understood why, a difficult moment for both of them when he stopped close by her side, and it was made no easier by the fact that they were not alone. Violet turned to her companion, who rose.

"Mr. Carshalton, from the Old Country," she said. "This is Mr. Nasmyth."

Carshalton nodded. "Glad to meet you. Won't you sit down?" he said. "As it happens, I had just pointed you out to Miss Hamilton. We were talking about the wilderness—or, to be more precise, the great primeval stillness. I ventured to suggest that you could tell us something about it."

Nasmyth smiled significantly. "Well," he replied, "I have certainly spent a few

months in the wilderness. That is one of the results."

He meant to indicate the hand that hung by his side in a thick, soft glove by the gesture he made, but it was the other one that Violet and Carshalton glanced at. It was scarred and battered, and had opened in raw red cracks under the frost.

"Ah!" said Carshalton, "I think I was quite warranted in assuring Miss Hamilton that it was a good deal nicer here. You see, I was up in the ranges for a week or two. I had to come down with my comrade, who sat out one night in the snow. The primeval stillness didn't agree with him."

He met Violet's eyes, and next moment glanced across the room.

"I don't think I've spoken to Mr. Acton this evening," he said. "We'll have a talk about the wilderness by-and-by, Mr. Nasmyth."

He strolled away, and Nasmyth sat down by Violet's side.

"I fancied the man meant to stay," he remarked.

Violet leaned back in the lounge, and looked at him a moment or two silently. Her thoughts were confused, and she was uneasy. In the first place, she almost wished it had not been so easy to make Carshalton understand that she wished him to go away; for the fact that she had been able to do so by merely looking at him suggested that there was at least a certain confidence between them, and she was unwilling to admit that such was the case. That, however, was only a minor point. While Carshalton had spoken of the simple life, and admitted that a few weeks of it was quite enough for him, she had thought with a certain tenderness of the man who had spent months of strenuous toil in the misty depths of the cañon. She was glad of this, and felt a slight compunction over the fact that she had seldom thought of him of late. Still, when she saw him bearing the marks of those months of effort on his body and in his worn face, she was sensible that she shrank from him, as she had once done from the dreary, dripping wilderness. This was disconcerting, but she could not drive out the feeling. His worn face vaguely troubled her, and she was sorry for him, but she would not have liked to touch his scarred and roughened hands. She glanced at the injured hand inquiringly.

"It is almost well again. It was crushed beneath a mass of timber," he told her briefly.

Conscious that the meeting so far left a good deal to be desired, Violet sat still a moment. It certainly had not afforded her the pleasure she might reasonably have expected, and she subconsciously resented the fact. There was also, as she

noticed, a suggestion of uneasiness in the man's scarred face.

"I have been in Victoria a few days," he explained. "There was a machine I had to buy, and one or two other matters had to be attended to. Then I got a letter forwarded from Waynefleet's ranch, from which it appeared that Mr. Acton wished to see me."

A faint sparkle crept into Violet Hamilton's eyes. "It is evident," she observed, "that we both find it a little difficult to say the right thing."

"I'm afraid I am now and then a little remiss in that respect. Still, how have I offended?"

Violet contrived to smile. "I'm not sure it was particularly judicious of you to explain so fully what brought you here. Couldn't you have left me to suggest another reason that would have been a little more satisfactory?"

Nasmyth laughed. "My dear, you know I have been longing to see you."

"Ah!" exclaimed Violet, "I am not altogether sure. Indeed, I could almost fancy that you have been thinking of nothing beyond what you are doing in that horrible cañon."

Nasmyth raised his hand in protest, though Violet was quick to notice the uneasiness in his face; but now the worn look in it roused her pity.

"Well," she said, "you can show how anxious you were by staying here at least a week. I want you to stay. Besides, you must for another reason—you are looking almost ill."

There was, for the first time, a softness in her voice that stirred the man, but the uneasiness that had troubled him did not disappear. Indeed, it seemed to grow stronger as he glanced about the room, which was furnished artistically, and flooded with light. Mrs. Acton's guests were of the station to which he had belonged, and he would once have found the sound of their voices and their light laughter pleasant. These, however, were things that no longer appealed to him, and he was conscious of a feverish impatience to get back to his work again in the misty cañon.

"I'm afraid," he replied gravely, "it will be out of the question for me to stay just now. There is so much to do at the cañon; and I think you know why I am so anxious to carry the work through."

The girl looked at him in a curious fashion, and though she was probably not aware of it, there was doubt in her eyes. For the moment she was troubled with a

sense of comprehension, and she could not be quite sure whether it was only on her account that he was so determined to carry out the project.

“Well,” she told him, “I know that Mr. Acton and your uncle are anxious to see you. In fact, I believe they have some suggestions to put before you, and though I do not know exactly what it is, I imagine that you need not go back to the Bush if you will do what they wish.” She broke off and glanced at him wistfully. “Derrick, you won’t decide rashly. I don’t want you to stay away from me.”

Nasmyth smiled reassuringly; but one of Violet’s companions approached them just then, and when she leaned upon the back of the lounge and spoke to the girl, Nasmyth rose. He crossed the room, and a few minutes later, in the big cedar hall, came upon a man connected with the Crown land agency. There was an open fire in the hall, and the man, who sat down by it, offered Nasmyth a cigar.

“Mrs. Acton will excuse us for a few minutes,” the Stranger remarked. “You are evidently fresh from the Bush. How are you getting on there?”

Nasmyth told him, and the man looked thoughtful.

“You don’t hold all the valley,” the man said. “I wonder if you know that folks are taking an interest in the land that’s still unrecorded?”

“I don’t,” said Nasmyth. “It’s mostly heavy timber that would cost a deal to clear. Any way, as we couldn’t take up any more than we hold, it doesn’t appear to affect me at all.”

“Well,” returned his companion, “that’s a point I’m not quite sure about. You only hold a provisional charter to lower the river. There’s only one unworked holding near the valley, and, as you couldn’t injure anybody’s property, we permitted you to go ahead. Still, if any parties supplied us with a sufficient reason for withdrawing that permission, we might have to listen to them.” He broke off for a moment and waved his hand. “Of course, I’m not speaking officially. I’m merely giving you a hint that may be useful. Some persons might take up that land with the object of putting the screw on you. You see, it would be possible to get over any difficulty they might raise by buying them out.”

Nasmyth’s lips closed firmly. He was quite aware that, in view of the state of his finances, the course suggested was not one that he could adopt.

“What kind of people are they?” he inquired.

His companion laughed in an ominous fashion. “Small ranchers, though it’s just possible that there may be some of the big men connected with the land business

behind them. The big promoters occasionally prefer to act through a dummy. Our object is, of course, to get men who will cultivate the land, and keep it out of the hands of anyone who merely wants to hold it. Now, while I'm far from sure my superiors would be pleased to hear I'd said so much to you, there's one piece of advice I can offer." He leaned forward and looked at Nasmyth confidentially. "Get that work through as soon as you can. Once you lower the level of the river, nobody could compel you to put it back again. Any man who wanted land would have to buy it as it was."

"A man who wished to start a ranch would naturally prefer it with the water run out of it."

"Precisely!" argued Nasmyth's informant. "That is why you got the charter. Still, I wasn't contemplating the man who merely wished to ranch."

His smile suggested that he intended to say no more upon that subject, and when he turned and glanced through the doorway into the lighted room, Nasmyth saw that he was looking at Violet Hamilton. Nasmyth also noticed that Carshalton was once more seated beside the girl.

"I rather like that Englishman," declared the stranger. "Acton apparently gets on with him, too. He seems to have been here some time. In fact, while it's nobody else's business, I've been inclined to wonder what Miss Hamilton thinks of him."

Nasmyth made no reply, but the observation slightly troubled him. A little later Acton crossed the hall.

"If you can give us a few minutes, your uncle and I have something to put before you," he said. "I'll go along with you to my room."

CHAPTER XXV

NASMYTH DECIDES

A shaded lamp stood on the table of Acton's room, and, as Nasmyth entered, he saw Wisbech, whom he had not met since his arrival, sitting just inside the light of it in a lounge-chair. He strode forward and shook hands with his uncle.

"Until I got your letter I almost fancied you were in Japan," he said.

Wisbech smiled at him. "I shall probably start very shortly. In fact, I never expected to stay here half so long as I have done, but I found a good deal to interest me in this country, and it's twenty years since I have been away from business for more than a week or two. The works were mine until very recently, but there are times now when I'm not altogether sorry I'm merely a director of the company."

Acton laid a handful of cigars on the table, and drew out a chair for Nasmyth.

"Well," he replied reflectively, "there is a good deal in this country that would interest a sensible man, but I'm not sure that's exactly what has kept Mr. Wisbech so long in Victoria. I've a point or two to mention later, but I'll let him speak first. It's his affair."

Nasmyth sat down, and he did not immediately notice that while Acton had placed his chair where the light struck full upon his face, Wisbech sat a little farther back in the shadow cast by the shade of the lamp. After a moment Acton sought the dimmer part of the room. Wisbech turned to Nasmyth.

"I understand that you expect to marry Miss Hamilton by-and-by," he said. "No doubt you have thought over the question of what you're going to keep a wife on?"

"I admit that it's one that has caused me a good deal of anxiety;" and Nasmyth leaned forward, with his elbows on the table. "Still, it hasn't troubled me quite so much of late. If I succeed with the scheme I have in hand, it will bring me money enough to make a start with a larger venture of the kind, or to enable me

to undertake ranching on a reasonably extensive scale. When the land is ready for cultivation, and you haven't to face the initial cost of getting rid of heavy timber, the business is a profitable one."

"It is possible that Miss Hamilton would not care to live at even a tolerably extensive ranch. She has been accustomed to comfort of every kind and cheerful society, and there can't be very much of either in the Bush; while, if you undertake any further work of the kind you suggest, it would be a few years before you made your mark. Now, I'm not sure it would be reasonable to expect a young woman like Miss Hamilton to wait indefinitely."

Nasmyth flushed a little. "I think," he replied, "that is a question which concerns Miss Hamilton and me alone."

Acton leaned forward in his chair. "Mrs. Acton seems to fancy it concerns her, too. In fact, that's one reason why I wrote to you. Well, I'm going to lay before you a business proposition. You have probably heard of the Hecla Mineral Exploitation concern? It's run by two friends of mine, who have made a great deal of money out of their claims. They're getting elderly, and are open to take in a younger man—a man of education, who has some acquaintance with the work that's done in the Bush. He must take hold now, and hold stock in the concern. Here's the last letter they wrote me."

He passed it across to Nasmyth, whose face grew eager, and then suddenly hardened again. The concern in question was, as he had heard, one of excellent repute, and supposed to be carrying on a profitable mining business.

"It's out of the question that I should raise the capital," he said.

"The money can be raised," Wisbech broke in quietly. "I'll buy that stock for you, and, if you insist on it, you can treat it as a loan."

Nasmyth sat very still for a moment or two, and slowly closed one hard hand. He had never expected such an offer from Wisbech, and he recognized that it would free him of all his difficulties if he accepted it. There was, however, an obstacle in the way.

"Well," asked Wisbech very dryly, "isn't the Hecla Minerals good enough for you?"

Nasmyth looked at Acton. "I must go there—now?"

"That is one of the conditions. They want to fix the thing before Kekewich, who hasn't been well lately, starts East on a trip to Montreal. I promised to wire if

you were willing to go down and see them to-morrow."

Nasmyth turned to Wisbech, and his voice was strained.

"I am under many obligations to you already, sir, but I'm sorry I can't profit by your generosity in this case," he said.

"Why?" queried Wisbech sharply.

"It's a little difficult to explain. You see, the idea of lowering the river was mine. Some of the boys up yonder have mortgaged their ranches, and put every dollar they could raise in that way into the scheme. They look to me to put the thing through; so that they may get their money back again."

"Is there no one else who could do that?" Acton asked. "It seems to me there's nothing wrong with that man Gordon. I guess you could leave it to him."

Nasmyth felt that Wisbech was watching him with a curious intentness.

"Gordon," he answered slowly, "is at least as well fitted to lead the boys as I am. In fact, I might go farther than that. After all, however, there is a little more to be said."

He stopped abruptly, and sat silent a moment or two, leaning with one elbow on the table, and the light full upon his face. There was trouble in his expressive eyes, but his mouth was tense and grimly resolute. He remembered the pleasant summer days that he and Violet Hamilton had spent together, but he also heard the roar of the river in the misty depths of the cañon, and the crash of stream-driven pines. The familiar sounds rang in his ears, rousing him to action, and something in his nature responded. In the meanwhile there was a heavy silence in the room. His companions watched him closely, and Acton, who looked round for a moment, noticed the suggestive glint in Wisbech's eyes.

