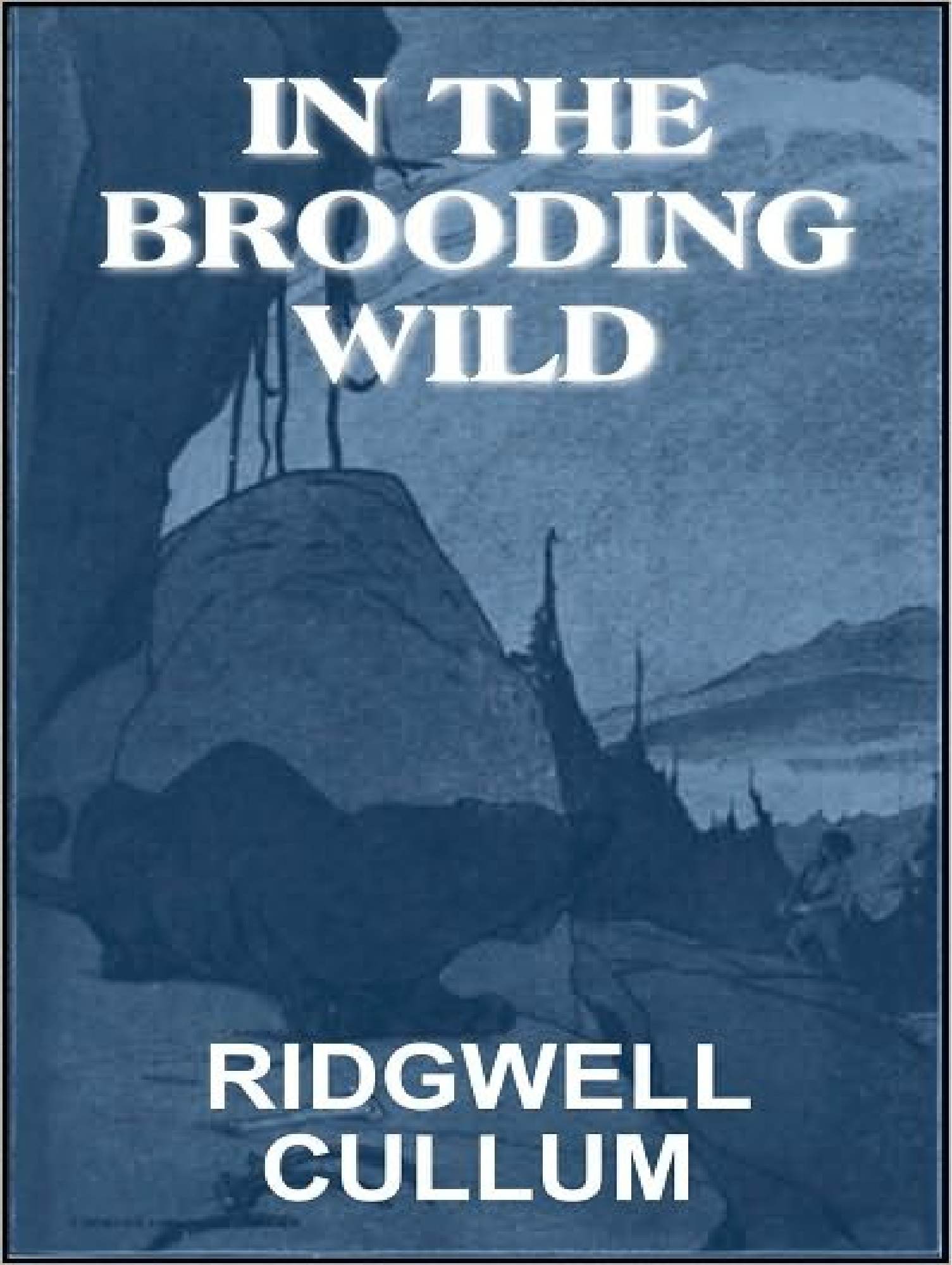
IN THE BROODING WILD
RIDGWELL CULLUM

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Author: Ridgwell Cullum

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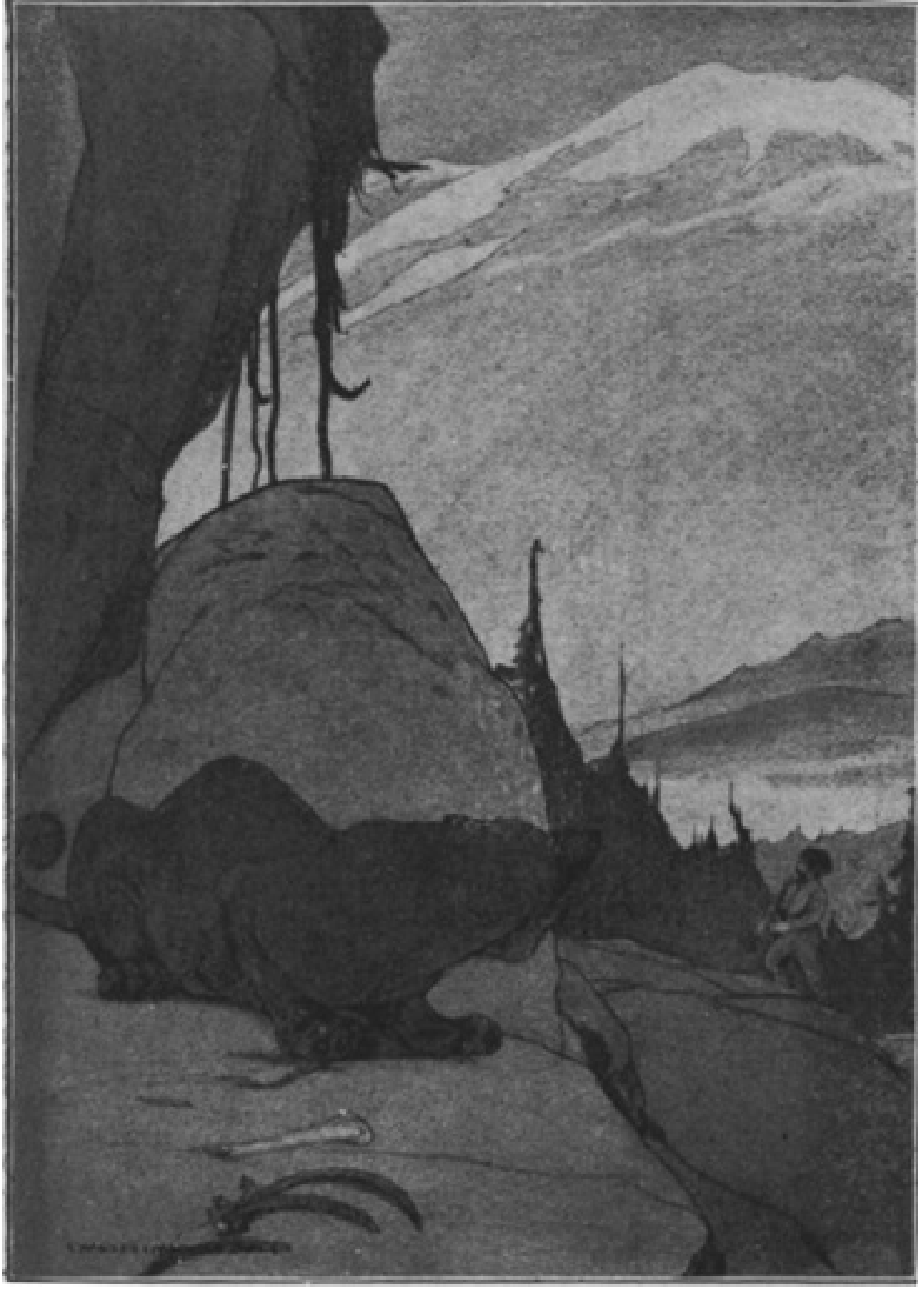


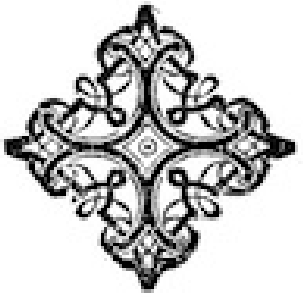
"THERE IS NO MOVEMENT IN THE SAVAGE BODY BUT THE FURIOUS, NOISELESS LASHING OF THE TAIL" (*See page 244*)

IN THE BROODING WILD

By RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF

"The Story of The Foss River Ranch,"
"The Law Breakers," "The Way
of the Strong," Etc.



With Frontispiece
By CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL

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IN THE BROODING WILD

CHAPTER I.
ON THE MOUNTAINSIDE

To the spirit which broods over the stupendous solitudes of the northern Rockies, the soul of man, with all its complex impulses, is but so much plastic material which it shapes to its own inscrutable ends. For the man whose lot is cast in the heart of these wilds, the drama of life usually moves with a tremendous simplicity toward the sudden and sombre tragedy of the last act. The titanic world in which he lives closes in upon him and makes him its own. For him, among the ancient watch-towers of the earth, the innumerable interests and activities of swarming cities, the restless tides and currents of an eager civilization, take on the remoteness of a dream. The peace or war of nations is less to him than the battles of Wing and Fur. His interests are all in that world over which he seeks to rule by the law of trap and gun, and in the war of defence which he wages against the aggression of the elements. He returns insensibly to the type of the primitive man, strong, patient, and enduring.

High up on the mountainside, overlooking a valley so deep and wide as to daze the brain of the gazing human, stands a squat building. It seems to have been crushed into the slope by the driving force of the vicious mountain storms to which it is open on three sides. There is no shelter for it. It stands out bravely to sunshine and storm alike with the contemptuous indifference of familiarity. It is a dugout, and, as its name implies, is built half in the ground. Its solitary door and single parchment-covered window overlook the valley, and the white path in front where the snow is packed hard by the tramp of dogs and men, and the runners of the dog-sled. Below the slope bears away to the woodlands. Above the hut the overshadowing mountain rises to dazzling heights; and a further, but thin, belt of primeval forest extends

up, up, until the eternal snows are reached and the air will no longer support life. Even to the hardy hunters, whose home this is, those upper forests are sealed chapters in Nature's story.

Below the dugout, and beyond the valley, lie countless lesser hills, set so closely that their divisions are lost in one smooth, dark expanse of forest. Blackened rifts are visible here and there, but they have little meaning, and only help to materialize what would otherwise wear an utterly ghostly appearance. The valley in front is so vast that its contemplation from the hillside sends a shudder of fear through the heart. It is dark, dreadfully dark and gloomy, although the great stretch of pine forest, which reaches to its uttermost confines, bears upon its drooping branches the white coat of winter.

The valley is split by a river, now frozen to its bed. But, from the hut door, the rift which marks its course in the dark carpet cannot be seen.

In the awesome view no life is revealed. The forests shadow the earth and every living thing upon it, and where the forest is not there lies the snow to the depth of many feet. It is a scene of solemn grandeur, over which broods silence and illimitable space.