Nasmyth straightened himself suddenly. "I know what I am turning my back upon," he added. "It is very probable that I shall never get another opportunity of this kind again. Still, I owe the boys something, and I feel I owe a little to myself. This scheme in the cañon is the first big thing I have ever undertaken. I can't quite make the way that I look at it clear to you, but"—and he brought one hand down on the table in an emphatic fashion—"I feel that I must go on until it breaks me or I put it through."

Wisbech noisily thrust his chair back, and Acton laughed—a laugh that had a faint ring in it.

"Well, I guess I partly expected this," said Acton. "Mr. Nasmyth, it's a sure thing

that river's not going to break you."

Nasmyth looked embarrassed, but next moment Wisbech laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"Derrick," he said simply, "if you had closed with my offer, I wouldn't have blamed you, but I'd have felt I had done my duty then, and I'd never have made you another. As it is, when things are going wrong, all you have to do is to send a word to me."

Then, to the relief of his companions, Acton, whose expression changed suddenly, broke in again. "Well," he commented, "I'm not quite sure that Miss Hamilton will look at the thing from Nasmyth's point of view. I guess we'll leave him to explain it to her and Mrs. Acton."

Nasmyth fancied that the explanation would not be an easy task. In fact, it was one he shrank from, but it had to be undertaken, and, leaving the others, he went back to the drawing-room. Violet Hamilton was surrounded by several companions, and he did not approach her until she glanced at him as she slipped out into the big cedar hall. She sat down on a lounge near the fire, and he leaned upon the arm of it, looking down on her with grave misgivings. He recognized that it was scarcely reasonable to expect that she would be satisfied with the decision he had made.

"You have seen your uncle and Acton?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Nasmyth; "I have something to tell you."

The girl turned towards him quickly. "Ah!" she said, "you are not going to do what they proposed?"

"I'm sorry the thing they suggested was out of the question. You will let me tell you what it was?"

Violet made a sign of assent, and Nasmyth spoke quietly for a minute or two. Then a faint flush crept into the girl's cheeks and a sparkle into her eyes.

"You said no!" she interrupted.

"I felt I had to. There seemed no other course open to me."

Violet looked at him in evident bewilderment, and Nasmyth spoke again deprecatingly. "You see," he explained, "I felt I had to keep faith with those ranchers."

"Didn't it occur to you that you had also to keep faith with me?" she inquired

sharply.

“I think that was the one thing I was trying to do.”

Violet showed no sign of comprehension, and it was borne in upon Nasmyth then that, in her place, Laura Waynefleet would have understood the motives that had influenced him, and applauded them.

“My dear,” he said, “can’t you understand that you have laid an obligation on me to play a creditable part? I couldn’t turn my back on my comrades now that they have mortgaged their possessions, and, though I think Gordon or one of the others could lead them as well as I could, when I asked them to join me, I tacitly pledged myself to hold on until we were crushed or had achieved success.”

He looked at her wistfully when he stopped speaking; but she made a gesture of impatience.

“The one thing clear to me is that if you had done what Mr. Acton suggested you could have lived in Victoria, and have seen me almost whenever you wished,” she declared. “Some of those ranchers must know a good deal more about work of the kind you are doing than you do, and, if you had explained it all to them, they would have released you.”

Nasmyth sighed. Apart from the obligation to his comrades, there were other motives which had influenced him. He vaguely felt that it was incumbent on him to prove his manhood in this arduous grapple with Nature, and, after a purposeless life, to vindicate himself. The wilderness, as Gordon had said, had also gotten hold of him, and that described what had befallen him reasonably well. There are many men, and among them men of education, in those Western forests who, having once taken up the axe and drill, can never wholly let them go again. These men grow restless and morose in the cities, which seldom hold them long. The customs of civilization pall on them, and content comes to them only when they toil knee-deep in some frothing rapid, or hew the new waggon-road through a stupendous forest. Why this should be they do not exactly know, and very few of them trouble themselves about the matter. Perhaps it is a subconscious recognition of the first great task that was laid on man to subdue the earth and to make it fruitful. Nasmyth, at least, heard the river. Its hoarse roar rang insistently in his ears, and he braced himself for the conflict that must be fought out in the depths of the cañon. These, however, were feelings that he could not well express, and once more he doubted Violet’s comprehension.

“My dear,” he told her humbly, “I am sorry; but there was, I think, only one thing I could do.”

Violet, looking up, saw that his face was stern, and became sensible of a faint and perplexing repulsion from him. His languid gracefulness had vanished, and he was no longer gay or amusing. A rugged elemental forcefulness had come uppermost in him, and this was a thing she did not understand. Involuntarily she shrank from this grave, serious man. There was a disfiguring newly healed cut on one of his cheeks, and his hand was raw and horribly scarred.

“You have changed since you were last here,” she said, looking at him with disapproval. “Perhaps you really are a little sorry to leave me, but I think that is all. At least, you will not be sorry to get back to the cañon.”

Nasmyth started a little. It was a thing that he would at one time certainly not have expected, but he realized now that he was driven by a fierce impatience to get back to the work he had undertaken.

“I think that is not astonishing in one respect,” he replied. “I told you why I feel that I must carry the project through. The sooner I am successful, the sooner I can come back to you.”

The girl laughed somewhat bitterly. “If you would only be sensible, you need not go away. Are you quite sure it is not the project that comes first with you?” she questioned.

Nasmyth felt the blood creep into his face, for it suddenly dawned on him that the suggestion she had made was to some extent warranted.

“My dear,” he answered quietly, “you must try to bear with me.”

Violet rose. “Well,” she said, “when do you go away?”

“In the morning.”

There was resentment in the girl’s expression. “Since you have made up your mind to go, I will make no protest,” she declared. Then, with a swift change of manner, she turned and laid her hand upon his arm. “After all, I suppose you must go. Derrick, you won’t stay away very long!”

They went into the drawing-room together, and half an hour had passed when Mrs. Acton beckoned to Nasmyth, and he followed her into an adjoining alcove. She sat down and looked at him reproachfully.

“I am very angry with you,” she asserted; “in fact, I feel distinctly hurt. You have not come up to my expectations.”

“I’m sorry,” replied Nasmyth quietly. “Still, I’m not astonished. Your indignation

is perfectly natural. I felt at the time Mr. Acton made me the offer that he had been prompted by you. That"—and he made a deprecatory gesture—"is one reason why I'm especially sorry I couldn't profit by it."

Mrs. Acton sat silent a moment or two, regarding him thoughtfully. "Well," she declared, "from now I am afraid you must depend upon yourself. I have tried to be your friend, and it seems that I have failed. Will you be very long at the cañon?"

"If all goes as I expect it, six months. If not, I may be a year, or longer. I shall certainly not come back until I am successful."

"That is, of course, in one sense the kind of decision I should expect you to make. It does you credit. Unfortunately, I'm not sure that it's wise."

Nasmyth looked at her with quick apprehension. "I wonder," he said, "if you would tell me why it isn't?"

Mrs. Acton appeared to weigh her words, "My views are, naturally, not always correct," she answered. "Even if they were, I should scarcely expect you to be guided by them. Still, I think it would not be wise of you to stay away very long."

She rose, and smiled at him. "It is advice that may be worth taking. Now I must go back to the others."

Nasmyth pushed aside the portieres for her, and then sauntered into the hall, where in a very thoughtful mood, he sat down by the fire.

CHAPTER XXVI

ONE NIGHT’S TASK

Daylight was dying out in a flurry of whirling snow, when Nasmyth, who led a jaded horse, floundered down from the steep rock slopes of the divide into the shelter of the dark pines about the head of the gully. It was a little warmer there, and he was glad of it, for he was chilled, in spite of the toilsome climb. The dark boughs wailed above him, tossing athwart his path a haze of sliding snow, but he caught a faint and reassuring clink of drills, and straightened himself as he clambered down between the trees. The sound had a bracing effect on him, and he felt a curious little thrill as the clamour of the river came up to him in long pulsations. The sound of the waters was growing louder when Gordon, with a big axe in his hand, materialized out of the shadows, and strode forward impulsively at the sight of him.

“Hand better? We’re glad to see you; but you might have stayed another day or two,” he said.

Nasmyth laughed. “Well,” replied he, “perhaps it’s a little curious, considering everything, but I was impatient to get back again. In fact, I feel more at home each time I scramble down from the divide.”

He glanced round through the sliding snow at the dim white range and ranks of towering pines, and, as he did so, the roar of the river and the wail of trees that swayed beneath a fierce wind filled the rock-walled hollow. Then the persistent clink of drills and thud of axes broke out again, while here and there the blurred white figure of a toiling man emerged from the snow. It was a picture that a man unused to the wilderness might have shrunk from, but Gordon understood his comrade. They were engaged in a great struggle, with the powers of savage Nature arrayed against them; but it was with a curious quickening of all the strength that was in them, mental and physical, that they braced themselves for the conflict.

“I have a thing or two to tell you, but we’ll get into the shanty and have supper

first. The boys are just quitting work," remarked Gordon.

They clambered down over a practicable trail, though part of it was covered deep with snow, crept in and out among the boulders by the light of a great fire that blazed above the fall, and found Mattawa laying a meal out when they reached the shanty. Neither Nasmyth nor Gordon said anything of consequence until after the meal, and then Nasmyth, who had put on his deer-hide jacket and duck trousers, flung himself down in an empty packing-case that was stuffed with soft spruce twigs, and looked about him with a smile of contentment. A lamp hung above him, and its light gleamed upon axes, drills, iron wedges, and crosscut saws, and made a chequered pattern of brightness and shadow on the rude log walls. A glowing stove diffused a cosy warmth, and the little room was filled with the odours of tobacco and drying boots and clothes.

"I suppose you saw Wisbech?" observed Gordon. "Miss Waynefleet told one of the boys, who was through at the settlement, that she had a note from him asking if she'd get a letter he or Acton had written into your hands as soon as possible. He seems to be making quite a stay in this country."

"He has stayed several months longer than he intended," replied Nasmyth. "I believe he did it on my account; but he's going on again in a week or two. I saw him at Bonavista. Where's Waynefleet?"

"I guess he's in Victoria."

"I didn't come across him. What took him there?"

Gordon laughed. "He said it was business. Wanted to see if we couldn't get our tools and powder cheaper. As a matter of fact, it would be a relief if that could be done. Any way, he has been working quite hard, and has hung on rather longer than I expected. Administration's his strong point. He doesn't like chopping." Gordon's face grew grave. "In one way it's rather a pity he's fond of talking. I'm 'most afraid somebody may start him discoursing on what we're doing over a glass of wine and a cigar. I like a man of that kind where I can put my hand on him. He's one of our weak spots."

Nasmyth nodded. "I'm sorry I didn't know he was in the city," he said. "How are you getting on?"

"Satisfactorily, so far as the work goes. We have pushed the blasting heading well under the fall, but there's a thing that has been worrying me. I'd gone across the range to see what the boys in the valley had done, when a man came in. It appears he resented our trying to lower the river. Mattawa saw him."

Mattawa looked up with a grin. “He said he’d a claim up at the head of the valley, and we had got to quit work right away. If we didn’t he’d get the Crown people or the court to stop us. He liked plenty of water round his ranch. Some of the boys got a little riled with him, and they took him up the gully and put him on his horse.”

“I never heard of a claim up yonder,” declared Nasmyth gravely.

“Well,” said Gordon, “I believe there is one. Somebody recorded it a long while ago, and did nothing on it, but, as it was bought land, his title stands. Potter says he understood the man was dead. It may be an attempt to get some money out of us.”

Nasmyth sat thoughtfully silent a moment or two.

“One of the Crown people hinted at something of the kind,” he said. “Now I scarcely think any of the boys would go back on us by selling out his land?”

“Not one. Any way, I guess they could hardly do it without the consent of the trustees. You and I are not likely to give ours.” He paused for a moment. “Well,” he added, “I guess Waynefleet could be depended on.”

Nasmyth said nothing for almost a minute, and both recognized that the silence was significant. Then he rose abruptly.

“In one shape or other the trouble you suggested is one we will have to face,” he commented. “That’s why I’m going to fire a big charge in the blasting heading to-night. You can bring the giant-powder along, Tom.”

Mattawa appeared to be amazed, and Gordon stared at his comrade curiously.

“If you fire that charge now, you’ll naturally make an end of the heading, and I understood your notion was to drive right under the fall and blow the whole ledge out at one time,” objected Gordon. “Guess if you just rip the top of the rock off, as far as we have gone, it will take us quite a while to make another tunnel, and money, as I needn’t remind you, is running out.”

“Exactly!” agreed Nasmyth. “That extra work will have to be faced, but if I can get a big charge in to-night I can cut down the ridge a foot or two. Two feet less water will count for something in the valley, and I’m going to make sure of it. It seems certain that somebody will try to stop us by-and-by.”

Gordon noticed the hard glint in Nasmyth’s eyes, and knew that now when he was being pushed back to the wall he meant to fight, and would not shrink from a sacrifice. They had driven that uncompleted heading at a heavy cost, cutting at

first an open gallery in the face of the rock, drenched with the spray of the fall. Then they had crawled into the dripping tunnel hewn out by sheer force of muscle, for it was seldom that powder could be used, and they had only a worn-out machine, and had toiled crouching with scarcely room to bring a hammer down on wedge or to hold the drill, while from odd fissures the icy river poured in on them. Now, it seemed, all that severe effort was to be practically thrown away, but he recognized that his comrade was right. It was wiser to make sure of two feet than to wait until somebody set the law in motion and stopped the work.

“Yes,” he assented simply; “I guess it has to be done.”

Mattawa entered with the magazine, and Nasmyth laid out several sticks of giant-powder near the stove. There was a certain risk in this, but giant-powder freezes, and when that happens one must thaw it out. It is a singularly erratic compound of nitro-glycerine, which requires to be fired by a powerful detonator, and, if merely ignited, burns harmlessly. One can warm it at a stove, or even flatten it with a hammer, without stirring it to undesired activity—that is, as a rule—but now and then a chance tap with a pick-handle or a little jolt suffices to loose its tremendous potentialities. In such cases the men nearest it are usually not shattered, but dissolved into their component gases.

Nasmyth was quite aware of this as he sat by the stove kneading the detonators into the sticks that he held up to warm. His lips were set, but his scarred hands were steady, for another risk more or less did not count for very much in the cañon. Once, however, Mattawa ventured a protest.

“I guess that stick’s quite hot enough,” he observed.

Nasmyth said nothing, but went on with his work, until at length he laid the sticks and fuses in the magazine, and signalling to the others, moved towards the door. The snow beat into their faces when they went outside, and the glare of the fire above the fall emphasized the obscurity. Now the flames flung an evanescent flash of radiance across the whirling pool and the dark rock’s side, and then sank again to a dim smear of yellow brightness while a haze of vapour whirled amidst the snow, for a high wind swept through the cañon. Sometimes they could see the boulders among which they stumbled, and the river frothing at their feet, but for the most part they saw nothing, and groped onward with dazzled eyes, until at last Nasmyth swung himself up on the narrow staging that overhung the pool beneath the fall, and Gordon heard the sticks of giant-powder jolt against the side of the magazine. That alone would have sufficed to indicate the state of his comrade’s temper, for so far as it is possible, men handle giant-powder very

tenderly.

There was no rail to the narrow staging, which was glazed with frozen spray, and when Gordon was half-way along it, the fire flung out a gush of radiance and sank suddenly. Then thick smoke whirled about him, and for a moment or two he stopped and gasped, feeling for the rock with a cautious hand. He was aware that the man who slipped from the staging would be whirled round with the eddy and drawn down beneath the fall. A harsh voice came out of the darkness.

“Am I to wait here half the night?” it asked.

Gordon went on circumspectly, bruising his numbed fingers now and then upon the stone, until once more a blaze broke out, and he saw Nasmyth floundering in haste over a pile of shattered rock. The magazine was slung over his shoulder, and now and then it struck his back or the side of the rock. While Gordon would have been relieved had his comrade acted more circumspectly, he was not surprised. There were, he knew, times when men under strain broke out into an unreasoning fury. He had seen one hewing savagely on the perilous side of a tremendous tottering tree, and another grimly driving the bolts that could not save it into the stringers of a collapsing wooden bridge. It was, as he recognized, not exactly courage that they had displayed, but the elemental savagery that in the newer countries, at least, now and then seizes on hard-driven men ground down by mortgage-holders, or ruined by flood and frost. With man and Nature against them they would make their last grim protest before they were crushed. Gordon once or twice had been conscious of the same fierce desire. He could sympathize with Nasmyth, but, after all, he wished he would not bang the giant-powder about in that unceremonious fashion.

“Leave the magazine yonder, and we’ll bring it along,” he cried.

Nasmyth made no answer, but he waited until Gordon and Mattawa joined him, and they lowered themselves down from a rock shelf on to a pile of broken rock, about which the eddy swirled. The spray of the fall beat upon them, and the roar of it was bewildering, but the noise was softened when they crawled into the entrance of a narrow tunnel. Mattawa, with considerable difficulty, struck a match, and a pale light streamed out from the little metal lamp he fastened in his hat. The light showed the ragged roof of the tunnel and the rivulet of icy water that flowed in the bottom of it. They crawled forward through the water for a few yards, vainly trying to avoid the deluge which broke upon them from the fissures, and finally sat down dripping on a pile of broken rock. Nasmyth took out his pipe, and was lighting it when Gordon drew the magazine away from

him.

“You might just as well have done that before you opened the thing,” he remarked. “Anyway, if you merely want to sit down, it would have been quite as comfortable in the shanty.”

Nasmyth was silent for several moments; then he turned to the other two men with a wry smile.

“I don’t quite know how we drove this heading with the tools we had, but I can’t think of any means of saving it,” he said. “There are men with money—Martial, and more of them—in the cities waiting to take away from us what we expect to get, and since we have to fight them, it seems to me advisable to strike where it’s possible.” He laughed harshly. “There’ll be two feet less water in the valley before the morning.”

“But no heading,” cried Mattawa.

“Well,” replied Nasmyth simply, “we’ll start another one. I notice two holes yonder. We’ll drill a third one, Tom.”

Nasmyth had been in the saddle since sunrise, in bitter frost and whirling snow, but he picked up a hammer, and Mattawa seized a drill. There was no room to swing the hammer, and Nasmyth struck half crouching, while, chilly as the heading was, the perspiration dripped from him, and the veins rose swollen on his forehead. He was up against it, and a man strikes hardest when he is pressed back to the wall. Gordon sat and watched them, but—for the rock rang with each jarring thud—he wrapped the magazine in his wet jacket, and it was a relief to him when Nasmyth finally dropped the hammer.

“Now,” said Nasmyth, “we’ll fill every hole ram to the top.”

Mattawa placed the giant-powder in the holes, and they crawled back, trailing a couple of thin wires after them, until they reached the strip of shingle near the gully, when Nasmyth made the connection with the firing-plug.

A streak of vivid flame leapt out of the rock, and the detonation was followed by the roar of the river pouring through the newly opened gap. Nasmyth turned without a word and plodded back to the shanty. A group of men who had scrambled down the gully met him.

“You were a little astonished to see me, boys?” he said with a question in his voice. Then he laughed.

“I’ve fired a big charge, and I guess you’ll have to start another heading as soon

as it’s sun-up.”

It was evident that the men were disconcerted, and an expostulatory murmur rose from them. It ceased, however, when Nasmyth waved his hand.

“I had to do it, boys,” he declared.

It had cost them strenuous toil to drive that heading, but one could have fancied that they were satisfied with the terse assurance he offered them. He had proved himself fit to lead them, and they had a steadfast confidence in him.

“Well,” commented one of the men, “in that case, I guess all we have to do is to start right off at the other one.”

Nasmyth opened the door of the shanty. “I felt you’d look at it that way, boys,” he said. “I’ll explain the thing later. I’m a little played out to-night.”

The men plodded away up the gully, and in another few minutes Nasmyth was sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXVII

TIMBER RIGHTS

They set to work on the new heading at sunrise next morning, but it was a week or two before they had made much of an opening in the rock beneath the fall. Though Nasmyth had lowered the level of the river a little, the smooth-worn stone still rose sheer from the depths of the whirling pool, and the blasting had obliterated every trace of their previous operations. They were compelled to make new approaches, and they toiled, drenched with the icy spray, on frail, slung stages, cutting sockets for the logs to hold a heavier platform for the little boring-machine Nasmyth had purchased in Victoria. When the platform was built, the working face was narrow, and the rock of a kind that yielded very slowly to the cutting-tool. They had no power but that of well-hardened muscle, and none of the workers had any particular knowledge of engineering.

They pushed the new heading toilsomely beneath the fall, working in rock fissured by the last explosion, through which the water poured in on them, while the river rose when the frost broke up and was succeeded by a week or two of torrential rain. The water swirled high among the boulders, and had crept almost to the mouth of the heading, when one evening Wheeler walked into the shanty. He said nothing of any consequence until supper was over, and he then took a newspaper out of his pocket.

“Have you had any strangers round?” he asked.

“No,” answered Nasmyth, with a dry smile. “That is, they didn’t get any farther than the head of the gully. Two of them turned up one wet day, and when they found they couldn’t get down, they explained rather forcibly what they thought of me.”

Wheeler nodded, and handed the paper across to him.

“I guess you did quite right,” he said. “This should make it clear that some of the city men with money are on our trail.”

Nasmyth glanced at the paper, and saw a notification that certain timber rights in the forest belt surrounding the valley had been applied for.

“The Charters people!” he declared. “When I was in Victoria I had a talk with them. I partly expected something of the kind. By the way, I got a notification from the rancher I mentioned that, if I continued operations, proceedings would be begun against me.”

“They mean business,” commented Wheeler, with a snap in his dark eyes. “It seems to me there are several of them in the thing, and they evidently expect to get their hands on the valley one way or another. In all probability their idea is to let you get most of the work in, and then scare you into selling out for what they like to offer. Have you had any big trees coming along lately?”

“Yes,” answered Mattawa, “one or two went over the fall this afternoon.”

“Drift logs?”

“Two had the branches chopped off them.”

Wheeler made a sign of comprehension. “Well,” he predicted, “you’re going to see a good many more of that kind before very long.” He turned to Nasmyth. “I’m going to stay over to-morrow. The mill’s held up again. We had an awkward break, and I can’t get the new fixings in. You can tell me how you’re getting on.”

They talked until late that night, and on awakening next morning found the river higher and thick with shattered ice. It had also crept into the heading, and the men who worked in it were knee-deep in water. They, however, went on as usual, and it was in the afternoon that several great trees leapt the fall, and, driving down the rapid, whirled away into the black depths of the cañon. Wheeler, who stood watching attentively, nodded as the trees drove by.

“Hemlock. That’s not going to count for milling purposes,” he observed.

Nasmyth, who came up dripping wet, sat down on a boulder and took out his pipe.

“Did you expect anything else?” he asked.

Wheeler laughed. “I’m not sure that I did. It seems to me the men who want those timber rights don’t figure on doing much milling.” He looked up sharply. “This one’s red cedar.”

Another great trunk leapt the fall, swept round the pool, and then brought up

with a crash upon the pile of shattered rock which still lay athwart the head of the rapid. Nasmyth rose and straightened himself wearily.

“It’s a trifle unfortunate I hadn’t hove that rock out with the derrick. We’ll have to take hold if the log won’t swing clear,” he said.

The tree swung a little, and then the thinner head of it drove in among the boulders and stuck fast. In another moment a shout rose from a man standing on the ledge above the fall.

“Quite a batch of big logs coming along!” he called.

Nasmyth thrust his pipe into his pocket, and Wheeler, who watched him, nodded.

“They’ll jam and pile up,” said Wheeler. “I guess that’s what the other folks wanted. You have got to keep them clear.”

In another few moments Nasmyth was beating a suspended iron sheet, and while its clangour broke through the roar of the river the men floundered towards him over the shingle. One or two of them had axes, and the rest, running into the shanty, brought out saws and handspikes. In the meanwhile a huge log crashed upon the one held fast, and there was no need to tell any of the men that those which followed would rapidly pile up into an inextricable confusion of interlocked timber. There was only one thing to be done, and that was to cut away the first log, which would hold them back, as soon as possible.

The men set to work, two or three of them running recklessly along the rounded top of the slippery trunk, which rolled a little as it hammered upon the rock. Mattawa, with a big crosscut saw, crouched on the half-submerged pile of stone, and a comrade, who seized its opposite handle, held himself somehow on the second trunk by his knees. It was difficult to understand how they could work at all, but they were accustomed to toiling under embarrassing conditions. The saw had hardly bitten through the bark when another log drove grinding against the rest, and Mattawa’s companion, who let the handle go, fell forward on his face. He was up again in a moment, and after that stuck fast while log after log drove smashing upon the growing mass. Sometimes the one he clung to rose up under him, and sometimes it sank until he crouched in the water while another great butt crept up upon it, and it seemed that he must be crushed between them. Still, the saw rasped steadily through the heaving, grinding timber. It was perilous work, but it was clear to all of them that it had to be done.

In the meanwhile Nasmyth and Gordon stood knee-deep amidst the white foam of the rapid. The water was icy cold, and it was with difficulty they kept their

feet, while every now and then a shower of spray that leapt out from among the timber fell upon them. The logs were already two deep at that spot, and one great top ground steadily forward over the others as its pressed-down butt was driven on by those behind. One could almost have fancied it was bent on escaping from the horrible confusion of piled-up trunks that moved on one another under the impact of the flood. More were sweeping on, and crash after crash rang through the hoarse clamour of the fall.