Out of the deathly stillness comes a long-drawn sigh. It echoes down the hillside like the weary expression of patient suffering from some poor creature imprisoned where ancient glacier and everlasting snows hold place. It passes over the low-pitched roof of the dugout, it plays about the angles and under the wide reaching eaves. It sets the door creaking with a sound that startles the occupants. It passes on and forces its way through the dense, complaining forest trees. The opposition it receives intensifies its plaint, and it rushes angrily through the branches. Then, for awhile, all is still again. But the coming of that breath from the mountain top has made a difference in the outlook. Something strange has happened. One looks about and cannot tell what it is. It may be that the air is colder; it may be that the daylight has changed its tone; it may be that the sunlit scene is

changed as the air fills with sparkling, diamond frost particles. Something has happened.

Suddenly a dismal howl splits the air, and its echoes intensify the gloom. Another howl succeeds it, and then the weird cry is taken up by other voices.

And ere the echoes die out another breath comes down from the hilltop, a breath less patient; angry with a biting fierceness which speaks of patience exhausted and a spirit of retaliation.

It catches up the loose snow as it comes and hurls it defiantly at every obstruction with the viciousness of an exasperated woman. Now it shakes the dugout, and, as it passes on, shrieks invective at the world over which it rushes, and everything it touches feels the bitter lash of the whipping snow it bears upon its bosom. Again come the strange howls of the animal world, but they sound more distant and the echoes are muffled, for those who cry out have sought the woodland shelter, where the mountain breath exhausts itself against the countless legions of the pines.

Ere the shriek has died out, another blast comes, down the mountainside, and up rises the fine-powdered snow like a thin fog. From the valley a rush of wind comes up to meet it, and the two battle for supremacy. While the conflict rages fresh clouds of snow rise in other directions and rush to the scene of action. Encountering each other on the way they struggle together, each intolerant of interference, until the shrieking is heard on every hand, and the snow fog thickens, and the dull sun above grows duller, and the lurid “sun dogs” look like evil coals of fire burning in the sky.

Now, from every direction, the wind tears along in a mad fury. The forest tops sway as with the roll of some mighty sea swept by the sudden blast of a tornado. In the rage of the storm the woodland giants creak out their impotent protests. The wind battles and tears at everything, there is no cessation in its onslaught.

And as the fight waxes the fog rises and a grey darkness settles over

the valley. The forest is hidden, the hills are gone, the sun is obscured, and a fierce desolation reigns. Darker and darker it becomes as the blizzard gains force. And the cries of the forest beasts add to the chaos and din of the mountain storm.

The driving cold penetrates, with the bite of invisible arrows, to the interior of the dugout. The two men who sit within pile up the fuel in the box stove which alone makes life possible for them in such weather. The roof groans and bends beneath the blast. Under the rattling door a thin carpet of snow has edged its way in, while through the crack above it a steady rain of moisture falls as the snow encounters the rising heat of the stifling atmosphere.

"I knew it 'ud come, Nick," observed one of the men, as he shut the stove, after carefully packing several cord-wood sticks within its insatiable maw.

He was of medium height but of large muscle. His appearance was that of a man in the prime of life. His hair, above a face tanned and lined by exposure to the weather, was long and grey, as was the beard which curled about his chin. He was clad in a shirt of rough-tanned buckskin and trousers of thick moleskin. His feet were shod with moccasins which were brilliantly beaded. Similar bead-work adorned the front of the weather-proof shirt.

His companion was a slightly younger and somewhat larger man. The resemblance he bore to his comrade indicated the relationship between them. They were brothers.

Ralph and Nicol Westley were born and bred in that dugout. Their father and mother were long since dead, dying in the harness of the toil they had both loved, and which they bequeathed to their children. These two men had never seen the prairie. They had never left their mountain fastnesses. They had never even gone south to where the railway bores its way through the Wild.

They had been born to the life of the trapper and knew no other. They lived and enjoyed their lives, for they were creatures of Nature who

understood and listened when she spoke. They had no other education. The men lived together harmoniously, practically independent of all other human companionship.

At long intervals, when pelts had accumulated and supplies had run low, they visited the cabin of an obscure trader. Otherwise they were cut off from the world and rejoiced in their isolation.

“Yes, we’ve had the warnin’ this week past,” rejoined Nick solemnly, as he affectionately polished the butt of his rifle with a rag greased with bear’s fat. “Them ’patch’ winds at sunrise an’ sunset ain’t sent fer nothin’. I ’lows Hell’s hard on the heels o’ this breeze. When the wind quits there’ll be snow, an’ snow means us bein’ banked in. Say, she’s boomin’. Hark to her. You can hear her tearin’ herself loose from som’eres up on the hilltops.”

Nick looked round the hut as though expecting to see the storm break through the walls of their shelter. A heavy storm always affected the superstitious side of these men’s natures. A blizzard to them was as the Evil Spirit of the mountains. They always possessed the feeling, somewhere deep down in their hearts, that the attack of a storm was directed against them. And the feeling was a mute acknowledgment that they were interlopers in Nature’s most secret haunts.

Ralph had planted himself upon an upturned bucket, and sat with his hands thrust out towards the stove. He was smoking, and his eyes were directed in a pensive survey at a place where the black iron of the stove was steadily reddening.

Presently he looked up.

“Ha’ ye fed the dogs, lad?” he asked.

“Ay.”

The two relapsed into silence. The creaking of the hut was like the protest of a wooden ship riding a heavy storm at sea. The men shifted their positions with every fresh burst which struck their home; it was as though they personally felt each shock, and their bones ached with the strain of battle. The smoke curled up slowly from Ralph’s pipe and

a thin cloud hovered just beneath the roof. The red patch on the stove widened and communicated itself to the stovepipe. Presently the trapper leaned forward, and, closing the damper, raked away the ashes with a chip of wood.

Nick looked up and laid his gun aside, and, rising, stepped over to the stove.

“Makes ye feel good to hear the fire roarin’ when it’s stormin’ bad. Ther’ ain’t no tellin’ when this’ll let up.” He jerked his head backward to imply the storm.

“It’s sharp. Mighty sharp,” replied his brother. “Say–”

He broke off and bent his head in an attitude of keen attention. He held his pipe poised in his right hand, whilst his eyes focused themselves on a side of bacon which hung upon the wall.

Nick had turned towards the door. His attitude was intent also; he, too, was listening acutely.

The howling elements continued to beat furiously upon the house and the din was appalling, but these two men, keen-eared, trained to the life of their mountains, had heard a sound which was not the storm, nor of the forest creatures doling their woful cries beneath the shelter of the woods.

Slowly Ralph’s eyes moved from the bacon and passed over the smoke stained wooden wall of the hut. Nor did they pause again until they looked into the eyes of his brother. Here they fixed themselves and the working brains of the two men seemed to communicate one with the other. Neither of them was likely to be mistaken. To hear a sound in those wilds was to recognize it unerringly.

“A cry,” said Nick.

“Some ’un out in the storm,” replied Ralph.

“A neche.”

Ralph shook his head.

“A neche would ’a’ know’d this was comin’. He’d ’a’ made camp.

’Tain’t a neche. Hark!”

The beat of the storm seemed to drown all other sounds, and yet those two men listened. It is certain that what they heard would have been lost to most ears.

Ralph rose deliberately. There was no haste, nor was there any hesitation. His intention was written on his face.

“The lifeline,” he said briefly.

Out into the awful storm the two men plunged a few moments later. There was no thought of their own comfort in their minds. They had heard a cry–the cry of a human being, and they were prepared to lend such aid as lay in their power. They did not pause to wonder at a voice other than their own in those regions. Some one was caught in the storm, and they knew that such a disaster meant certain death to the poor wretch if they did not go to the rescue. The terror of the blizzard was expressed in the significant words Ralph had uttered. Even these hardy men of the wild dared not venture beyond their door without the lifeline which was always kept handy.

With their furs covering every part of them but their eyes and noses they plunged into the fog of blinding snow. They could see nothing around them–they could not even see their own feet. Each gripped a long pole, and used his other hand to grasp the line.

They moved down the beaten path with certain step. Three yards from the dugout and the house was obscured. The wind buffeted them from every direction, and they were forced to bend their heads in order to keep their eyes open.

The whole attack of the wind now seemed to centre round those two struggling human creatures. It is the way of the blizzard. It blows apparently from every direction, and each obstacle in its chaotic path becomes the special object of its onslaught.

A forceful gust, too sudden to withstand, would drive them, blind, groping, from their path; and a moment later they would be hurled like shuttlecocks in the opposite direction. They staggered under the

burden of the storm, and groped for the solid foothold of the track with their poles; and so they slowly gained their way.

Their strenuous life had rendered them uncomplaining, and they laboured in silence. No emergency but they were ready to meet with a promptness that was almost automatic. A slip upon the declining path and the fall was checked by the aid of the poles which both men used as skilfully as any guide upon the Alps. These contests with the elements were as much a part of their lives as were their battles with the animal world.

After awhile Ralph halted; he thrust his pole deep into the snow and held his position by its aid. Then, throwing up his head, as might any wolf, he opened his throat and uttered a prolonged cry. It rose high above the storm in a manner which only the cry of a mountain or forest bred man can. It rushed forth borne unwillingly upon the shrieking wind, and its sound almost instantly died out of the ears of the sender. But the men knew it was travelling. Nick followed his brother's example, and then Ralph gave out the mountain call again.

Then they waited, listening. A sound, faint and far off, came in answer to their cries. It was the human cry they had heard before.

Ralph moved forward with Nick hard upon his heels. The line "paid out," and the points of the poles sought the hard earth beneath the snow. They gained their way in spite of the storm, foot by foot, yard by yard. And, at short intervals, they paused and sent their cries hurtling upon the vicious wind. And to every cry came an answer, and every answer sounded nearer.

They were on the only open track in the valley, and both men knew that whoever was out in that storm must be somewhere upon it. Therefore they kept on.

"The line's gettin' heavy," said Nick presently.

"It's only a little further," replied Ralph.

"By the weight o' the line, I reckon ther' ain't more'n fifty feet more."

“Maybe it’ll be ’nough.”

And Ralph was right.

Ten yards further on they almost fell over a dark mass lying in the snow. It was a huddled heap, as of a creature striving to shut out the attack of the storm. It was the attitude of one whose heart quails with dread. It was the attitude of one, who, in possession of all his faculties and strength, lies down to die. Rank cowardice was in that fur-clad figure, and the cries for help were as the weeping of a fear-filled soul.

Ralph was down upon his knees in a moment, and all that the still figure conveyed was at once apparent to him. His hand fell heavily upon the man’s shoulder, and he turned him over to look at his face.

The victim of the storm groaned; as yet he was unable to realize that help was at hand. Then, after several rough shakes, his head emerged from the folds of an enormous storm-collar.

As he looked up at the faces bending over him the two trappers uttered exclamations.

“It’s the trader!” said Ralph.

“Victor Gagnon!” exclaimed Nick.