Nasmyth felt very feeble as he whirled the heavy axe about his head, for that mass of timber was impressively big. He had torn off his deer-hide jacket, and his soaked blue shirt gaped open to his waist at every heave of his shoulders. He stood in icy water, but the perspiration dripped from him as he swung with every blow. Though some men with good thews and sinews can never learn to use the axe to any purpose, he could chop, and the heavy blade he whirled rang with a rhythmic precision in the widening notch, then flashed about his head, and fell with a chunk that was sharp as a whip-crack into the gap again. In between Gordon's axe swept down, and the blades flashed athwart each other's orbits without a check or clash. It requires years to acquire that kind of proficiency with the axe, but the result is a perfecting of the co-operation between will and hardened muscle.

It was fortunate that both could chop, for the men with the crosscut appeared in difficulties. The tree bent on the pile of rock, and in straining closed the cut upon the saw. Another man who had joined them was endeavouring to hammer a wedge in, but with that crushing weight against him the attempt seemed futile. He persisted, however, and stood above the white froth of the rapid, a puny figure dwarfed by the tremendous rock wall, whirling what appeared to be a wholly insignificant hammer. His comrades were scattered about the grinding mass making ineffective efforts to heave a butt or top clear of the others with their handspikes, but there was clearly only one vulnerable point of attack, and that was the one Nasmyth and Gordon were hewing at. Wheeler, who felt the tension, watched them, clutching hard upon an unlighted pipe. He was aware that if the mass of timber, which grew rapidly larger, once wedged itself fast, it might be a month or two before a flood broke it up; but he had also sense enough to recognize that, since most of the men's efforts were futile, he might just as well sit still.

The trunk was partly hewn through when the top of it bent outwards, and Gordon flashed an anxious glance at it. It was evident that if none of the others wedged themselves in upon and reinforced it the weight behind would shortly

rend the trunk apart. Then the position would become a particularly perilous one, for the whole mass would break away in chaotic ruin, and he and his comrade stood close in front of it; but he could not tell how much further strain the tree would bear, and he recognized that it was desirable to hew the notch as deep as possible before he relinquished chopping. The axes rang for another two minutes, and then there was a sudden crash, and a cry from Wheeler that was drowned in the tumult of sound that rose from the liberated timber.

Great logs reared their butts or tops out of the heaving mass. Some rolled round and disappeared beneath those that crept upon them, but for a moment or two the shattered trunk, jammed down by the weight upon it, held them back from the plunge into the rapid. It smashed among the rocks that ground and rent it as it slowly gave way, and Wheeler ran his hardest towards a strip of shingle that projected a little into the river. He saw Nasmyth, who had evidently lost his footing, driving downstream towards it, and knew that in another moment or two the logs would be upon him.

Nasmyth was not exactly swimming. In fact, strictly speaking, one cannot swim in a rapid, nor when there is only three or four feet of water can one get upon one's feet. He rolled over and over, went down and came up again, until Wheeler, floundering into the foaming water, clutched him, and held on desperately, though he felt that his arm was being drawn out of its socket. He would probably have been swept away, too, had not somebody grabbed his jacket, and he heard a hoarse voice behind him.

"Heave!" it said—"heave!"

The strain on Wheeler's arm became intolerable, but somehow he held fast, and just then there was an appalling crash and roar. He felt himself being dragged backwards, and in another moment fell heavily upon the shingle with Nasmyth across his feet. Blinking about him half dazed, he saw the logs drive by, rolling, grinding, smashing, and falling on one another. Then, as they whirled down the rapid, and the roar they made began to die away, he looked round, and saw several gasping men standing close behind him.

"Guess that was quite a near thing," said one of them. "Any way, in this kind of contract you can sure figure on trouble."

This, as a matter of fact, was perfectly correct, for it is only at considerable peril to life and limb that saw-logs are driven down the rivers to a Western mill. They must be guided through each awkward pass and frothing rapid, and the men who undertake it spring with pike and peevie from one to another while the rolling

trunks tumultuously charge on.

Nobody, however, troubled himself any further about the matter, and in a few more minutes the men had set to work again heaving the rocks that had held up the first log out of the river with the derrick. It was not until supper was over, and he sat with his companions in the shanty, that Wheeler referred to the affair again. He looked at Nasmyth with a smile.

“I guess it’s fortunate you got those logs away,” he said. “It’s probably a little more than the men who turned them loose on you figured you could do.”

“That,” agreed Nasmyth, “is very much my own opinion.”

Wheeler filled his pipe. “Now,” he said reflectively, “anybody can apply for timber rights, and bid for them at public auction, but the man who secures them must cut up so many thousand feet every month. Since that’s the case, it’s quite evident that nobody is likely to bid for timber rights round the valley, except the Charters people, who have a little mill on the Klatchquot Inlet, and they’d probably get the timber rights ’most for nothing, though they might have to put in a new saw or two with the object of satisfying the Legislature.”

“It’s rather difficult to see how they expect to make a profit on hemlock in view of what it would cost them to get the logs there,” Gordon broke in.

“They don’t want to make a profit.” Wheeler smiled. “Seems to me it’s their programme to get hold of the rights cheap, and then worry you because they can’t run the logs through this cañon. The Legislature won’t give you land or rights to do nothing with, and it’s quite likely the Charters people will file a notification that your workings are the obstacle. Still, they’d probably make you an offer first. If you let them in on the ground-floor—handed them a big slice of the valley or something of the kind—they’d let up on their timber rights. I’m not sure they could run good milling fir to that mill at a profit.”

A grim look crept into Nasmyth’s face. Difficulties were crowding thick upon him, and though he was as determined as ever on proceeding with the work, he almost felt that it would be only until they crushed him.

“It seems to me we are in the hands of the Charters people, unless I can keep the cañon clear,” he commented.

Wheeler’s eyes twinkled. “Well,” he returned, “they’re smart. I have, however, come across smart folks who missed a point or two occasionally. Now, I saw a couple of red cedar logs among that hemlock.”

He glanced at Mattawa. “Tom, you’ve been round the head of the valley. Did you strike any trees of that kind up yonder?”

“A few,” answered Mattawa. “It’s quite likely there are more.”

“A sure thing. You and I are going out timber-right prospecting at sun-up to-morrow. Just now they can’t get red cedar shingles fast enough on to the Eastern markets.”

Nasmyth looked up and Gordon laughed a soft laugh, while Wheeler waved his hand.

“Anyone can bid for timber rights,” he declared. “Now, our folks are open for any business, and we have got a mill. It’s not going to cost much to put a shingle-splitting plant in. We have easy water-carriage to the Inlet, where a schooner can load, and the Charters people would have to tow their raw material right along to their mill. Besides, that Inlet’s a blame awkward place to get a schooner in. It’s quite clear to me we could cut shingles way cheaper than they could.” He paused for a moment. “Yes,” he said, “if there’s milling cedar near the valley, our folks will make their bid. If Charters wants those rights, he’ll have to put up the money, and it’s quite likely we’ll take them up in spite of him if I’m satisfied with my prospecting. In that case, we’re not going to worry you about the cañon. In fact, we would probably make you a proposition at so much the log for running the trees down for us.”

He filled his pipe again, and Nasmyth looked at him with relief in his eyes.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A PAINFUL DUTY

Three months had slipped away since the evening on which Wheeler had discussed the subject of shingle-splitting with his companions. Nasmyth stood outside the shanty in the drenching rain. He was very wet and miry, and his face was lined and worn, for the three months of unremitting effort had left their mark on him. Wheeler had secured the timber rights in question, and that was one difficulty overcome, but Nasmyth had excellent reasons for believing that the men who had cast covetous eyes upon the valley had by no means abandoned the attempt to get possession of at least part of it.

He had had flood and frost against him, and his money was rapidly running out. A wild flood swept through the cañon. The heading was filled up, so that no one could even see the mouth of it, and half the rock he had piled upon the shingle had been swept into the rapid, where it had formed a dam among the boulders that could be removed only at a heavy expenditure of time and powder when the water fell. He was worn out in body, and savage from being foiled by the swollen river at each attempt he made, but while the odds against him were rapidly growing heavier he meant to fight.

A Siwash Indian whom he had hired as messenger between the cañon and the settlement had just arrived, and Gordon, who stood in the doorway of the shanty, took a newspaper out of the wet packet he had brought. Gordon turned to Nasmyth when he opened it.

“Wheeler’s getting ahead,” he said. “Here’s his announcement that his concern is turning out a high-grade cedar shingle. That’s satisfactory so far as it goes. I don’t quite know how we’d have held out if it hadn’t been for the money we got from him for running the logs down.” Then his voice grew suddenly eager. “Try to get hold of the significance of this, Derrick: ‘We have got it on reliable authority that certain propositions for the exploitation of the virgin forest-belt beyond the Butte Divide will shortly be laid before the Legislature. It is expected

that liberal support will be afforded to a project for the making of new waggon-roads, and we believe that if the scheme is adopted certain gentlemen in this city will endeavour to inaugurate a steamboat service with the Western inlets.'" He waved his hand. "When this particular paper makes an assertion of that kind, there's something going on," he added. "It's a sure thing that if those roads are made, it will put another thirty or forty cents on to every dollar's worth of land we're holding."

"Exactly," replied Nasmyth, whose tense face did not relax. "That is, it would, if we had run the water out of the valley; but, as it happens, we haven't cut down very much of the fall yet, and this thing is going to make the men we have against us keener than ever. They're probably plotting how to strike us now. Get those letters open."

There was anxiety in his voice, and Gordon started when he had ripped open one or two of the envelopes.

"This looks like business," he remarked, as he glanced at a letter from a lawyer who had once or twice handled Nasmyth's affairs in the city. "It's from Phelps. He says he has been notified that, unless an agreement can be arrived at, proceedings will be taken by a man called Hames, who claims to hold one hundred acres on the western side of the valley, to restrain you from altering the river level. Atterly—he's the man we've heard from already—it seems, is taking action, too."

"Hames?" repeated Nasmyth. "I've never heard of him. Any way, he can't hold land on the western side. We haven't sold an acre." He stopped a moment, and looked hard at Gordon. "That is, I haven't sanctioned it, and I believe there's nobody holding a share in the project who would go back on us."

Gordon made a gesture indicating his doubt in the subject, and they looked at each other for half a minute.

"I'm afraid I can't go quite as far as that," he replied, and laughed harshly. "As it stands recorded, the land could be transferred to anyone by Waynefleet. Any way, it seems to be in his block. Phelps cites the boundary-posts."

Nasmyth closed one hand tight. Waynefleet, who had found the constant wetting too much for him, had left the cañon a week or two before this morning, on which it was evident a crisis of some sort was near. He had complained of severe pains in his back and joints, and had sent them no word after his departure.

"Is there anything from him?" asked Nasmyth.

Gordon picked out an envelope and opened it. “Here’s a note from Miss Waynefleet. She desires you to ride across at once.”

With a troubled face Nasmyth stood still in the rain another minute.

“I’ll take the pack-horse and start now,” he said after a brief silence. “When I have seen Miss Waynefleet, I’ll go right on to Victoria.” He turned and gazed at the river. “If one could get into the heading by any means, I’d fire every stick of giant-powder in it first. Unfortunately, the thing is out of the question.”

In a few moments he was scrambling up the gully, and Gordon, who went into the shanty and lighted his pipe, sat gazing at the letters very thoughtfully. They had no money to spare for any legal expenses. Indeed, he was far from sure they had enough to supply them with powder and provisions until their task was accomplished. During the long grim fight in the cañon they had borne almost all that could be expected of flesh and blood, and it was unthinkable that the city man, who sat snug in his office and plotted, should lay grasping hands upon the profit. Still, that seemed possible now that somebody had betrayed them.

Meantime, Nasmyth had swung himself into the pack-saddle, and, in the rain, was scrambling up the rocky slopes of the divide. He had not changed his clothing, and it would have availed him little if he had, since there was a long day’s ride before him. The trail was a little easier than it had been, for each man who led the pack-horse along it had hewn through some obstacle, but it was still sufficiently difficult, and every here and there a frothing torrent swept across it. There were slopes of wet rock to be scrambled over, several leagues of dripping forest thick with undergrowth that clung about the narrow trail to be floundered through, and all the time the great splashes from the boughs or torrential rain beat upon him. In places he led the pack-horse, in places he rode, and dusk was closing in when he saw a blink of light across Waynefleet’s clearing. In another few minutes he had led the jaded horse into the stable, and then, splashed with mire, and with the water running from his clothes, had limped to the homestead door.

Nasmyth opened the door and saw Laura Waynefleet sitting by the stove. She started as he came in.

“I have been expecting you,” she said. She gave him her hand and her eyes met his with a look of anxiety. She noticed his appearance of weariness and the condition of his clothing. “I can get you something dry to put on,” she added.