CHAPTER II.
WHICH TELLS OF THE WHITE SQUAW

The stormy day was followed by an equally stormy night. Inside the dugout it was possible, in a measure, to forget the terrors of the blizzard raging outside. The glowing stove threw out its comforting warmth, and even the rank yellow light of the small oil lamp, which was suspended from one of the rafters, gave a cheering suggestion of comfort to the rough interior. Besides, there were within food and shelter and human association, and the mind of man is easily soothed into a feeling of security by such surroundings.

The trappers had brought the rescued trader to the shelter of their humble abode; they had refreshed him with warmth and good food; they had given him the comfort of a share of their blankets, the use of their tobacco, all the hospitality they knew how to bestow.

The three men were ranged round the room in various attitudes of repose. All were smoking heavily. On the top of the stove stood a tin billy full to the brim of steaming coffee, the scent of which, blending with the reek of strong tobacco, came soothingly to their nostrils.

Victor Gagnon was lying full length upon a pile of outspread blankets. His face was turned towards the stove, and his head was supported upon one hand. He looked none the worse for his adventure in the storm. He was a small, dark man of the superior French half-breed class. He had a narrow, ferret face which was quite good looking in a mean small way. He was clean shaven, and wore his straight black hair rather long. His clothes, now he had discarded his furs, showed to be of orthodox type, and quite unlike those of his hosts. He was a

trader who kept a store away to the northeast of the dugout. He worked in connection with one of the big fur companies of the East, as an agent for the wholesale house dealing directly with trappers and Indians.

This was the man with whom the Westleys traded, and they were truly glad that chance had put it in their power to befriend him. Their associations with him, although chiefly of a business nature, were decidedly friendly.

Now they were listening to his slow, quiet, thoughtful talk. He was a man who liked talking, but he always contrived that his audience should be those who gave information. These two backwoodsmen, simple as the virgin forests to which they belonged, were not keen enough to observe this. Victor Gagnon understood such men well. His life had been made up of dealings with the mountain world and those who peopled it.

Nick, large and picturesque, sat tailor-fashion on his blankets, facing the glowing stove with the unblinking, thoughtful stare of a large dog. Ralph was less luxurious. He was propped upon his upturned bucket, near enough to the fire to dispense the coffee without rising from his seat.

“Yup. It’s a long trail for a man to make travellin’ light an’ on his lone,” Victor was saying, while his black eyes flashed swiftly upon his companions. “It’s not a summer picnic, I guess. Maybe you’re wonderin’ what I come for.”

He ceased speaking as a heavy blast shook the roof, and set the lamp swinging dangerously.

“We’re good an’ pleased to see you–” began Ralph, in his deliberate way; but Victor broke in upon him at once.

“O’ course you are. It’s like you an’ Nick there to feel that way. But human natur’s human natur’, an’ maybe som’eres you are jest wonderin’ what brought me along. Anyway, I come with a red-hot purpose. Gee! but it’s blowin’. I ain’t like to forget this storm.” Gagnon

shuddered as he thought of his narrow escape.

“Say,” he went on, with an effort at playfulness. “You two boys are pretty deep–pretty deep.” He repeated himself reflectively. “An’ you seem so easy and free, too. I do allow I’d never ’a’ thought it. Ha, ha!”

He turned a smiling face upon his two friends and looked quizzically from one to the other. His look was open, but behind it shone something else. There was a hungriness in his sharp, black eyes which would have been observed by any one other than these two backwoodsmen.

“You allus was a bit fancy in your way o’ speakin’, Victor,” observed Nick, responding to the man’s grin. “Hit the main trail, man. We ain’t good at guessin’.”

Ralph had looked steadily at the trader while he was speaking; now he turned slowly and poured out three pannikins of coffee. During the operation he turned his visitor’s words over in his mind and something of their meaning came to him. He passed a tin to each of the others and sipped meditatively from his own, while his eyes became fixed upon the face of the half-breed.

“Ther’ was some fine pelts in that last parcel o’ furs you brought along,” continued Victor. “Three black foxes. But your skins is always the best I get.”

Ralph nodded over his coffee, whilst he added his other hand to the support of the tin. Nick watched his brother a little anxiously. He, too, felt uneasy.

“It’s cur’us that you git more o’ them black pelts around here than anybody else higher up north. You’re a sight better hunters than any durned neche on the Peace River. An’ them hides is worth more’n five times their weight in gold. You’re makin’ a pile o’ bills. Say, you keep them black pelts snug away wi’ other stuff o’ value.”

Gagnon paused and took a deep draught at his coffee.

“Say,” he went on, with a knowing smile. “I guess them black foxes

lived in a gold mine–”

He broke off and watched the effect of his words. The others kept silence, only their eyes betrayed them. The smoke curled slowly up from their pipes and hung in a cloud about the creaking roof. The fire burned fiercely in the stove, and with every rush of wind outside there came a corresponding roar of flame up the stovepipe.

“Maybe you take my meanin’,” said the Breed, assured that his words had struck home. “Them black furs was chock full o’ grit–an’ that grit was gold-dust. Guess that dust didn’t grow in them furs; an’ I ’lows foxes don’t fancy a bed o’ such stuff. Say, boys, you’ve struck gold in this layout o’ yours. That’s what’s brought me out in this all-fired storm.”

The two brothers exchanged rapid glances and then Ralph spoke for them both.

“You’re smart, Victor. That’s so. We’ve been workin’ a patch o’ pay-dirt for nigh on to twelve month. But it’s worked out; clear out to the bedrock. It wa’n’t jest a great find, though I ’lows, while it lasted, we took a tidy wage out o’ it–”

“An’ what might you call a ‘tidy wage’?” asked the Breed, in a tone of disappointment. He knew these men so well that he did not doubt their statement; but he was loth to relinquish his dream. He had come there to make an arrangement with them. If they had a gold working he considered that, provided he could be of use to them, there would be ample room for him in it. This had been the object of his hazardous journey. And now he was told that it had worked out. He loved gold, and the news came as a great blow to him.

He watched Ralph keenly while he awaited his reply, sitting up in his eagerness.

“Seventy-fi’ dollars a day,” Ralph spoke without enthusiasm.

Victor’s eyes sparkled.

“Each?” he asked.

“No, on shares.”

There was another long silence while the voice of the storm was loud without. Victor Gagnon was thinking hard, but his face was calm, his expression almost indifferent. More coffee was drunk, and the smoke continued to rise.

“I ’lows you should know if it’s worked out, sure.”

The sharp eyes seemed to go through Ralph.

“Dead sure. We ain’t drawn a cent’s worth o’ colour out o’ it fer nine months solid.”

“’Tain’t worth prospectin’ fer the reef?”

“Can’t say. I ain’t much when it comes to prospectin’ gold. I knows the colour when I sees it.”

Nick joined in the conversation at this point.

“Guess you’d a notion you fancied bein’ in it,” he said, smiling over at the Breed.

Victor laughed a little harshly.

“That’s jest what.”

The two brothers nodded. This they had understood.

“I’d have found all the plant fer big work,” went on the trader eagerly. “I’d have found the cash to do everything. I’d have found the labour. An’ us three ’ud have made a great syndicate. We’d ’a’ run it dead secret. Wi’ me in it we could ’a’ sent our gold down to the bank by the dogs, an’, bein’ as my shack’s so far from here, no one ’ud ever ’a’ found whar the yeller come from. It ’ud ’a’ been a real fine game–a jo-dandy game. An’ it’s worked clear out?” he asked again, as though to make certain that he had heard aright.

“Bottomed right down to the bedrock. Maybe ye’d like to see fer yourself?”

“Guess I ken take your word, boys; ye ain’t the sort to lie to a pal. I’m real sorry.” He paused and shifted his position. Then he went on with

a slightly cunning look. “I ’lows you’re like to take a run down to Edmonton one o’ these days. A feller mostly likes to make things hum when he’s got a good wad.” Gagnon’s tone was purely conversational. But his object must have been plain to any one else. He was bitterly resentful at the working out of the placer mine, and his anger always sent his thoughts into crooked channels. His nature was a curious one; he was honest enough, although avaricious, while his own ends were served. It was different when he was balked.

“We don’t notion a city any,” said Nick, simply.

“Things is confusin’ to judge by the yarns folks tell,” added Ralph, with a shake of his shaggy head.

“Them fellers as comes up to your shack, Victor, mostly talks o’ drink, an’ shootin’, an’–an’ women,” Nick went on. “Guess the hills’ll do us. Maybe when we’ve done wi’ graft an’ feel that it ’ud be good to laze, likely we’ll go down an’ buy a homestead on the prairie. Maybe, I sez.”

Nick spoke dubiously, like a man who does not convince himself.

“Hah, that’s ’cause you’ve never been to a city,” said the Breed sharply.

“Jest so,” observed Ralph quietly, between the puffs at his pipe.

Gagnon laughed silently. His eyes were very bright and he looked from one brother to the other with appreciation. An idea had occurred to him and he was mentally probing the possibilities of carrying it out. What he saw pleased him, for he continued to smile.

“Well, well, maybe you’re right,” he said indulgently. Then silence fell.

Each man was rapt in his own thoughts, and talk without a definite object was foreign to at least two of the three. The brothers were waiting in their stolid Indian fashion for sleep to come. The trader was thinking hard behind his lowered eyelids, which were almost hidden by the thick smoke which rose from his pipe.

The fire burned down and was replenished. Ralph rose and gathered the pannikins and threw them into a biscuit-box. Then he laid out his

blankets while Nick went over and bolted the door. Still the trader did not look up. When the two men had settled themselves comfortably in their blankets the other at last put his pipe away.

"No," he said, as he too negotiated his blankets, "guess we want good sound men in these hills, anyway. I reckon you've no call to get visitin' the prairie, boys; you're the finest hunters I've ever known. D'ye know the name your shack here goes by among the down-landers? They call it the 'Westley Injun Reserve.'"

"White Injuns," said Nick, with a grin followed by a yawn.

"That's what," observed Victor, curling himself up in his blankets. "I've frequent heard tell of the White Squaw, but White Injuns sounds like as it wa'n't jest possible. Howsum, they call you real white buck neches, an' I 'lows ther' ain't no redskin in the world to stan' beside you on the trail o' a fur."

The two men laughed at their friend's rough tribute to their attainments. Ralph was the quieter of the two, but his appreciation was none the less. He was simple-hearted, but he knew his own worth when dealing with furs. Nick laughed loudly. It tickled him to be considered a White Indian at the calling which was his, for his whole pride was in his work.

Nick was not without a romantic side to his nature. The life of the mountains had imbued him with a half-savage superstition which revelled in the uncanny lore of such places. This was not the first time he had heard of a White Squaw, and, although he did not believe such a phenomenon possible, it appealed seductively to his love of the marvellous. Victor had turned over to sleep, but Nick was very wide awake and interested. He could not let such an opportunity slip. Victor was good at a yarn. And, besides, Victor knew more of the mountain-lore than any one else. So he roused the Breed again.