“No,” said Nasmyth, “you must not trouble. I would be quite as wet again, soon after I leave here. If I can borrow a horse, I must push on to the railroad in an

hour."

"To-night?" asked Laura. "After riding in from the cañon, it's out of the question. Besides, you could never get through the Willow Ford. Listen to the rain."

Nasmyth sank wearily into the nearest chair, and heard the deluge lash the shingled roof.

"I'm afraid it must be done," he declared.

Laura laid supper upon the table, and insisted that he should eat before she made any reference to the object she had in hand. Then, while he sat beside the stove with his clothes steaming, she looked at him steadily, and a little colour crept into her face.

"I wonder if you can guess why I sent for you?" she said.

"Where is your father?" Nasmyth asked abruptly.

"In Victoria. He left six days ago. I suppose he sent you no word that he was going."

"No," answered Nasmyth very dryly, "he certainly didn't. I don't think I could have expected it from him."

He sat silent for almost a minute, looking at her with a troubled air, and though Laura was very quiet, her manner was vaguely suggestive of tension. It was Nasmyth who broke the silence.

"I believe you have something to tell me, Miss Waynefleet," he said. "Still, I would sooner you didn't, if it will hurt you. After all, it's rather more than possible that I can arrive at the information by some other means."

The tinge of colour grew plainer in Laura's face, but it was evident that she laid a firm restraint upon herself. "Ah!" she cried, "it has hurt me horribly already. I can't get over the shame of it. But that isn't what I meant to speak of. I feel"—and her voice grew tense and strained—"I must try to save you and the others from a piece of wicked treachery."

She straightened herself, and there was a flash in her eyes, but Nasmyth raised one hand.

"No," he protested, almost sternly, "I can't let you do this. You would remember it ever afterwards with regret."

The girl seemed to nerve herself for an effort, and when she spoke her voice was

impressively quiet.

“You must listen and try to understand,” she said.

“It is not only because it would hurt me to see you and the others tricked out of what you have worked so hard for that I feel I must tell you. If there was nothing more than that, I might, perhaps, never have told you, after all. I want to save my father from a shameful thing.” Her voice broke away, and the crimson flush on her face deepened as she went on again. “He has been offering to sell land that can’t belong to him,” she asserted accusingly.

Nasmyth felt sorry for her, and he made an attempt to offer her a grain of consolation.

“A few acres are really his,” he said. “I made them over to him.”

“To be his only if he did his share, and when the scheme proved successful,” Laura interrupted. “I know, if he has sold them, what an opportunity of harassing you it will give the men who are plotting against you. Still, now you know, you can, perhaps, break off the bargain. I want you to do what you can”—and she glanced at him with a tense look in her eyes—“if it is only to save him.”

“That,” replied Nasmyth quietly, “is, for quite another reason, the object I have in view. I would like you to understand that I have guessed that he had failed us already. It may be some little consolation. Now, perhaps, you had better tell me exactly what you know.”

Laura did so, and it proved to be no more than Nasmyth had suspected. Letters had passed between Waynefleet and somebody in Victoria, and the day after he left for that city two men, who had evidently crossed him on the way, arrived at the ranch. One said his name was Hames, and his conversation suggested that he supposed the girl was acquainted with her father’s affairs. In any case, what he said made it clear that he had either purchased, or was about to purchase from Waynefleet, certain land in the valley. After staying half an hour, the men had, Laura understood, set out again for Victoria.

When she had told him this, Nasmyth sat thoughtfully silent a minute or two. Her courage and hatred of injustice had stirred him deeply, for he knew what it must have cost her to discuss the subject of her father’s wrongdoing with him. He was also once more overwhelmingly sorry for her. There was nobody she could turn to for support or sympathy, and it was evident that if he succeeded in foiling Hames, it would alienate her from her father. Waynefleet, he felt, was not likely to forgive her for the efforts she had made to save him from being drawn

into an act of profitable treachery.

“Well,” he said after a moment’s thought, “I am going on to Victoria to see what can be done, but there is another matter that is troubling me. I wonder if it has occurred to you that your father will find it very difficult to stay on at the ranch when the part he has played becomes apparent. I am almost afraid the boys will be vindictive.”

“I believe he has not expected to carry on the ranch much longer. It is heavily mortgaged, and he has been continually pressed for money.”

“Has he any plans?”

Laura smiled wearily. “He has always plans. I believe he intends to go to one of the towns on Puget Sound, and start a land agency.” She made a dejected gesture. “I don’t expect him to succeed in it, but perhaps I could earn a little.”

Nasmyth set his lips tight, and there was concern in his face. She looked very forlorn, and he knew that she was friendless. He could hardly bring himself to contemplate the probability of her being cast adrift, saddled with a man who, it was evident, would only involve her in fresh disasters, and, he fancied, reproach her as the cause of them. A gleam of anger crept into his eyes.

“If your father had only held on with us, I could have saved you this,” he observed.

There was a great sadness in Laura’s smile.

“Still,” she replied, “he didn’t, and perhaps you couldn’t have expected it of him. He sees only the difficulties, and I am afraid never tries to face them.”

Nasmyth felt his self-control deserting him. He was conscious of an almost overwhelming desire to save the girl from the results of her father’s dishonesty and folly, and he could see no way in which it could be done. Then it was borne in upon him that in another moment or two he would probably say or do something that he would regret afterwards, and she would resent, and, rising stiffly, he held out his hand.

“I must push on to the railroad,” he said, and he held the hand she gave him in a firm clasp. “Miss Waynefleet, you saved my life, and I believe I owe you quite as much in other ways. It’s a fact that neither of us can attempt to disregard. I want you to promise that you will, at least, not leave the ranch without telling me.”

Laura flashed a quick glance at him, and perhaps she saw more than he

suspected in his insistent gaze, for she strove to draw her hand away. He held it fast, however, while his nerves thrilled and his heart beat furiously. He remembered Violet Hamilton vaguely, but there came upon him a compelling desire to draw this girl to whom he owed so much into his arms and comfort her. They both stood very still a moment, and Nasmyth heard the snapping of the stove with a startling distinctness. Then—and it cost him a strenuous effort—he let her hand go.

“You will promise,” he insisted hoarsely.

“Yes,” answered Laura, “before I go away I will tell you.”

Nasmyth went out into the blackness and the rain, while Laura sat trembling until she heard the beat of his horse’s hoofs. Then she sank lower, a limp huddled figure, in the canvas chair. The stove snapped noisily, and the pines outside set up a doleful wailing, but, except for that, it was very still in the desolate ranch.

Nasmyth rode on until he borrowed a fresh horse from a man who lived a few miles along the trail. There was a cheerful light from the windows as he rode into a little settlement, and the trail to the railroad led through dripping forest and over a towering range, but he did not draw bridle. He was aching all over, and the water ran from his garments, but he scarcely seemed to feel his weariness then, and he pushed on resolutely through the rain up the climbing trail.

He remembered very little of that ride afterwards, or what he thought about during it. The strain of the last few minutes he had passed at Waynefleet’s ranch had left him dazed, and part of his numbness, at least, was due to weariness. Several times he was almost flung from the saddle as the horse scrambled down a slope of rock. Willow-branches lashed him as he pushed through the thickets, and in one place it was only by a grim effort that he drove the frightened beast to ford a flooded creek. Then there was a strip of hillside to be skirted, where the slope was almost sheer beneath the edge of the winding trail, and the rain that drove up the valley beat into his eyes. Still he held on, and two hours after sunrise rode half asleep into the little mining town. There was a train in the station, and, turning the horse over to a man he met, he climbed, dripping as he was, into a car.

CHAPTER XXIX

A FUTILE SCHEME

There was bright sunshine at Bonavista when Nasmyth, who had been told at the station that Acton had arrived from Victoria the day before, limped out from the shadow of the surrounding Bush, and stood still a moment or two, glancing across the trim lawn and terrace towards the wooden house. The spacious dwelling, gay with its brightly painted lattice shutters, dainty scroll-work, and colonnades of wooden pillars, rose against the sombre woods, and he wondered with some anxiety whether Mrs. Acton had many guests in it. He had no desire to fall in with any strangers, for he was worn out and aching, and he still wore the old duck clothing in which he had left the cañon. It might, he fancied, be possible to slip into the house and change before he presented himself to Mrs. Acton, though he was by no means sure that the garments in the valise he carried in his hand were dry. He could see nobody on the terrace, and moved forward hastily until he stopped in consternation as he crossed one of the verandas. The sunlight streamed in, and Mrs. Acton and Violet Hamilton sat upon the seat which ran along the back of it. The girl started when she saw him, and Nasmyth stood looking down on her, worn in face and heavy-eyed, with his workman's garb clinging, tight and mire-stained, about his limbs. There was, however, a certain grimness in his smile. He had seen the girl's start and her momentary shrinking, and it occurred to him that there was a significance in the fact that it had not greatly hurt him.

"I must make my excuses for turning up in this condition," he apologized. "I had to start for the railroad at a moment's notice, and it rained all the way, while, when I reached it, the train was in the depôt. You see, my business is rather urgent."

Mrs. Acton laughed. "Evidently," she said. "I think we were both a trifle startled when we saw you. I should be sorry to hear that anything had gone seriously wrong, but you remind one of the man who brought the news of Flodden."

Nasmyth made a quick gesture of denial. “Well,” he announced bravely, “our standard is flying yet, and I almost think we can make another rally or two. Still, I have come for reinforcements. Mr. Acton is in?”

“He is. As it happened, he came up from Victoria yesterday. I believe he is discussing some repairs to the steamer with George just now. I’ll send you out a plate of something and a glass of wine. You can’t have had any lunch.”

Mrs. Acton rose, and Nasmyth, who sat down, looked at Violet with a smile. She was evidently not quite at ease.

“You really haven’t welcomed me very effusively,” he remarked.

The girl flushed. “I don’t think I could be blamed for that,” she returned. “I was startled.”

“And perhaps just a little annoyed?”

The colour grew plainer in Violet’s cheeks. “Well,” she averred, “that isn’t so very unnatural. After all, I don’t mind admitting that I wish you hadn’t come like this.”

Nasmyth glanced down at his attire, and nodded gravely. “It’s certainly not altogether becoming,” he admitted. “I made that hole drilling, but I fancied I had mended the thing. Still, you see, I had to start on the moment, and I rode most of twenty-four hours in the rain. I suppose”—and he hesitated while he studied her face—“I might have tidied myself at the depôt, but, as it happened, I didn’t think of it, which was, no doubt, very wrong of me.”

“It was, at least, a little inconsiderate.”

Nasmyth laughed good-humouredly, though he recognized that neither his weariness nor the fact that it must manifestly be business of some consequence that had brought him there in that guise had any weight with her. He had, after all, a wide toleration, and he acknowledged to himself that her resentment was not unreasonable.

“I’ve no doubt that I was inconsiderate,” he said. “Still, you see, I was worried about our affairs in the cañon.”

“The cañon!” repeated Violet reproachfully. “It is always the cañon. I wonder if you remember that it is at least a month since you have written a line to me.”

Nasmyth was disconcerted, for a moment’s reflection convinced him that the accusation was true.

“Well,” he confessed, “I have certainly been shamefully remiss. Of course, I was busy from dawn to sunset, but, after all, I’m afraid that is really no excuse.”

The girl frowned. “No,” she said, “it isn’t.”

It was a slight relief to Nasmyth that a maid appeared just then, and he took a glass of wine from the tray she laid upon a little table.

“To the brightest eyes in this Province!” he said, when the servant had gone, and, emptying the glass, he fell upon the food voraciously.

It was unfortunate that in such unattractive guise he had come upon Violet, and the fashion in which he ate also had its effect on her. In the last thirty hours he had had only one hasty meal, and he showed a voracity that offended her fastidious taste. He was worn out and anxious, and since all his thoughts were fixed upon the business that he had in hand, he could not rouse himself to act according to the manner expected of a lover who returns after a long absence. It was, however, once more borne in upon him that this was significant.

Violet, on her part, felt repelled by him. He was gaunt and lean, and the state of his garments had shocked her. His hands were hard and battered. She was very dainty, and in some respects unduly sensitive, and it did not occur to her that it would have been more natural if, in place of shrinking, she had been sensible only of a tender pity for him. Perhaps there were excuses for her attitude. She had never been brought into contact with the grim realities of life, and it is only from those whom that befalls that one can expect the wide sympathy which springs from comprehension. Nasmyth, lounging at Bonavista with amusing speeches on his lips and his air of easy deference, had been a somewhat romantic figure, and the glimpses of the struggle in the Bush that he had given her had appealed to her imagination. She could feel the thrill of it when she saw it through his eyes with all the unpleasantly realistic features carefully wiped out, but it was different now that he had come back to her with the dust and stain of the conflict fresh upon him. The evidences of his strife were only repulsive, and she shrank from them. She watched him with a growing impatience until he rose and laid his empty plate aside.

“Well,” he observed, “you will excuse me. I must see Mr. Acton as soon as I can.”

It was not in any way a tactful speech, and Violet resented it. The man, it seemed, had only deferred the business he had on hand for a meal. She looked at him with her displeasure flashing in her eyes.

“In that case,” she said, “I should, of course, be sorry to keep you away from him.”

Nasmyth gazed at her curiously, but he did not reply. He went away from her. A few minutes later when he entered Acton’s room he was attired in conventional fashion. His host shook hands with him, and then leaned back in a chair, waiting for him to speak, which he did with a trace of diffidence.

“My object is to borrow money,” he explained frankly. “I couldn’t resent it in the least if you sent me on to somebody else.”

“I’ll hear what you have to say in the first case,” replied Acton. “You had better explain exactly how you stand.”

Nasmyth did so as clearly as he could, and Acton looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two.

“I’ve been partly expecting this,” he observed. “It’s quite clear that one or two of the big land exploitation people have a hand in the thing. I guess I could put my finger right down on them. You said the man’s name was Hames?”

Nasmyth said it was, and Acton sat thinking for several minutes.

“It seems to me that the folks I have in my mind haven’t been quite smart enough,” he declared at length. “They should have put up a sounder man. As it happens, I know a little about the one they fixed upon. Mr. Hames is what you could call a professional claim-jumper, and it’s fortunate that there’s a weak spot or two in his career.”

Acton paused, and Nasmyth waited in tense expectancy until the older man turned to him again, with a twinkle in his eyes.

“I almost think I can take a hand in this thing, and to commence with, we’ll go down to Victoria this afternoon and call on Mr. Hames,” he added. “If he has bought that land, it will probably be registered in his name. The men you have against you are rather fond of working in the dark. Then we come to another point—what it would be wisest to do with Waynefleet, who went back on you. You said he had a mortgage on his ranch. You know who holds it?”

Nasmyth said he did not know, and Acton nodded. “Any way,” he rejoined, “we can ascertain it in the city. Now, I guess you would like that man run right out of the neighbourhood? It would be safest, and it might perhaps be done.”

Nasmyth was startled by this suggestion, and with a thoughtful face he sat wondering what was most advisable. He bore Waynefleet very little good-will,

but it was clear that Laura must share any trouble that befell her father, and he could not at any cost lay a heavier load upon her. He was conscious that Acton was watching him intently.

“No,” he objected, “I don’t want him driven out. In fact, I should be satisfied with making it impossible for him to enter into any arrangement of the kind again.”

“In that case, I guess we’ll try to buy up his mortgage,” remarked Acton. “Land’s going to be dearer in that district presently.”

Nasmyth looked at him with a little confusion. “It is very kind, but, after all, I have no claim on you.”

“No,” agreed Acton, with a smile, “you haven’t in one way. This is, however, a kind of thing I’m more at home in than you seem to be, and there was a little promise I made your uncle. For another thing”—and he waved his hand—“I’m going to take a reasonable profit out of you.”

Nasmyth made no further objections, and they set out for Victoria that afternoon. Hames was, however, not readily traced; and when, on the following morning, they sat in Acton’s office waiting his appearance, Nasmyth was conscious of a painful uncertainty. Acton, with a smile on his face, leaned back in his chair until Hames was shown in. Hames was a big, bronze-faced man, plainly dressed in city clothes, but there was, Nasmyth noticed, a trace of half-furtive uneasiness in his eyes. Acton looked up at him quietly, and let him stand for several moments. Then he waved his hand toward a chair.

“Won’t you sit down? We have got to have a talk,” said Acton. “I’ll come right to the point. You have have been buying land.”

Hames sat down. “I can’t quite figure how that concerns you,” he replied. “I’m not going to worry about it, any way.”

“I want that land—the block you bought from Waynefleet.”

“It’s not for sale,” asserted Hames. “If you have nothing else to put before me, I’ll get on. I’m busy this morning.”

Acton leaned forward in his chair. “When I’m in the city, I’m usually busy, too,” he said; “in fact, I’ve just three or four minutes to spare for you, and I expect to get through in that time. To begin with, you sent Mr. Hutton a note from your hotel when my clerk came for you. He never got it. You can have it back unopened. I can guess what’s in the thing.” He handed Hames an envelope.

“Now,” he went on, “you can make a fuss about it, but I guess it wouldn’t be wise. Hutton doesn’t know quite as much about you as I do. I’ve had a finger in most of what has been done in this Province the last few years, and it’s not often I forget a man. Well, I guess I could mention one or two little affairs that were not altogether creditable which you had a share in.”

Hames laughed. “It’s quite likely.”

“Still, what you don’t know is that I’m on the inside track of what was done when the Hobson folks jumped the Black Crag claim. There was considerable trouble over the matter.”

Nasmyth saw Hames start, but he apparently braced himself with an effort.

“Any way,” replied Hames, “that was ’most four years ago, and there’s not a man who had a hand in it in this Province now.”

Acton shook his head. “There’s one. I can put my hand on your partner Okanagon Jim just when I want to.”

There was no doubt that Hames was alarmed.

“Jim was drowned crossing the river the night the water broke into the Black Crag shaft,” he declared.

“His horse was, and the boys found his hat. That, however, is quite a played-out trick. If you’re not satisfied, I can fix it for you to meet him here any time you like.”

Hames made a motion of acknowledgment. “I don’t want to see him—that’s a sure thing! I guess you know it was fortunate that Jim and two or three of the other boys got out of the shaft that night. Well, I guess that takes me. If Jim’s around, I’ll put down my cards.”

“It’s wisest,” advised Acton. “Now, I’m going to buy that land Waynefleet sold from you—or, rather, he’s going to give you your money back for it. You can arrange the thing with Hutton—who, I believe, supplied the money—afterwards as best you can.”

Nasmyth fancied Hames was relieved that no more was expected from him.

“I guess I’m in your hands,” observed Hames.

“Then,” Acton said, “you can wait in my clerk’s office until I’m ready to go over with you to Waynefleet’s hotel.”

Hames went out, and Acton turned to Nasmyth. “He was hired with a few others

to jump the claim he mentioned, and there was trouble over it. As usual, just what happened never quite came out, but that man left his partner to face the boys, who scarcely managed to escape with their lives that night. The man who holds Waynefleet's mortgage should be here at any moment."

The man arrived in a few minutes. After he had sat down and had taken the cigar Acton offered him, he was ready to talk business.

"You have a mortgage on Rancher Waynefleet's holding in the Bush," said Acton. "I understand you've had some trouble in getting what he owes you."

The man nodded. "That's certainly the case," he said. "I bought up quite a lot of land before I laid down the mill, but after I did that I let most of it go. In fact, I'm quite willing to let up on Waynefleet's holding, too. I can't get a dollar out of him."

"Have you offered to sell the mortgage to anybody?"

"I saw Martial and the Charters people not long ago. They'd give about eighty cents on the dollar. Hutton said he'd make me a bid, but he didn't."

"Well," said Acton, "my friend here wants that ranch for a particular purpose. He'd bid you ninety."

"I can't do it. If the new roads that have been suggested are made, the ranch ought to bring me a little more. Still, I don't mind letting you in at what I gave for it."

Acton looked at Nasmyth.

"Then," said Acton, "we'll call it a bargain. You can write me a note to that effect, and I'll send my clerk across with the papers presently."

The man went out a few minutes later, and Acton rose.

"I'll charge you bank interest; but if you care to put the mortgage up for sale, you'll get your money back 'most any time after they start those roads," Acton said to Nasmyth. "Now we'll go along and call on Waynefleet."

They went out with Hames, and a little while later came upon Waynefleet sitting on the veranda of a second-rate hotel. He was dressed immaculately, and with a cigar in his hand, lay in a big chair. He started when he saw them. Hames grinned, and sat down close in front of him.

"I'm going back on my bargain. I want my money and you can keep your land," he said. "The fact is Mr. Acton has got on my trail, and he's not the kind of man

I have any use for fighting."

There was consternation in Waynefleet's face, but he straightened himself with an effort.

"I suppose you have brought this man, Mr. Nasmyth, and I scarcely think it is quite what one would have expected from you—at least, until you had afforded me the opportunity of offering you an explanation," he blustered.

"Can you offer me one that any sensible man would listen to?" Nasmyth asked sharply.

"He can't," Acton broke in. "We're out on business. You may as well make it clear that we understand the thing."

Waynefleet turned and looked at Acton with lifted brows, and had he been less angry, Nasmyth could have laughed at his attitude. Waynefleet's air of supercilious resentment was inimitable.

"You have some interest in this affair?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes," answered Acton cheerfully. "Still, you needn't worry about me. All you have to do is to hand this man over the money and record the new sale. We don't want any unpleasantness, but it has to be done."

Waynefleet appeared to recognize that there was no remedy.

"In that case there is the difficulty that I can't quite raise the amount paid," he said. "Travelling and my stay in the city have cost me something."

"How much are you short?"

"About a hundred dollars."

"Then," replied Acton, "I'll take a bill for the money. We'll go along and record the sale as soon as Mr. Nasmyth's ready. I expect he has something to say to you."

Acton went into the hotel with Hames, and there was an awkward silence when they had disappeared. Nasmyth leaned against a wooden pillar, and Waynefleet sat still, waiting for him to speak. Nasmyth turned to him.

"It would, perhaps, be preferable to regard this affair from a strictly business point of view," said Nasmyth. "You are, of course, in our hands, but to save your credit and to protect Miss Waynefleet from any embarrassment, we shall probably not insist upon your handing over the land to anybody else. I think we are safe in doing that. Now that you have signally failed, you will not have nerve

enough to attempt to betray us again."

Waynefleet waved his hand. "I resent the attitude you have adopted. It is not by any means what I am accustomed to, or should have expected from you."

Nasmyth felt a faint, contemptuous pity for the man, who still endeavoured to retain his formality of manner.

"I'm afraid that hasn't any great effect on me, and my attitude is, at least, a natural one," he said. "I believe that Gordon and I can arrange that the boys do not hear of your recent action, and though you will take no further part in our affairs, you will stay on at the ranch. I may mention that I have just bought up your mortgage."

A flush of anger showed in Waynefleet's cheeks.

"Is it in any way your business where I live?" he asked.

"No," answered Nasmyth, "not in the least—that is, as far as it affects yourself. Still, I am determined that Miss Waynefleet shall have no fresh cause for anxiety. I don't mind admitting that I owe a great deal to her." He paused for a moment, and then turned to Waynefleet with a forceful gesture. "When you have bought back the land from Hames, I don't suppose you will have a dollar in your possession, and the ranch belongs to me. As I said, you will stay—at least, until you can satisfy me that you can maintain yourself and Miss Waynefleet in some degree of comfort if you go away. Now I believe the others are waiting. We will go along and get the sale recorded."

CHAPTER XXX

SECOND THOUGHTS

It was getting dusk when Wheeler swung himself from the saddle near the head of the gully and, with the bridle of the jaded horse in his hand, stood still a few moments looking about him. A wonderful green transparency still shone high up above the peaks, whose jagged edges cut into it sharply with the cold blue-white gleam of snow, but upon the lower slopes there was a balmy softness in the air, which was heavy with the odours of fir and cedar. Summer was breaking suddenly upon the mountain-land, but Wheeler, who had crossed the divide in bright sunshine, was sensible of a certain shrinking as he glanced down into the depths of the cañon. A chilly mist streamed up out of it, and the great rift looked black and grim and forbidding.

Wheeler noticed a dusky figure beneath the firs, and, moving towards it, came upon a man with a pipe in his hand, sitting upon a fallen tree. In view of the strenuous activity that was the rule in the cañon, such leisure was unusual.

“Well,” he remarked, “you don’t seem busy, any way.”

The man grinned. “I’m looking out,” he replied. “Guess I’ve had my eye on you for the last few minutes, and a stranger wouldn’t have got quite so far. You haven’t got any papers from the courts on you?”

“No,” said Wheeler, who noticed that there was a rifle lying near the man, “I haven’t. Still, if I’d looked like a lawyer or a court officer——”

“Then,” asserted the man, “it’s a sure thing you wouldn’t have got in. The boys have enough giant-powder rammed into the heading to lift the bottom right out of the cañon two minutes after any suspicious stranger comes along.”

Wheeler laughed, for it was evident to him that Nasmyth had been taking precautions, and, turning away, he led his horse down the gully. It grew colder as he proceeded, and a chilly breeze swept the white mist about him. The trees, that shook big drops of moisture down on him, were wailing, but he could hear them

only faintly through the clamour of the fall. He left the horse with a man he came upon lower down, and, reaching the shingle at the water's edge, saw the great derrick swing black athwart the glare of a big fire. The smoke whirled about the dark rock wall, and here and there dusky figures were toiling knee-deep amid the white froth of the rapid. The figures emerged from the blackness and vanished into it again, as the flickering radiance rose and fell. Scrambling to the ledge above the fall, Wheeler found two men standing near the mouth of the heading, which was just level with the pool.