"You was sayin' about a White Squaw, Victor," he said, in a shamefaced manner. His bronzed cheeks were deeply flushed and he glanced over at his brother to see if he were laughing at him. Ralph

was lying full length upon his blankets and his eyes were closed, so he went on. “Guess *I've* heerd tell of a White Squaw. Say, ain't it that they reckon as she ain't jest a human crittur?”

Victor opened his eyes and rolled over on his back. If there was one weakness he had it was the native half-breed love of romancing. He was ever ready to yarn. He revelled in it when he had a good audience. Nick was the very man for him, simple, honest, superstitious. So he sat up and answered readily enough.

“That's jest how, pard. An' it ain't a yarn neither. It's gospel truth. I know.”

“Hah!” ejaculated Nick, while a strange feeling passed down his spine. Ralph's eyes had slowly opened, but the others did not notice him.

“I've seen her!” went on the trader emphatically.

“You've seen her!” said Nick, in an awed whisper.

An extra loud burst of the storming wind held the men silent a moment, then, as it died away, Victor went on.

“Yes, I see her with my own two eyes, an' I ain't like to ferget it neither. Say, ye've seen them Bible 'lustrations in my shanty? Them pictur's o' lovesome critturs wi' feathery wings an' sech?”

“I guess.”

“Wal, clip them wings sheer off, an' you've got her dead right.”

“Mush! But she must be a dandy sight,” exclaimed Nick, with conviction. “How come ye to–”

“Guess it's a long yarn, an' maybe ye're wantin' to sleep.”

“Say, I 'lows I'd like that yarn, Victor. I ain't worried for sleep, any.”

Nick deliberately refilled his pipe and lit it, and passed his tobacco to the trader. Victor took the pouch. Ralph's eyes had closed again.

“You allus was a great one fer a yarn, Nick,” began the half-breed, with a laugh. “Guess you most allus gets me gassin'; but say, this ain't

no yarn, in a way. It's the most cur'us bit o' truth, as maybe you'll presently allow. But I ain't goin' to tell it you if ye ain't believin', 'cause it's the truth." The trader's face had become quite serious and he spoke with unusual earnestness. Nick was impressed, and Ralph's eyes had opened again.

"Git goin', pard; guess your word's good fer me," Nick said eagerly. "You was sayin'—"

"Ye've heard tell o' the Moosefoot Injuns?" began the trader slowly. Nick nodded. "They're a queer lot o' neches. I used to do a deal o' trade wi' them on the Peace River, 'fore they was located on a reserve. They were the last o' the old-time redskin hunters. Dessay they were the last to hunt the buffalo into the drives. They're pretty fine men now, I guess, as neches go, but they ain't nothin' to what they was. I guess that don't figger anyway, but they're different from most Injuns, which is what I was coming to. Their chief ain't a 'brave,' same as most, which, I 'lows, is unusual. Maybe that's how it come they ain't allus on the war-path, an' maybe that's how it come their river's called Peace River. Their chief is a Med'cine Man; has been ever since they was drove across the mountains from British Columbia. They was pretty nigh wiped out when that happened, so they did away wi' havin' a 'brave' fer a chief, an' took on a 'Med'cine Man.'

"Wal, it ain't quite clear how it come about, but the story, which is most gener'ly believed, says that the first Med'cine Man was pertic'ler cunnin', an' took real thick with the white folks' way o' doin' things. Say, he learned his folk a deal o' farmin' an' sech, an' they took to trappin' same as you understand it. There wa'n't no scrappin', nor war-path yowlin'; they jest come an' settled right down an' took on to the land. Wal, this feller, 'fore he died, got the Mission'ry on his trail, an' got religion; but he couldn't git dead clear o' his med'cine, an' he got to prophesyin'. He called all his folk together an' took out his youngest squaw. She was a pretty crittur, sleek as an antelope fawn; I 'lows her pelt was nigh as smooth an' soft. Her eyes were as black an' big as a moose calf's, an' her hair was as fine as black fox fur.

Wal, he up an' spoke to them folk, an' said as ther' was a White Squaw comin' amongst 'em who was goin' to make 'em a great people; who was goin' to lead 'em to victory agin their old enemies in British Columbia, where they'd go back to an' live in peace. An' he told 'em as this squaw was goin' to be the instrument by which the comin' of the White Squaw was to happen. Then they danced a Med'cine Dance about her, an' he made med'cine for three days wi'out stoppin'. Then they built her a lodge o' teepees in the heart o' the forest, where she was to live by herself.

"Wal, time went on an' the squaw give birth to a daughter, but she wa'n't jest white, so the men took and killed her, I guess. Then came another; she was whiter than the first, but she didn't jest please the folk, an' they killed her too. Then came another, an' another, each child whiter than the last, an' they were all killed, 'cause I guess they wa'n't jest white. Till the seventh come along. The seventh was the White Squaw. Say, fair as a pictur, wi' black hair that shone in the sun, an' wi' eyes that blue as 'ud shame the summer sky."

The half-breed paused, and sat staring with introspective gaze at the iron side of the stove. Nick was gazing at him all eyes and ears for the story. Ralph, too, was sitting up now.

"Wal, she was taken care of an' treated like the queen she was. On'y the headman was allowed to look at her. She grew an' grew, an' all the tribe was thinkin' of war, an' gettin' ready. They made 'braves' nigh every week, an' their Sun Dances was the greatest ever known. They danced Ghost Dances, too, to keep away Evil Spirits, I guess, an' things was goin' real good. Then sudden comes the white folk, an' after a bit they was all herded on to a Reserve an' kep' there. But that White Squaw never left her home in the forest, 'cause no one but the headman knew where she was. She was on'y a young girl then; I guess she's grown now. Wal, fer years them pore critturs reckoned on her comin' along an' leadin' them out on the war-path. But she didn't come; she jest stayed right along with her mother in that forest, an' didn't budge.

“That’s the yarn as it stan’s,” Victor went on, after another pause, “but this is how I come to see her. It was winter, an’ I was tradin’ on the Reserve there. It was a fine, cold day, an’ the snow was good an’ hard, an’ I set out to hunt an old bull moose that was runnin’ with its mates in the location. I took two neches with me, an’ we had a slap-up time fer nigh on to a week. We hunted them moose hard the whole time, but never came up wi’ ’em. Then it came on to storm, an’ we pitched camp in a thick pine forest. We was there fer nigh on three days while it stormed a’mighty hard. Then it cleared an’ we set out, an’, wi’in fifty yards o’ our camp, we struck the trail o’ the moose. We went red-hot after them beasts, I’m figgerin’, an’ they took us into the thick o’ the forest. Then we got a couple o’ shots in; my slugs got home, but, fer awhiles, we lost them critturs. Next day we set out again, an’ at noon we was startled by hearin’ a shot fired by som’un else. We kep’ right on, an’ bimeby we came to a clearin’. There we saw four teepees an’ a shack o’ pine logs all smeared wi’ colour; but what came nigh to par’lyzin’ me was the sight o’ my moose lyin’ all o’ a heap on the ground, an’, standin’ beside its carcass, leanin’ on a long muzzle-loader, was a white woman. She was wearin’ the blanket right enough, but she was as white as you are. Say, she had six great huskies wi’ her, an’ four women. An’ when they see us they put hard into the woods. I was fer goin’ to have a look at the teepees, but my neches wouldn’t let me. They told me the lodge was sacred to the White Squaw, who we’d jest seen. An’ I ’lows, they neches wa’n’t jest easy till we cleared them woods.”

“An’ she was beautiful, an’–an’ fine?” asked Nick, as the trader ceased speaking. “Was she that beautiful as you’d heerd tell of?”

His voice was eager with suppressed excitement. His pipe had gone out, and he had forgotten everything but the story the Breed had told.

“Ay, that she was; her skin was as clear as the snow she trod on, an’ her eyes–gee! but I’ve never seen the like. Man, she was wonderful.”

Victor threw up his hands in a sort of ecstasy and looked up at the

creaking roof.

“An’ her hair?” asked Nick, wonderingly.

“A black fox pelt was white aside it.”

“An’ didn’t ye foller her?”

The question came abruptly from Ralph, whom the others had forgotten.

“I didn’t jest know you was awake,” said Victor. “Wal, no, to own the truth, I ’lows I was scart to death wi’ what them neches said. Maybe I wa’n’t sorry to light out o’ them woods.”

They talked on for a few moments longer, then Ralph’s stertorous breathing told of sleep. Victor was not long in following his example. Nick sat smoking thoughtfully for some time; presently he rose and put out the lamp and stoked up the fire. Then he, too, rolled over in his blankets, and, thinking of the beautiful White Squaw, dropped off to sleep to continue his meditations in dreamland.

CHAPTER III.
THE QUEST OF THE WHITE SQUAW

Christmas had gone by and the new year was nearing the end of its first month. It was many weeks since Victor Gagnon had come to the Westley's dugout on that stormy evening. But his visit had not been forgotten. The story of the White Squaw had made an impression upon Nick such as the half-breed could never have anticipated. Ralph had thought much of it too, but, left to himself, he would probably have forgotten it, or, at most, have merely remembered it as a good yarn.

But this he was not allowed to do. Nick was enthusiastic. The romance of the mountains was in his blood, and that blood was glowing with the primest life of man. The fire of youth had never been stirred within him, but it was there, as surely as it is in every human creature. Both men were nearing forty years of age, and, beyond the associations of the trader's place, they had never mixed with their fellows.

The dream of this beautiful White Squaw had come to Nick; and, in the solitude of the forest, in the snow-bound wild, it remained with him, a vision of such joy as he had never before dreamed. The name of "woman" held for him suggestions of unknown delights, and the weird surroundings with which Victor had enveloped the lovely creature made the White Squaw a vision so alluring that his uncultured brain was incapable of shutting it out.

And thus it was, as he glided, ghost-like, through the forests or scaled the snowy crags in the course of his daily work, the memory of the mysterious creature remained with him. He thought of her as he set

his traps; he thought of her, as, hard on the trail of moose, or deer, or wolf, or bear, he scoured the valleys and hills; in the shadow of the trees at twilight, in fancy he saw her lurking; even amidst the black, barren tree-trunks down by the river banks. His eyes and ears were ever alert with the half-dread expectation of seeing her or hearing her voice. The scene Victor had described of the white huntress leaning upon her rifle was the most vivid in his imagination, and he told himself that some day, in the chances of the chase, she might visit his valleys, his hills.

At night he would talk of her to his brother, and together they would chum the matter over, and slowly, in the more phlegmatic Ralph, Nick kindled the flame with which he himself was consumed.

And so the days wore on; a fresh zest was added to their toil. Each morning Ralph would set out with a vague but pleasurable anticipation of adventure. And as his mind succumbed to the strange influence of the White Squaw, it coloured for him what had been the commonplace events of his daily life. If a buck was started and rushed crashing through the forest growths, he would pause ere he raised his rifle to assure himself that it was not a woman, garbed in the parti-coloured blanket of the Moosefoot Indians, and with a face radiant as an angel's. His slow-moving imagination was deeply stirred.