"Where's Nasmyth, boys?" he inquired.

"Inside," answered one of the men. "Guess he's wedging up the heading. If you want him, you'd better crawl right in."

Wheeler glanced down at the black mouth of the tunnel, on which the streaming radiance fell. He fancied that the river flowed into it, and the man's suggestion did not appeal to him.

"Won't you tell him that I'd like a talk with him?" he asked.

The man laughed. "Guess that's not going to bring him. It will be daylight, any way, before he lets up. You'll have to go right in."

Wheeler dropped cautiously upon a slippery staging, across which the water flowed, and, crawling into the heading, with a blinking light in his eyes, fell into a sled that was loaded with broken rock. He crept round the obstruction, and a few moments later found himself knee-deep in water before a little dam that had been thrown across the heading. The heading dipped sharply beyond it, which somewhat astonished him, and when he had climbed over the barricade, he descended cautiously, groping towards another light. Big drops of water fell upon him, and here and there a jet of it spurted out. At last he stopped, and saw Nasmyth lying, partly raised on one elbow, in an inch or two of water, while he painfully swung a heavy hammer. The heading was lined with stout pillars, made of sawn-up firs, and Nasmyth appeared to be driving a wedge under one of them. Two or three other men were putting heavy masses of timber into place.

The smoky flame of a little lamp flared upon the rock above, which trickled with moisture, and the light fell upon Nasmyth's wet face, which was deeply flushed. Nasmyth gasped heavily, and great splashes of sand and mire lay thick upon his torn, drenched shirt. He appeared to see Wheeler, for he looked up, but he did not stop until he had driven the wedge in. Then he rose to his knees and stretched himself wearily.

“The rock’s badly fissured. We’ve got to get double timbers in as soon as we can,” he explained. “I’m going to do some boring. We’ll go along.”

Wheeler crept after him down the inclined heading until they reached the spot where Gordon sat crouched over a machine. Gordon did not move until Nasmyth seized his shoulders.

“You can get back to the wedging, and send two or three boys along to heave the water out. I’ll keep this thing going,” he said.

Gordon, who greeted Wheeler, floundered away, and Wheeler sat down in the dryest spot he could find, while Nasmyth grasped the handle of the machine.

“There’s no reason why you shouldn’t smoke,” he said.

“That,” replied Wheeler, “is a point I’m not quite sure about. How many sticks of giant-powder have you rammed into this heading? As you know, it’s apt to be a little uncertain.”

Nasmyth laughed as he glanced at the flaring lamp above his head. “There’s a hole with a stick in it just at your elbow. I’ve been filling the holes as we made them. In view of what I expect those folks in the city are arranging, it seemed advisable.”

Wheeler was sensible of a certain uneasiness as he listened to the crunch of the boring tool and the jarring thud of the hammers.

“What are you going so far down for?” he asked.

“To get into sounder rock. It’s costing us considerable time that we can badly spare, but once or twice I fancied the whole river was coming in on us. Now we’re getting almost through, I want to make quite sure.”

Wheeler nodded. “I guess that’s wise. So far, we have come out ahead of Hutton and the rest of them,” he asserted. “Our people hold the timber rights, and we have got the shingle-splitting plant in. You headed him off in Waynefleet’s case, and there only remains the man with the old Bush claim. There’s, unfortunately, no doubt about his title to the ranch, and it’s a sure thing the folks in the city will put him up again. Have you heard from him lately?”

“I have,” answered Nasmyth, with a smile. “As you know, I made him half a dozen different offers to buy him out. He naturally didn’t close with them, but he wrote trying to raise me, and kept the thing up rather well. Of course, it was evident that his friends were quite willing to let me get most of the work done before they showed their hand too visibly. I scarcely fancy they know how near we are to getting through, though that rancher man’s lawyer said something about taking proceedings a little while ago.”

“Suppose they went to court, and served you with a notice to quit what you’re doing?”

Nasmyth, turning, pointed with a wet, scarred hand to several holes in the side of the heading, from which a wire projected.

“Well,” he said, “they’d have to serve it, and while their man was trying to get down the gully I’d rip most of the bottom out of this strip of cañon. I’m not sure we haven’t gone far enough already to split up the whole ridge that’s holding

back the river. Still, I'm going on a little. I mean to make sure." He bent over the machine. "You have brought up some letters? The man has, perhaps, been trying to worry me again."

"Two or three," replied Wheeler. "I called at the settlement for them. One is evidently from a lady."

Nasmyth swung round again and took the little dainty envelope from him. He smeared it with his wet hands as he opened it, and then his voice broke sharply through the thud of the hammers.

"Can't you move? I'm too far from that lamp," he said.

He scrambled by Wheeler and crouched close beneath the smoky, flickering flame, dripping, spattered with mire, and very grim in face. The note was from Violet Hamilton, and it was brief.

"I should like to see you as soon as you can get away," it read. "There is something I must say, and since it might spare both of us pain, I feel almost tempted to try to explain it now. That, however, would perhaps be weak of me, and I think you will, after all, not blame me very greatly."

He flung the note down in the water, and straightened himself wearily.

"I am invited to go down to Bonavista, and it's tolerably clear that I have another trouble to face," he announced in a dull tone. "In the meanwhile there's this heading to be pushed on, and it seems to me that the thing that counts most is what I owe the boys."

Wheeler, who had heard something from Gordon, looked at him with grave sympathy, but Nasmyth made an expressive gesture as he glanced down at his attire.

"Well," he remarked, "I probably look very much what I am—a played-out borer of headings and builder of dams, who has just now everything against him. Still, I was fool enough to indulge in some very alluring fancies a little while ago." He turned to Wheeler with a sudden flash in his eyes. "You can take those letters to Gordon and tell him to open them. I've a little trouble to grapple with, and I don't feel inclined for conversation."

Wheeler could take a hint, and he crawled away along the heading, while Nasmyth toiled for the next half-hour strenuously at the machine. The perspiration dripped from him. He gasped as he ripped the handle around; then he let it go suddenly, and his face became softer as he picked up the letter again.

“Well,” he told himself, “I don’t think I can blame her, after all, and with what she has to say it would hurt if I kept her waiting.”

He sat down again at the machine, and the boring tool crunched on steadily into the rock until after some time, a man took his place, and, crouching in the narrow heading, swung the heavy hammer as they wedged the extra timbers fast. A faint grey light was creeping into the eastern sky when Nasmyth crawled out of the heading and scrambled back to the shanty. Gordon, who was getting up when he entered, looked at him curiously.

“I’m going into Bonavista after breakfast,” Nasmyth said. “I don’t want to leave the boys now, but I can’t help it.”

Gordon asked no injudicious questions, for Wheeler had mentioned the letter, and his comrade’s voice had its significance for him.

“Then,” he said, “I’ll tell Mattawa to have the horse ready.”

Nasmyth slept soundly until the meal was laid out. He rode into the settlement a little before dark that night. It was the next afternoon when he reached Bonavista, and he found Violet Hamilton sitting upon the veranda alone. She appeared embarrassed when she saw him, and he leaned against one of the pillars, quietly looking down on her. For a moment or two neither of them said anything, and it was Nasmyth who broke the awkward silence.

“I felt very bitter when I got that note,” he said. “When I grappled with the thing, however, I commenced to realize that you might be right. Of course, I quite realized all you wished to imply.”

“Ah!” answered the girl softly, “then you are not very angry with me.” She leaned forward and met his gaze. “I think we were both very nearly making a terrible mistake.”

“I scarcely think that is a thing you could expect me to admit—that is, at least, as far as my part in it goes,” said Nasmyth.

“Still,” replied Violet, “you admitted that you felt I might be right.”

She looked anxious, and Nasmyth realized that, since she might have written what she had to say, it must have cost her a good deal to break with him personally. The courage which had prompted her to summon him appealed to him, and, in place of anger, he was conscious of a certain sympathy for her.

“In one sense you were certainly right,” he said. “We belong to different worlds, and I should never have spoken to you as I did. That is a thing you must try to

forgive me, and you have no reason to blame yourself. As I told you at the time, you were free."

"Ah!" cried Violet, "you are very generous. After all, I expected that from you, and I think it will not hurt you very much to give me up."

"I wonder why?" asked Nasmyth gravely.

Violet sat silent a moment or two, and then looked up at him quietly.

"Oh," she said, "you owe so much to that girl in the Bush! She would always have come between us. I think you made me recognize it when you told me about her, though it was only by degrees I came to understand it clearly."

Nasmyth's face flushed. "That," he queried, "is your reason for wishing to get rid of me?"

Violet looked away from him, and there was a telltale self consciousness in her manner when she turned to him again. Nasmyth, who noticed it, winced.

"Well," he hazarded, "it was, perhaps, not the only one."

"No," confessed Violet very softly, "there was another thing which influenced me rather more."

Nasmyth, who understood her, stood silent a moment or two, with one hand tightly closed. "In that case there is nothing to be said, and I must try to face it gracefully," he told her. "Reproaches are not exactly becoming in the case of a discarded man." He took off his wide hat as he held out his hand. "Miss Hamilton, the thing naturally hurts me, but perhaps I cannot reasonably blame you. I'm not sure you could expect me to go any further now."

"Ah!" exclaimed Violet, "you have made it easy. I would like to assure you of my good-will."

He held her hand a moment and swung abruptly away. He met Mrs. Acton as he went down a corridor. He stopped in front of her, and she looked at him questioningly when she saw his face.

"I have not come up to expectations. It is, perhaps, fortunate Miss Hamilton found it out when she did," he said.

"Oh!" Mrs. Acton replied, "I told you it would not be well to stay away very long."

"I scarcely think the result would have been different in any case," Nasmyth declared.

Mrs. Acton was silent for a moment. Then she looked at him sharply.

“Where are you going now?” she asked.

“Back to the world I belong to,” answered Nasmyth,—“to the railroad, in the first case. I’m not sure that Miss Hamilton would like to feel that I was in the house.”

Mrs. Acton made no protest, and ten minutes later he had crossed the clearing and plunged into the Bush.

Mrs. Acton, crossing the veranda, laid her hand on the girl’s shoulder.

“I naturally don’t know what he said to you, but I can’t help believing that he acquitted himself rather well,” she observed. “After all, it must have been a little painful to him.”

“Perhaps it was,” replied Violet. “Still, I don’t think it hurt him dreadfully.”

She was more or less correct in this surmise, for, as Nasmyth walked on through the Bush, he became conscious of a faint relief.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE LAST SHOT

Laura Waynefleet was preparing breakfast, and the door of the ranch stood open, when she heard the sharp clatter of the flung-down slip-rails in the fence across the clearing jar upon the stillness of the surrounding woods. It was early in the morning, and since it was evident that, if the strangers who were approaching came from the settlement, they must have set out as soon as it was light, she decided that their business was probably urgent. Laying down the frying-pan in which she was making flapjacks, she moved toward the door, and stood watching two men ride across the clearing in the direction of the house. They did not belong to the settlement, for she had never seen either of them before, a fact which made it clear that they had not ridden in from the cañon. She had quick eyes, and she noticed that, although they could not have ridden very far that morning, their horses appeared jaded, which suggested that they had made a long journey the previous day. The men appeared weary, too, and she imagined that they were not accustomed to the Bush.

As she watched them she wondered with a trace of uneasiness what their business could be, and decided that it was, perhaps, as well that her father was busy in the stable, where he could not hear them arrive. Since Gordon usually called at the ranch when he went down to the settlement, she was more or less acquainted with what was being done at the cañon and with Nasmyth's affairs, and she was on her guard when one of the strangers pulled his horse up close in front of her.

"Can we hire a couple of horses here?" he asked. "Ours are played out."

There was then a cayuse pony in Waynefleet's stable, but it belonged to a neighbouring rancher, and Laura had no intention of handing it over to the strangers.

"I'm afraid not," she answered. "The only horse on the ranch does not belong to us, and I wouldn't care to hire it out unless I had permission. Besides, I may

want it myself. You could have obtained horses at the settlement hotel."

"We didn't put up there."

"But you must have come through the settlement. You have evidently ridden in from the railroad."

The man laughed. "Well," he admitted, "we certainly did, but we got off the trail last night, and they took us in at Bullen's ranch. Soon after we started out a chopper told us we could save a league by riding up the valley instead of by the settlement. Does the man you said the horse belonged to live in the neighbourhood?"

Laura did not answer immediately. She was quick-witted, and she recognized that, while the man's explanation was plausible, there were weak points in it. For one thing, the previous night had not been dark, and it was difficult to understand how anyone could have wandered off the wide trail to the settlement into the one which led through thick undergrowth to Bullen's ranch. She guessed that the strangers must have had an object in not visiting the settlement. Then there was, it seemed to her, something suggestive in the fact that Bullen, who had a share in Nasmyth's project, and owned several horses, had not seized upon the opportunity to aid the travellers, for, if he had not been willing to lend his horses, it could only have been because he was a little dubious about the strangers.