From the Beginning Nature has spoken in no uncertain language. "Man shall not live alone," she says. Victor Gagnon had roused these two simple creatures. There was a woman in the world, other than the mother they had known, and they began to wonder why the mountains should be peopled only by the forest beasts and solitary man.

As February came the time dragged more heavily than these men had ever known it to drag before. They no longer sat and talked of the White Squaw, and speculated as to her identity, and the phenomenon of her birth, and her mission with regard to her tribe. Somehow the outspoken enthusiasm of Nick had subsided into silent brooding; and Ralph needed no longer the encouragement of his younger brother to

urge him to think of the strange white creature. Each had taken the subject to himself, and nursed and fostered it in his own way.

The time was approaching for their visit to Gagnon's store. This was the reason of the dragging days. Both men were eager for the visit, and the cause of their eagerness was not far to seek. They wished to see the half-breed and feed their passion on fresh words of the lovely creature who had so strangely possessed their imaginations.

They did not neglect the methodical routine of their duties. When night closed in Nick saw to the dogs. The great huskies obeyed only one master who fed them, who cared for them, who flogged them on the trail with club and whip; and that was Nick. Ralph they knew not. He cooked. He was the domestic of the abode, for he was of a slow nature which could deal with the small details of such work. Nick was too large and heavy in his mode of life to season a stew. But in the trapper's craft it is probable that he was the better man.

The brothers' nights were passed in long, Indian-like silence which ended in sleep. Tobacco scented the atmosphere of the hut with a heaviness that was depressing. Each man sat upon his blankets alternating between his pannikin of coffee and his pipe, with eyes lowered in deep thought, or turned upon the glowing stove in earnest, unseeing contemplation.

The night before the appointed day for starting came round. To-morrow they would be swinging along over the snowy earth with their dogs hauling their laden sled. The morrow would see them on their way to Little Choyeuse Creek, on the bank of which stood Victor Gagnon's store.

There was an atmosphere of suppressed excitement in the doings of that night. There was much to be done, and the unusual activity almost seemed a bustle in so quiet an abode. Outside the door the sled stood piled with the furs which represented their winter's catch. The dog harness was spread out, and all was in readiness. Inside the hut the two men were packing away the stuff they must leave behind.

Although there was no fear of their home being invaded it was their custom to take certain precautions. In that hut were all their savings, to lose which would mean to lose the fruits of their life's labours.

Nick had just moved a chest from the depths of the patchwork cupboard in which they kept their food. It was a small receptacle hewn out of a solid pine log. The lid was attached with heavy rawhide hinges, and was secured by an iron hasp held by a clumsy-looking padlock. He set it down upon his blankets.

"Wer'll we put this?" he asked abruptly.

Ralph looked at it with his thoughtful eyes.

"It needs considerin'," he observed. And he leant himself against a heavy table which stood by the wall.

"We ain't opened it since last fall," said Nick presently, after a long and steady survey of the object of their solicitude.

"No."

"Ther's a deal in it."

Ralph groped at the neck of his shirt. Nick watched his brother's movements.

"Maybe we'll figure it up agin."

Ralph fell in with his brother's suggestion and drew out the key which was secured round his neck. He unlocked the rusty padlock and threw open the lid. The chest contained six small bags filled to bursting point and securely tied with rawhide; one bag, half-full and open; and a thick packet of Bank of Montreal bills.

Nick knelt down and took out the bills and set them on one side.

"Ther's fi' thousand dollars ther," he said. "I 'lows they've been reckoned careful." Then he picked up one of the bags and held it up for his brother's inspection. "We tied them seven bags up all weighin' equal, but we ain't jest sure how much dust they hold. Seven," he went on reflectively, "ther's on'y six an' a haf now, since them woodbugs got at 'em, 'fore we made this chest. I 'lows Victor's 'cute to locate the

dust in them furs. It wa'n't a good layout wrappin' the bags in black fox pelts. Howsum, I'd like to know the value o' them bags. Weighs nigh on to three poun', I'm guessin'."

Ralph took the bag and weighed it in his hand.

"More," he said. "Ther's fi' poun' o' weight ther'."

"Guess them bags together means fifteen to twenty thousan' dollars, sure," said Nick, his eyes shining at the thought.

"I don't rightly know," said Ralph. "It's a goodish wad, I 'lows."

Nick returned the store to the chest which Ralph relocked.

"Where?" asked Nick, glancing round the hut in search of a secure hiding-place.

"We'll dig a hole in the floor under my blankets," said Ralph after a pause. "Maybe it'll be tol'ble safe there."

And for greater security the chest was so disposed. The work was quickly done, and the clay floor, with the aid of water, was smeared into its usual smooth appearance again. Then the brothers sought their rest.

At daybreak came the start. Nick harnessed the dogs, five great huskies who lived in the shelter of a rough shed outside the hut when it stormed, and curled themselves up in the snow, or prowled, baying the moon, when the night was fine. Fierce-looking brutes these with their long, keen muzzles, their high shoulders and deep chests, their drooping quarters which were massed with muscle right down to the higher sinews of their great feet. Their ferocity was chiefly the animal antagonism for their kind; with Nick they were easy enough to handle, for all had been well broken beneath the heavy lash which the man knew better than to spare.

While the dogs were being hitched into their places Ralph secured the door of the dugout. There were no half measures here. The door was nailed up securely, and a barrier of logs set before it. Then, when all was ready, the men took their poles and Nick broke out the frost-

bound runners of the sled. At the magic word “Mush!” the dogs sprang at their breast-draws, and the sled glided away down the slope with Nick running beside it, and Ralph following close behind.

Down they dropped into the depths of the silent valley, Nick guiding his dogs by word of mouth alone. The lead dog, an especially vile-tempered husky, needed nothing but the oft-repeated “Gee” and “Haw” where no packed path was, and when anything approaching a trail was struck Nick issued no commands. These creatures of the wild knew their work, loved it, lived for it, as all who have seen them labouring over snow and ice must understand.

By the route they must take it was one hundred miles to Little Choyeuse Creek. One hundred miles of mountain and forest; one hundred miles of gloomy silence; one hundred miles of virgin snow, soft to the feet of the labouring dogs, giving them no foothold but the sheer anchorage of half-buried legs. It was a temper-trying journey for man and beast. The dogs snapped at each other’s heels, but the men remained silent, hugging their own thoughts and toiling amidst the pleasure of anticipation.

Skirting the forests wherever possible, and following the break of the mammoth pine-trees when no bald opening was to hand they sped along. The dogs hauled at the easy running sled, while, with long, gliding strides, the two men kept pace with them. The hills were faced by the sturdy dogs with the calm persistence of creatures who know their own indomitable powers of endurance, while the descents were made with a speed which was governed by the incessant use of Nick’s pole.

The evening camp was pitched in the shelter of the forest. The dogs fed voraciously and well on their raw fish, for the journey was short and provisions plentiful. The two men fared in their usual plain way. They slept in their fur-lined bags while the wolfish burden-bearers of the North first prowled, argued out their private quarrels, sang in chorus as the northern lights moved fantastically in the sky, and finally

curled themselves in their several snow-burrows.

The camp was struck at daylight next morning and the journey resumed. The dogs raced fresh and strong after their rest, and the miles were devoured with greedy haste. The white valleys wound in a mazy tangle round the foot of tremendous hills, but never a mistake in direction was made by the driver, Nick. To him the trail was as plain as though every foot of it were marked by well-packed snow; every landmark was anticipated, every inch of that chaotic land was an open book. A “Gee,” or a sudden “Haw” and a fresh basin of magnificent primeval forest would open before the travellers. And so the unending ocean of mountain rollers and forest troughs continued. No variation, save from the dead white of the open snowfields to the heavy shadows of the forest. Always the strange, mystic grey twilight; the dazzling sparkle of glinting snow; the biting air which stung the flesh like the sear of a red-hot iron; the steady run of dogs and men. On, on, with no thought of time to harass the mind, only the destination to think of.

And when they came to Little Choyeuse Creek they were welcomed in person by Victor Gagnon. He awaited them at his threshold. The clumsy stockade of lateral pine logs, a relic of the old Indian days when it was necessary for every fur store to be a fortress, was now a wreck. A few upright posts were standing, but the rest had long since been used to bank the stoves with.

The afternoon was spent in barter, and the time was one of beaming good nature, for Victor was a shrewd dealer, and the two brothers had little real estimate of the value of money. They sold their pelts in sets, regardless of quality. And when the last was traded, and Victor had parted the value in stores and cash, there came a strong feeling of relief to the trappers. Now for their brief holiday.

It was the custom on the occasion of these visits to make merry in a temperate way. Victor was never averse to such doings for there was French blood in his veins. He could sing a song, and most of his

ditties were either of the old days of the Red River Valley, or dealt with the early settlers round the Citadel of Quebec. Amongst the accomplishments which he possessed was that of scraping out woful strains upon an ancient fiddle. In this land, where life was always serious, he was a right jovial companion for such men as Nick and Ralph, and the merry evenings in his company at the store were well thought of.

When night closed down, and supper was finished, and the untidy living-room which backed the store was cleared by the half-breed, the business of the evening's entertainment began. The first thing in Victor's idea of hospitality was a "brew" of hot drink. He would have called it "punch," but the name was impossible. It was a decoction of vanilla essence, spiced up, and flavoured in a manner which, he claimed, only he understood. The result was stimulating, slightly nauseating, but sufficiently unusual to be enticing to those who lived the sober life of the mountain wild. He would have bestowed good rum or whiskey upon these comrades of his, only his store of those seductive beverages had long since given out, and was not likely to be replenished until the breaking of spring. The variety of strong drink which falls to the lot of such men as he is extensive. His days of "painkiller," which he stocked for trade, had not yet come round. The essences were not yet finished. Painkiller would come next; after that, if need be, would come libations of red ink. He had even, in his time, been reduced to boiling down plug tobacco and distilling the liquor. But these last two were only used *in extremis*.

The three men sat round and sipped the steaming liquor, the two brothers vying with each other in their praises of Victor's skill in the "brew."

The first glass was drunk with much appreciation. Over the second came a dallying. Nick, experiencing the influence of the spirit, asked for a tune on the fiddle. Victor responded with alacrity and wailed out an old half-breed melody, a series of repetitions of a morbid refrain. It produced, nevertheless, an enlivening effect upon Ralph, who asked

for another. Then Victor sang, in a thin tenor voice, the twenty and odd verses of a song called “The Red River Valley;” the last lines of the refrain were always the same and wailed out mournfully upon the dense atmosphere of the room.

"So remember the Red River Valley
And the half-breed that loved you so true."

But, even so, there was something perfectly in keeping between the recreation of these men and the wild, uncouth life they led. The long, grey winter and the brief, fleeting summer, the desolate wastes and dreary isolation.