"The man who owns the horse lives at least an hour's ride away," she informed the stranger. "You are going on into the Bush?"

"Yes," answered the man. "Can you tell us the easiest way to reach the cañon?"

Laura was glad that he had asked for the easiest route, for soon after the snow had gone, Nasmyth had broken out a shorter and somewhat perilous trail over the steepest part of the divide. Only the pack-horses now went round by the longer way. She thought hard for a moment or two, and then told the man how to find the old trail.

He rode away with his companion, and Laura's face was thoughtful when she sat down again. She made a hasty breakfast, and went out to the stable. Waynefleet was still busy when she reached it, and she took down the side-saddle before she turned to him.

"I have left your breakfast ready, but you must excuse me," she announced; "I am going to the cañon."

Waynefleet raised his brows and looked at her with his most precise air, but, seeing that had no effect, he made a gesture of resignation.

“Very well,” he said. “I presume you do not, as usual, think it worth while to acquaint me with your object.”

Laura laughed. “I’m not exactly sure of it myself. I may tell you a little more when I come back.”

She led the horse out, and, crossing the clearing, rode hard for a league or so, and then made sure by the prints of their horses’ feet that the strangers had followed her instructions before she struck into the shorter trail. It was scarcely wide enough to ride along, and for a while dense thickets of fern and undergrowth closed in on it. Further on, it skirted a quaggy swamp, and led through several rapid creeks, while here and there great fallen trees compelled her to turn aside, and there were groves of willows to be painfully struggled through. The cayuse she rode was, however, more or less accustomed to that kind of work, and she made tolerable progress until she reached the foot of the big divide. There she dismounted, and led the cayuse up a steep gully through which a torrent poured. They stumbled amidst big boulders and over slippery shingle until they reached the head of the gully, and then there were almost precipitous slopes of rock to be faced. They climbed for a couple of hours, and Laura gasped with relief when at last she stood upon the crest of the divide.

The descent was perilous, but already the sun hung low above the western hills, and she went down in the saddle with the cayuse slipping and stumbling horribly, until the roar of the river came faintly up to her. Then she drew bridle, and glanced ruefully at her attire. Her skirt was rent in places, and one little shoe had burst. A branch that had torn her hat off had loosened a coil of gleaming hair, and, anxious as she was, she stopped for several minutes to set these matters straight as far as it was possible. There was, she felt, after all, no reason why Nasmyth should see her in that state. Then she rode on, and a little later a man appeared among the pines at the head of the gully. She was very weary when she got down beside him.

“Have two strangers arrived here yet?” she asked.

“They haven’t,” answered the man.

Laura was glad she had undertaken the journey when she saw the sudden intentness of his face.

“Two of them are on the trail?” he inquired sharply.

“Yes,” said Laura. “They have gone round by the pack-horse trail. I rode in by the new one.”

The man was astonished that she had accomplished the trip, and she saw that he was troubled.

“Well,” he advised, “you had better go right on and tell Nasmyth as quick as you can. It’s my business to see no strangers get in, or I’d go with you.”

Laura left the horse with him, and, descending the gully, found an unusual number of men busy beside the river. In fact, she believed that all those who had been at work in the valley must have crossed the range to the cañon. It was also evident from their faces that most of them were in a state of eager expectation. Something out of the usual course was clearly going on. She asked for Nasmyth, and a few moments later he came scrambling towards her along the log staging. There was, she was quick to notice, a strained look in his eyes, but he shook hands with her, and then, remembering the state of her attire, she coloured a little.

“Do you expect two men from the city to-night?” she asked.

Nasmyth started. “I have, at least, been wondering when they would turn up,” he answered. “There are two men of that kind on the trail?”

His voice was sharp and insistent, and Laura told him hastily about the men who had called at the ranch.

“From what you say, they can’t well be here for another hour or two,” he said, and there was a determined glint in his eyes. “I fancy we’ll be through by then.”

He swung around, and raised a hand to the men. “Boys, you’ll get the last holes filled with giant-powder as quick as you can, and couple up the firing battery. We’ll lift that rock right out when you’re ready.”

He turned again to Laura. “I’m not sure you understand all that you have done,” he said. “For one thing, I think, you have saved us from being beaten when what we have fought for was almost in our hand.”

He paused for a moment, and then his voice became hoarse as he indicated the clustering men with a little forceful gesture.

“They have come in to see the last shot fired. We had arranged to put in a few more sticks of powder, and then lower the river once for all in another hour or two. Some of the boys are now getting a big supper ready to celebrate the occasion, but if you hadn’t brought us the warning, it’s scarcely likely that any of

us would have felt much inclined for festivity. In all probability, those strangers are bringing an order to restrain me from going any further. Once it was in my hands, I could not have fired the shot. All we have done would have been thrown away."

"Ah!" cried Laura, "that would be intolerable!"

Nasmyth laughed significantly.

"Any way," he declared, "until the papers are served on me, my charter stands. We'll have scattered the last strip of rock when those men ride in."

He made her a grave little bow. "You set us to work," he said. "It is only fitting that you should once more hold the firing battery."

He moved away abruptly from her and crawled into the heading. It was half an hour later when he came back, and almost every man who had a share in the undertaking gathered upon the strip of shingle. Nobody spoke, however, and there was tense expectancy in the bronzed faces. Nasmyth beckoned to Laura and moved forward with Gordon, and Wheeler, who carried the battery. Nasmyth swung his battered hat off as he held out his hand, and Laura, clinging to him, climbed to a shelf of rock where she stood still a moment or two, looking about her.

In front the white spray of the fall whirled beneath the tremendous wall of rock, and about her stood groups of hard-handed men, who had driven the heading with strenuous, insistent toil. She knew what the work had cost them, and could understand the look in their steady eyes. They had faced the river in the depths of the tremendous rift, borne with the icy winter, and patiently grappled with obstacle after obstacle. Their money had not sufficed to purchase them costly machines. They had pitted steadfast courage and hardened muscle against the vast primeval forces of untrammelled Nature. Laura felt deeply stirred as she glanced at them. They were simple men, but they had faced and beaten roaring flood and stinging frost, caring little for the hazard to life or limb as they played their part in that tremendous struggle with axe and drill.

Suddenly Laura became conscious that Nasmyth, who held up a little box from which trailed a couple of wires, was speaking.

"Our last dollars bought that powder. Wish us good luck," he said.

Laura stretched out her hands for the box, and standing upon the rock shelf, with one shoe burst and her skirt badly rent, raised her voice as she had done in that spot once before.

“Boys,” she said, “you have stood fast against very heavy odds. May all that you can wish for—orchards, oat-fields, wheat, and cattle—be yours. The prosperity of this country is founded on such efforts as you have made.”

With a little smile in her eyes, she fitted in the firing-plug, and in another moment a streak of flame that seemed to expand into a bewildering brilliancy flashed through the spray of the fall. The flash of light was lost in rolling smoke and a tremendous eruption of flying rock that rang with deafening detonations against the side of the cañon. The smoke rolled higher, and still great shattered fragments came whirling out of it, striking boulder and shingle with a heavy crash, until the roar of the liberated river rose in tumultuous clamour and drowned all other sound.

A great foaming wave swept forward, washing high along the bank, and poured seething down the rapid. Shingle and boulder were lost in it. It drove on tumultuously, and a mad turgid flood came on behind. Then it slowly fell away again, and a man, clambering out, in peril of being swept away, beneath the dripping rock, flung up a hand. His voice rang harsh and exultant through the sinking roar of the beaten river.

“We’ve cut the last ledge clean away,” he said.

A great shout went up, and Nasmyth held out his hand to Laura.

“I owe it all to you,” he said with a curious gleam in his eyes.

The men trooped about them both, and, though they were not as a rule effusive, some of them thumped Nasmyth’s shoulder and some wrung his hand. Half an hour had slipped by before he was free of them.

He and Laura went slowly back up the climbing gully. It was growing dark, but a light still streamed down between the pines, and Nasmyth, who pointed to a tree that had fallen, stood close by, looking down upon the girl.

“I will ride back with you presently, but you must rest first; and I have something to say, though if we had not beaten the river I think I should never have had courage enough,” he said. “When you found me lying in the snow, you took me in; you nursed me back to life, gave me a purpose, and set me on my feet again.”

He paused for a moment. A flush dyed his worn face, and his voice was strained when he went on again.

“One result was that I went back to the world I once belonged to—it was really

you who sent me—and you know what befell me there," he said. "I don't think I quite forgot what I owed to you, but I was carried away. Still, she recognized her folly and discarded me."

He stopped again, and Laura looked at him steadily with a tinge of colour in her face.

"Well," he continued, "that was when I commenced to understand exactly what you had been all along to me. I don't know what came upon me at Bonavista; but though the thing must seem preposterous, I believe I was in love with you then. Now I have nothing to bring you. You know all my weak points, and I could not complain if you would not listen to me. But I have come back to you again."

"Ah!" answered Laura very softly, "after all, it was fortunate that you went away. I think it was a relief to me when Wisbech took you to the city."

Nasmyth looked at her in surprise, and she smiled at him. "Derrick," she said, "once or twice when you were building the dam you fancied that you loved me. I, however, didn't want you to fancy. That was only going far enough to hurt me."

Nasmyth stooped toward her. "In the height of my folly I had an uneasy consciousness that I belonged to you. Afterwards I was sure. It was a very real thing, but I naturally shrank from coming to you. I don't quite know how I have gathered the courage now."

Laura sat still, and he laid a hand on her shoulder. Then she turned and looked up at him.

"Well," she confessed very simply, "I think I loved you in the days when you were building the dam."

He bent down and kissed her, and neither of them ever remembered exactly what they said.

A few minutes later there was a clatter in the shadow above them, and two men came scrambling down, each leading a jaded horse. Nasmyth rose and turned toward them when they stopped close in front of him.

"You have some business with me?" he inquired.

One of them handed him a sealed paper, and he opened it with deliberation.

"I may as well tell you that I expected this," he said. He glanced at Laura. "I am summoned to attend in Victoria and show cause why I should not be restrained

from injuring the holding of a rancher at the head of the valley. In the meantime I am instructed to carry on the operations in the cañon no further."

He turned to the men. "You should have come along an hour or two ago. I don't propose to do anything further in the cañon; in fact, I have accomplished the purpose I had in hand."

As his meaning dawned on them, the men gazed at each other in evident consternation, until one of them turned to Laura.

"Well," he commented, "in that case I guess it's quite a pity we didn't, but I begin to understand the thing. This is the young lady who told us the trail. She must have taken a shorter way."

Laura smiled at him. "You," she reminded him, "seemed anxious to go by the easiest one."

The other man looked at Nasmyth. "I'm acting for Hutton, and it seems you have got ahead of him," he observed. "Still, we're both out on business, and I don't bear you any ill-will. In fact, if you're open to make any arrangement, I should be glad to talk to you."

Nasmyth smiled as he answered: "You can at least come and get some supper. I expect the boys will fix you and your horses for the night."

They went down the gully together, and a few minutes later walked into the flickering light of a great fire, near which a rudely bountiful supper had been laid out. Nasmyth pointed to the strangers.

"Boys," he said, "these are the men we expected, but I don't think they mean to worry us now, and they've had a long ride." He turned to the strangers. "Won't you sit down?"

There was a great burst of laughter, and one of the strangers smiled.

"We're in your hands, but I don't know any reason why you shouldn't be generous, boys," he said.

He sat down, but for a moment or two Nasmyth and Laura stood still in the glare of the fire, and the eyes of everyone were fixed upon them. Laura's face was flushed, but Nasmyth was calm with a new dignity.

"We have a little more to do, boys, but we have left the toughest of our troubles behind," Nasmyth spoke in confident tones. "We'll have another supper when we're through with it, and I'll expect every one of you at the biggest event in my

life.”

There was a great shout that rang through the roar of the rapid and far across the climbing pines. Then the men sat down, and it was a little while later when their leader and the girl quietly slipped away from them. Those who noticed this said nothing, and the men still sat round the snapping fire when Nasmyth and Laura crossed the ridge of the divide.

There was a moon above them, and the night was soft and clear, while the Bush rolled away beneath, shadowy and still. Only the turmoil of the river came faintly up to them. The muffled sound sent a curious thrill through both of them, but they were silent as they went down the long slope among the climbing pines. Laura sat in the saddle, looking out on the silent forest with eyes that shone softly in the moonlight, and Nasmyth walked beside her, with his hand on the pack-horse’s bridle. They had both borne the stress and strain, but now as the pack-horse plodded on they were conscious only of a deep contentment.

THE END

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