After awhile the sum of Victor's entertainment was worked out and they fell back on mere talk. But as the potent spirit worked, the conversation became louder than usual, and Victor did not monopolize it. The two brothers did their share, and each, unknown to the other, was seeking an opportunity of turning Victor's thoughts into the channel where dwelt his recollections of the wonderful White Squaw.

Nick was the one who broke the ice. The more slow-going Ralph had not taken so much spirit as his brother. Nick's eyes were bright, almost burning, as he turned his flushed, rugged face upon the half-breed. He leant forward in his eagerness and his words came rapidly, almost fiercely.

"Say, Victor," he jerked out, as though he had screwed himself up for the necessary courage to speak on the subject. "I was thinkin' o' that white crittur you got yarnin' about when you come around our shanty. Jest whar's that Moosefoot Reserve, an'–an' the bit o' forest whar her lodge is located? Maybe I'd fancy to know. I 'lows I was kind o' struck on that yarn."

The trader saw the eager face, and the excitement in the eyes which looked into his, and, in a moment, his merry mood died out. His dark face became serious, and his keen black eyes looked sharply back into Nick's expressive countenance. He answered at once in characteristic fashion.

"The Reserve's nigh on to a hund'ed an' fifty miles from here, I guess. Lies away ther' to the nor'east, down in the Foothills. The bluff lies beyond." Then he paused and a flash of thought shot through his

active brain. There was a strange something looking out of Nick's eyes which he interpreted aright. Inspiration leapt, and he gripped it, and held it.

"Say," he went on, "you ain't thinkin' o' makin' the Reserve, Nick?" Then he turned swiftly and looked at Ralph. The quieter man was gazing heavily at his brother. And as Victor turned back again to Nick his heart beat faster.

Nick lowered his eyes when he found himself the object of the double scrutiny. He felt as though he would like to have withdrawn his questions, and he shifted uneasily. But Victor waited for his answer and he was forced to go on.

"Oh," he said, with a shamefaced laugh, "I was on'y jest thinkin'. I 'lows that yarn was a real good one."

There was a brief silence while swift thought was passing behind Victor's dark face. Then slowly, and even solemnly, came words which gripped the hearts of his two guests.

"It wa'n't no yarn. I see that White Squaw wi' my own two eyes."

Nick started to his feet. The "punch" had fired him almost beyond control. His face worked with nervous twitchings. He raised one hand up and swung it forcefully down as though delivering a blow.

"By Gar!" he cried, "then I go an' find her; I go an' see for myself."

And as he spoke a strange expression looked out of Victor's eyes.

Ralph removed his pipe from his lips.

"Good, Nick," he said emphatically. "The dogs are fresh. Guess a long trail'll do 'em a deal o' good. When'll we start?"

Nick looked across at his brother. He was doubtful if he had heard aright. He had expected strong opposition from the quiet, steady-going Ralph. But, instead, the elder man gave unhesitating approval. Just for one instant there came a strange feeling in his heart; a slight doubt, a sensation of disappointment, something foreign to his nature and unaccountable, something which took all pleasure from the

thought of his brother's company. It was quite a fleeting sensation, however, for the next moment it was gone; his honest nature rose superior to any such jealousy and he strode across the room and gripped Ralph's hand.

"Say, we'll start at daylight, brother. Jest you an' me," he blurted out, in the fulness of his large heart. "We'll hunt that white crittur out, we'll smell her out like Injun med'cine-men, an' we'll bring her back wi' us. Say, Ralph, we'll treat her like an angel, this dandy, queer thing. By Gar! We'll find her, sure. Shake again, brother." They wrung each other forcefully by the hand. "Shake, Victor." And Nick turned and caught the trader's slim hand in his overwhelming grasp.

His enthusiasm was at boiling point. The brew of essences had done its work. Victor's swift-moving eyes saw what was passing in the thoughts of both his guests. And, like the others, his enthusiasm rose. But there was none of the simple honesty of these men in Victor. The half-breed cunning was working within him; and the half-breed cunning is rarely clean.

And so the night ended to everybody's satisfaction. Ralph was even more quiet than usual. Victor Gagnon felt that the stars were working in his best interests; and he blessed the lucky and innocent thought that had suggested to him the yarn of the White Squaw. As for Nick, his delight was boisterous and unrestrained. He revelled openly in the prospect of the morrow's journey.

Nor had broad daylight power to shake the purpose of the night. Too long had the trappers brooded upon the story of the White Squaw. Victor knew his men so well too; while they breakfasted he used every effort to encourage them. He literally herded them on by dint of added detail and well-timed praise of the woman's beauty.

And after the meal the sled was prepared. Victor was chief adviser. He made them take a supply of essences and "trade." He told them of the disposition of Man-of-the-Snow-Hill, the Moosefoot chief, assuring them he would sell his soul for strong drink. No encouragement was

left ungiven, and, well before noon, the dogs stood ready in the traces.

A hearty farewell; then out upon the white trail Nick strung the willing beasts, and the flurry of loose surface-snow that flew in their wake hid the sled as the train glided away to the far northeast.

Victor stood watching the receding figures till the hiss of the runners died down in the distance, and the driving voice of Nick became lost in the grey solitude. The northern trail held them and he felt safe. He moved out upon the trampled snow, and, passing round to the back of the store, disappeared within the pine wood which backed away up the slope of the valley.

Later he came to where three huts were hidden away amongst the vast tree-trunks. They were so placed, and so disguised, as to be almost hidden until the wanderer chanced right upon them. These habitations were a part of Victor's secret life. There was a strange mushroom look about them; low walls of muck-daubed logs supported wide-stretching roofs of reeds, which, in their turn, supported a thick covering of soot-begrimed snow. He paused near by and uttered a low call, and presently a tall girl emerged from one of the doors. She walked slowly toward him with proud, erect carriage, while at her heels followed two fierce husky dogs, moving with all the large dignity of honoured guards. The woman was taller than the trader, and her beauty of figure was in no wise hidden by the blanket clothing she wore. They talked earnestly together for some time, and then, in answer to a further summons from Victor, they were joined by a tall, gaunt man, with the solemn cast of face of an Indian, and a pair of eyes as darkly brooding as those of a moose. Although he was very dark-skinned he was plainly of the bastard race of his companions, and a certain resemblance between himself and the woman spoke of relationship.

The three talked long and seriously, and finally Victor returned alone to the store. Again he took up his stand in the doorway and remained gazing out upon the valley of the Little Choyeuse Creek, and the more

distant crags of the foothills beyond.

His face was serious; serious even for the wild, where all levity seems out of place, and laughter jars upon the solemnity of the life and death struggle for existence which is for ever being fought out there. On his brow was a pucker of deep thought, whilst his eyes shone with a look which seemed to have gathered from his surroundings much of the cunning which belongs to the creatures of the forest. His usual expression of good-fellowship had passed; and in its place appeared a hungry, avaricious look which, although always there, was generally hidden behind a superficial geniality. Victor had hitherto lived fairly honestly because there was little or no temptation to do otherwise where his trading-post was stationed. But it was not his nature to do so. And as he stood gazing out upon the rugged picture before him he knew he was quite unobserved; and so the rough soul within him was laid bare to the grey light of the world.

CHAPTER IV.
THE HOODED MAN

The mere suggestion of the possibility of a woman's presence had rudely broken up the even calm of Ralph and Nick Westley's lives. To turn back to the peace of their mountain home without an effort to discover so fair and strange a creature as this White Squaw would have been impossible.

These men had known no real youth. They had fought the battle of life from the earliest childhood, they had lived lives as dispassionate and cold as the glaciers of their mountain home. Recreation was almost unknown to them. Toil, unremitting, arduous, had been their lot. Thus Nature had been defied; and now she was coming back on them as inevitably as the sun rises and sets, and the seasons come and go. They failed to realize their danger; they had no understanding of the passions that moved them, and so they hurried headlong upon the trail that was to lead them they knew not whither, but which was shadowed by disaster every foot of the way. To them temptation was irresistible for they had never known the teaching of restraint; it was the passionate rending of the bonds which had all too long stifled their youth.

Even the dogs realized the change in their masters. Nick's lash fell heavily and frequently, and the hardy brutes, who loved the toil of the trace, and the incessant song of the trailing sled, fell to wondering at the change, and the pace they were called upon to make. It was not their nature to complain; their pride was the stubborn, unbending pride of savage power, and their reply to the wealing thong was always the reply their driver sought. Faster and faster they journeyed as the uncooling ardour of their master's spirits rose.

The snow lay thick and heavy, and every inch of the wild, unmeasured trail had to be broken. The Northland giants thronged about them, glistening in their impenetrable armour and crested by the silvery burnish of their glacial headpieces. They frowned vastly, yet with a sublime contempt, at the puny intrusion of their solitude. But the fiery spirit impelling the brothers was a power which defied the overwhelming grandeur of the mountain world, and rendered insignificant the trials they encountered. The cry was “On!” and the dogs laboured as only these burden-bearers of the North can labour.

The dark day ripened; and, as the dull sun crept out from behind the greyness, and revealed the frost in the air, the temperature dropped lower and lower. And the animal world peeped furtively out upon the strange sight of creatures like themselves toiling at the command of beings whose voices had not even the power to smite the mountainsides with boastful defiance as theirs were wont to do.

Then the daylight waned. The sky returned to its greyness as the night shades rose, and a bitter breeze shuddered through the woods and along the valleys. The sounds of the forest rose in mournful cadence, and, as the profundity of the mountain night settled heavily upon the world, the timber-wolf, the outlaw of the region, moved abroad, lifting his voice in a cry half-mournful, half-exultant.

Camp was pitched well clear of the forest and a large fire kindled; and the savage night-prowlers drew forth from the woodland shadows. The men proceeded silently with their various tasks. Ralph prepared their own food, and soon a savoury odour tickled the nostrils of those beyond the circle of the firelight. Nick thawed out the dogs’ evening meal and distributed it impartially, standing over the hungry beasts with a club to see that each got the full benefit of his portion. It was a strange sight for the furtive eyes that looked on, and a tantalizing one, but they dared not draw near, for the fire threatened them, and, besides, they possessed a keen instinct of caution.

After supper the men rested in spells, one always sitting up by the fire

whilst the other slept in the comfort of his fur-lined “Arctic bag.” And presently the blackness about lightened, and the dark shadows prowling became visible to the eyes of the sentry. The moon had risen, but was still hidden somewhere behind the great mountains. Its light had effect, that was all. And as the night wore on the shadows grew bolder and their presence kept the sentry ever on the alert. For the most part he sat still, swathed to the eyes in his furs; he huddled down over the fire smoking, every now and then pausing to thaw the nicotine in the stem of his pipe. But his eyes seemed to be watching in every direction at once. Nor was the vaguest shadow lost to their quick flashing glances.

The dogs, sleeping in their snow-burrows, rested their muscles, dreaming peacefully of happy hunting-grounds. Their safety was assured under the watchful eyes of their masters; the forest world had no terrors for them.

Towards dawn Nick was on the watch. The aspect of the night had quite changed. The moon, large, full, brilliant, was directly overhead, and the stars, like magnificent dewdrops, hung richly in the sky. Away to the north, just clear of a stretch of heaven-high peaks, the scintillating shafts of the northern lights shuddered convulsively, like skeleton arms outstretched to grasp the rich gems which hung just beyond their reach. The moving shadows had changed to material forms. Lank, gaunt, hungry-looking beasts crowded just beyond the fire-lit circle; shaggy-coated creatures, with manes a-bristle and baleful eyes which gazed angrily upon the camp.

Nick saw all these; could have counted them, so watchful was he. The wolves were of small account, but there were other creatures which needed his most vigilant attention. Twice in the night he had seen two green-glowing eyes staring down upon him from among the branches of one of the trees on the edge of the forest. He knew those eyes, as who of his calling would not; a puma was crouching along the wide-spreading bough.

He stealthily drew his gun towards him. He was in the act of raising it to his shoulder when the eyes were abruptly withdrawn. The time passed on. He knew that the puma had not departed, and he waited, ready. The eyes reappeared. Up leapt the rifle, but ere his hand had compressed the trigger a sound from behind arrested him. His head turned instantly, and, gazing through the light, drifting fire smoke, he beheld the outline of a monstrous figure bearing down upon the camp in an almost human manner. In size the newcomer dwarfed the trapper; it came slowly with a shuffling gait. Suddenly it dropped to all-fours and came on quicker. Nick hesitated only for a second. His mouth set firmly and his brows contracted. He knew that at all hazards he must settle the puma first. He glanced at the sleeping Ralph. He was about to rouse him; then he changed his mind and swung round upon the puma, leaving the fire between himself and the other. He took a long and deadly aim. The glowing eyes offered a splendid target and he knew he must not miss. A report rang out, followed almost instantaneously by a piteous, half-human shriek of pain; then came the sound of a body falling, and the eyes had vanished. After firing Nick swung round to the figure beyond the fire. It loomed vast in the yellow light and was reared to its full height not ten yards away. A low, snarling growl came from it, and the sound was dreadful in its suppressed ferocity. Ralph was now sitting up gazing at the oncoming brute,–a magnificent grizzly. Nick stooped, seized a blazing log from the fire, and dashed out to meet the intruder.

It was a strange and impressive sight, this encounter of man and beast. But Nick, with his wide experience, was master of the situation. He boldly went up to within two yards of his savage and fearless foe and dashed the burning brand into the creature's face. Down dropped the grizzly upon all-fours again, and, with a roar of pain and terror, ambled hastily away into the forest.

"B'ar?" questioned Ralph, from the shelter of his fur bag.

"Yes–an' puma," replied Nick unconcernedly, as he returned to his seat to await the coming of morning.

And so the long night passed, and the slow day broke over the bleak, pitiless world. The dogs awoke, and clambered from their warm, snowy couches. The routine of the “long trail” obtained, and once more the song of the sled rang out at the heels of the eager beasts.

Nor was the short day and long weary night in such a region without effect upon the men. A feeling of superstitious uneasiness seized upon Nick. He said nothing, he was possibly too ashamed of it to do so, but the dread steadily grew, and no effort of his seemed to have power to dispel it. As he moved along beside his dogs he would shoot swift, fearful glances at the heights above, or back over the trail, or on ahead to some deep, dark gorge they might be approaching. He grew irritable. The darkness of the woods would sometimes hold his attention for hours, while the expression of his eyes would tell of the strange thoughts passing behind them. And Ralph, though more unemotional than his brother, was scarcely less affected. It was startling in such men, yet was it hardly to be wondered at in so overpowering a waste.

It was still the morning of the second day. Nick’s whip had been silent for a long time. His eyes were gazing out afar. Sometimes up at the lowering sky, where the peaks were lost in a sea of dark cloud, sometimes down, with a brooding fire, into the forest depths. Ralph had observed the change in his brother and sympathy prompted him to draw up alongside him.

“What’s ailin’ ye?” he asked.

Nick shook his head; he could not say that anything ailed him.

“Thought, maybe ther’ was somethin’ amiss,” went on his brother, half-apologetically. He felt himself that he must talk.

Then Nick was seized with a desire to confide in the only lifelong friend he had ever known.

“Ther’ ain’t nothin’ amiss, zac’ly,” he said. And he got no farther.

“Hah!”

Ralph looked round sharply. It seemed as if something were stirring about him. He waited expectantly. There was nothing unusual in sight. A wild panorama of snowy grandeur; mountain and valley and wood, that was all.

They traipsed on in silence, but now they journeyed side by side. Both men were strangely moved. Both had heard of the “Dread of the Wild,” but they would have scoffed at the idea of its assailing them. But the haunting clung, and at each step they felt that the next might be the signal for a teeming spirit life to suddenly break up the dreadful calm.

They passed a hollow where the snow was unusually deep and soft. The dogs laboured wearily. They reached the rising end of it, and toiled up the sharp ascent. The top was already in sight and a fresh vista of the interminable peaks broke up their view. Without apparent reason Nick suddenly drew up and a sharp exclamation broke from him. The dogs lay down in the traces, and both men gazed back into the hollow they had left. Nick towered erect, and, with eyes staring, pointed at a low hill on the other side of it.

Ralph followed the direction of the outstretched arm. And as he looked he held his breath, for something seemed to grip his throat.

Then a moment later words, sounding hoarse and stifled, came from the depths of his storm-collar.

“Who–who is it?”

Nick did not answer. Both were staring out across the hollow at the tall motionless figure of a man, and their eyes were filled with an expression of painful awe. The figure was aggressively distinct, silhouetted as it was against a barren, snow-clad crag. They might have been gazing at a statue, so still the figure stood. It was enveloped in fur, so far as the watchers could tell, but what impressed them most was the strange hood which covered the head. The figure was too distant for them to have distinguished the features of the face had they been visible, but, as it was, they were lost within the folds of

the grey hood.

There came an ominous click from behind. Ralph turned suddenly and seized his brother's arm as he was in the act of raising his rifle to his shoulder. The gun was lowered, and the intense face of Nick scowled at the author of the interruption.

"It's–it ain't a human crittur," he said hoarsely.

"It's a man," retorted Ralph, without releasing his hold.

And the two brothers became silent.

They stood watching for a long time. Neither spoke again, they had nothing to say. Their thoughts occupied them with strange apprehension while the dogs sprawled in the snow in the spiritless manner of their kind when the labour of the traces is not demanded of them. The figure on the hill stood quite still. The silence of the wild was profound. No wind stirred to relieve it, and even under their warm furs the two men watching shivered as with cold.

At last the movement they had awaited came. The Hooded Man turned towards them. One long arm was raised and he pointed away at a tall hill. Then his arm moved, and he seemed to be pointing out certain landmarks for his own benefit. Again, on a sudden, as he fronted the direction where the brothers stood, he dropped his arm, and, a moment later, disappeared on the other side of the hill. The two men remained gazing out across the hollow for some while longer, but as the Hooded Man did not return they turned back to their dogs and continued their journey.

Nick shook his head in a dissatisfied manner. Ralph said nothing for awhile. He was beginning to doubt his own assertion.

The dogs leapt at their breast-draws and the sled moved forward. The two men ran side by side. When Nick at length spoke it was to reiterate his fears.

"Ther' wa'n't no face showed," he said abruptly.

"No," replied Ralph. Then he added thoughtfully: "He hadn't no dogs,

neither."

"He was alone, seemly. Ther' wa'n't no camp outfit."

Ralph shook his head and brushed away the ice about his mouth with the back of his beaver mitt.

There was a painful atmosphere of disquiet about the two men. Their backward glances spoke far louder than words. Had their mission been in the nature of their ordinary calling they would possibly have felt nothing but curiosity, and their curiosity would have led them to investigate further, but as it was, all their inclinations tended in the opposite direction. "The Dread of the Wild" had come to them.

When they camped at midday things were no better. They had seen nothing more to disturb them, but the thoughts of both had turned upon the night, so long and drear, which was to come; and the "dread" grew stronger.

After the noon meal Nick harnessed the dogs while Ralph stowed the chattels. They were on a hillside overlooking a wide valley of unbroken forest. All was ready for a start and Nick gave a wide, comprehensive glance around. The magic word "Mush," which would send the dogs headlong at their breast harness, hovered on his lips, but ere he gave it utterance it changed into an ejaculation of horror.

"By Gar!" Then after a thrilling pause, "The Hood!"

Ralph, standing ready to break the sled out, turned.

"Hey!" he ejaculated; and horror was in his tone, too.

There, in the hazy distance, more than three miles away, was the dim figure of the Hooded Man racing over the snow. His course lay on the far side of the valley and he was to the rear of them.

Nick turned back to the dogs, the command "Mush!" rang out with biting emphasis, and the dogs and men, as though both were animated by the same overwhelming fear, raced down the virgin trail. Their pace was a headlong flight.

Night came, and they camped in the open. The night was blacker, and

longer, more weary and shadowy than the first, by reason of the "dread" which had now become the "Dread of the Hooded Man." Even thoughts of the White Squaw took a secondary place in the minds of the brothers, for, at every turn, they felt that their steps were dogged by that other strange creature of the wild. When morning came they knew, without looking, that somewhere, coldly surveying their camp, the grey-hooded figure would be watching and waiting for them to move on. And sure enough, as the eager eyes looked out over the snow and forest, the grim, silent figure was there, watching, watching; but no nearer to them.

That night they came to the Moosefoot Reserve, and both men experienced such nervous relief as they had never before known. They camped within sight of the Indian teepees and log huts, but they waited for morning before they approached the chief.

Over their fire they discussed their plans with seriousness. Neither of them could speak the Moosefoot language, but they could talk both Sioux and Cree, and they did not doubt but there would be interpreters about the chief.

"We'll see him first thing, I guess," said the eager Nick. "Guess them two black foxes'll fix him good. He'll git a goodish bit o' trade for 'em."

"An' we'll promise him powder, an' slugs, an' essences," said the cautious Ralph. "We'll get his yarn first an' pay after," he added, as he sipped his coffee.

Nick nodded.

"We'll fin' that crittur, sure," he said.

And he sat gazing upon the pictures his mind conjured up as he watched the flaming logs. In every tongue of flame he beheld the glowing face Victor had told them of, and, as the smoke rolled up into the black vault of night, he seemed to see the elusive form of the White Squaw floating in its midst. Ralph's slower imagination was less fantastically, but no less deeply, stirred.

At daybreak they sought Man-of-the-Snow-Hill's lodge. They found

him a grizzled wreck of extreme age. He was surrounded by his medicine-men, his young chiefs and his squaws. And by the gathering in the smoke-begrimed hut they knew that their approach had been made known.

Perfect silence reigned as the white men entered. An Indian silence; such silence as it would be hard to find anywhere but in the primitive dwelling. The atmosphere of the place was heavy with the pungent odours of Killi-ka-nik. Both men and women were smoking it in pipes of red clay with reed stems, and they passed this sign of friendship from one to another in solemn fashion. All were clad in the parti-coloured blanket, and sat hunched upon their quarters more like beasts than human creatures, yet with that perfect air of dignity which the Indian seldom loses.

Man-of-the-Snow-Hill alone differed in his dress and attitude. He was wrapped in a large buffalo robe, and was stretched out upon a pile of skins to ease his rheumatics, while, spread out before him, were a number of charms and much “med’cine,” which had been so set by his wise men to alleviate his ailments. In the centre of the throng a fire smouldered, and the smoke therefrom rose sullenly upon the dense air and drifted out through a hole in the flat roof. Man-of-the-Snow-Hill blinked his watery eyes as the strangers entered, and passed his pipe to his favourite squaw, a buxom, sleepy-eyed beauty who sat upon his right. Then he grunted intelligently as he saw the visitors deposit their pile of presents upon the floor, and, in the manner of the neche, seat themselves beside it.

Ralph spoke his greeting in Indian fashion.

“How,” he said.

“How!” replied Man-of-the-Snow-Hill, in a thin, reedy voice. And his followers echoed the sentiment in chorus.

Then the aged chief held out his hand in further greeting. And each neche in turn shook the white men by the hand.

The visitors filled and lighted their pipes, and passed their plugs of

tobacco to the others. Then Ralph began to speak in Cree.

“We come far to speak with Man-of-the-Snow-Hill,” he began.

The watery-eyed chief shook his head, grunting. The squaws laughed, and the med’cine-men closed their eyes in sign of not understanding the tongue in which he spoke. Then a young chief harangued his comrades. He could understand the tongue and would interpret. The old chief nodded approval and continued to gaze greedily at the presents.

Now the conversation proceeded quite smoothly.

“We wish to speak with the great Man-of-the-Snow-Hill in private,” Ralph said. “We have much to say, and many presents.”

The chief blinked with satisfaction, and grunted appreciation. His lined face lit up. He waved one shaking arm and his followers reluctantly departed. All except the interpreter and the chief squaw.

Then Ralph went on. Nick had care of the presents, and on him the cunning old chief kept his eyes. He opened a large bag of beads and emptied some on a spread of cheap print. The squaw’s eyes smiled greedily.

“We wish the great chief well,” said Ralph, using all the flowery embellishments of the Cree tongue, “and we would live in peace. We have tobacco, beads, skins, prints, and blankets. And we would lay them all at the feet of the great man, the mighty hunter, if he would help us to find that which we seek.”

Ralph signed to his brother and Nick laid out an array of presents and passed them with due solemnity to the old man.

“Ow-ow!” grunted Man-of-the-Snow-Hill, as he waved the things away to his squaw. He was not satisfied, and his eyes watered as though he were weeping.

Then Ralph went on.

“We have come on the ‘long trail’ through the mountains. And we seek the White Squaw of the Moosefoot Indians.”

The chief remained quite calm, but his bleared old eyes shot a sidelong gleam at the speaker in which there was little friendliness. No other movement was allowed to give evidence of disquiet. It is part of the upbringing of the neche to eschew all outward signs of emotion. The Sun Dance, when the braves are made, is the necessary education in this direction. Ralph saw the look but failed to take its meaning. The squaw watched the white men with keen interest. Nick was groping about in the depths of a gunny-sack.

Ralph plunged into the fantastic story which he and Nick had prepared. The language of the Cree helped him, for the natural colouring of the Indian tongues is as flowery as that of any Eastern race.

"We come from beyond the mountains, from the hunting-grounds of forest and river where the great fathers of the Moosefoot Indians dwelt. We come to tell the White Squaw that the land cries out for her, and the return of the children of the Moose. We come to speak with her of these things, for the time has come when she must leave her forest home and return to her own land. Man-of-the-Snow-Hill must show us the way. We have many presents which we will give him."

"It is well," said the great man, closing his eyes while the water oozed from between the compressed lids. "The white men are the friends of the Moosefoot people, and they have many presents. Have they fire-water?"

Nick produced some bottles and the great man reached for them greedily. But the other withheld them.

"What will Man-of-the-Snow-Hill do for the fire-water?" Ralph asked.

The interpreter passed the word.

"He will send his favourite squaw to guide the white men," he answered at once. "He can do no more."

A dozen bottles of vanilla essence passed over to the chief. A number of other presents were handed to him. Then without a word the squaw arose and accompanied the white men out.

And without further delay the brothers continued their journey. Fleet of foot, untiring, silent as only an Indian woman can be, the squaw led the way. North, north; always north they travelled, over hill, through forest and deep white valley, without let-up to their eager speed. The superstitious dread which had hitherto so afflicted the white men now fell away from them. Night came on swift and silent, and camp was pitched on the edge of a dense forest.

Ere the daylight had quite died out the squaw took the two men to the crest of a hill. She looked out across the virgin carpet of towering pines below them and pointed with one blanket-covered arm outstretched. She was silent while she indicated several points in the vast panorama before her. Then she tried to tell them something.

But her language was the language of her tribe, and neither of the men could understand her. Then she spoke in the language of signs, which all Indians speak so well.

She raised her hand, pointing eastward, till it reached a point directly overhead. Then she pointed to her feet, and her hand moved slowly in a northern direction, after which she made a running movement with her feet. Then she bent her body and appeared to be gazing about her, searching. Finally she pointed to two very large trees which stood out apart from their fellows. Then again came the motion of running, which finished quickly, and she pointed first to Nick's face and then to herself. After that she stood motionless, with arms folded over her bosom. And the two men read her meaning.

At daylight they were to start out northward and travel until midday. Then they were to halt and search the outskirts of the forest until they found two mammoth trees standing apart. The space between them was the mouth of a pathway into the heart of the forest. They were to traverse this path a short distance, and they would discover the White Squaw.

Ralph nodded his head slowly in token of comprehension. He waited to see if she had aught further to say. But the woman remained

standing where she was, slightly aloof and with her arms folded. Her sleepy eyes were watching the last dying gleam of daylight away in the west. Suddenly, out upon the still air, came a doleful cry. It was long-drawn-out and mournful, but it travelled as mountain cries will travel. It came waving upon the air with a certain rise and fall in it like the rippling of water. It rose up, up, and then lingeringly died out. The men listened, and looked in the direction whence it came, and, as they looked, a feeling of awe swept over them. In a rush the old "dread" awoke, and their gaze was filled with the expression of it.

Out to the west the forest lay gloomy, brooding; and within a few hundred yards of them stood the mighty sentry trees which the squaw had pointed out. But now between them, breaking up the dead white carpet which covered the earth, the tall form of the Hooded Man stood silhouetted. Grim and ghostly he looked, as, motionless, he gazed upon the watchers.

With the instinct of self-defence which the wild teaches so insistently, Nick unslung his rifle. Ere Ralph could stay him the shot rang out, echoing away over the tree-tops. The figure had disappeared, and the unblemished carpet of snow was as it had been before. Nick stood aghast, for he was a dead shot. Ralph gazed helplessly at the spot where the man had stood.

Suddenly Nick gasped.

"It–it ain't human."

And Ralph had no answer to make.

Then presently they turned to where the Moosefoot squaw had stood. She, too, had gone; vanished as completely as had the Hooded Man. There was the trail of her snow-shoes ruffling the snow, and the men ran following it as far as the forest edge; but here they stood. They could follow no further. Night was upon them. Slowly they returned to camp.

The next day they continued their journey with almost fanatical persistence. They found no sentry-trees such as the squaw had

described. Forest, yes, but where in that region could they fail to find forest? The abode of the White Squaw was nowhere to be found.

That night they decided upon their next move in the quiet, terse manner of men who cannot bring themselves to speak of the strange feelings which possess them; who are ashamed of their own weakness, and yet must acknowledge it to themselves.

“An’ to-morrow–” said Nick, glancing apprehensively around beyond the fire, over which they were sitting, fighting the deadly cold of the night.

“To-morrow?” echoed Ralph.

“Where?” asked Nick, looking away towards the south.

Ralph followed the direction of his brother’s gaze.

“Um.” And he nodded.

“What–south?”

“South.”

“An’ the Wh–”

Ralph shook his head, and smoked on solemnly.

CHAPTER V.
THE WHITE SQUAW

Down the sharp incline Nick ran beside his dogs; Ralph was close behind. They were home once more in their own silent valley, and were pushing on to avoid the coming snow-storm which the leaden hue of the sky portended. So the dogs were rushed along at a great pace, for the dugout was beyond, a full hour distant.

It had been a weary journey, that return from the quest of the White Squaw. But the weariness had been mental. The excitement of their going had eaten up their spirit, and left them with a feeling of distressing lassitude. They were sobered; and, as men recovering from drunkenness, they felt ashamed, and their tempers were uncertain.

But as the string of huskies raced down into the valley they knew so well, yelping a joyful greeting to the familiar objects about them, the men began to feel better, and less like those who are detected in unworthy actions.

The dogs emerged upon their original outward-bound trail and pursued it along the edge of the forest. They needed no urging, and even set a pace which taxed all their masters' speed. The sight of the familiar scenes had banished the "Dread of the Wild" from the minds of the two men, and their spirits rose as they approached the frost-bound river below their home. There were no stealing glances into the gloomy shelter of the woods, no nervous backward turns of the head. They looked steadily ahead for the glad sight of their home; and the snap of the crisp snow under the heavy-footed dogs, and the eager, steady pull on the traces brought a cheerful light to their eyes such as had not been there for days.

But although they had failed to discover the White Squaw, she was by no means forgotten. A certain sense of relief had followed their first moments of keen disappointment, but it was only a revulsion of their strained nerves; thoughts of her which were, perhaps, less fiery and reckless, but consequently more enduring, still possessed them.

Ralph was especially calm. He had thought the whole thing over in his deliberate fashion, and, finally, admitted to himself that what had happened was for the best. Nick was less easy. His disappointment had slightly soured an already hasty, but otherwise kindly, disposition. He needed something of his brother's calm to balance him. But, however, in both cases, somewhere deep down in their hearts the fateful flame so strangely kindled was still burning; a deep, strong, unquenchable fire.

They were almost home. Before them lay the frozen waterway. Beyond that, and above, rose the hill, on the face of which stood their shack; and about them was the brooding silence, still and portentous, but familiar.

The lead-dog plunged down the bank and the rest followed, whilst Ralph and Nick steadied the laden sled. The brief passage was made, and Nick's whip drove the fierce, willing beasts at the ascent beyond. Then, ere the sled had left the river, and while the dogs still struggled in their harness to lift its nose over what was almost a cut-bank, and when Nick's attention was most needed, the whip suddenly became idle, and his stock of driving-curses changed to a shout of alarmed surprise.

Down he dropped upon his knees; and, with head bent low, examined the disturbed surface of the snow. In an instant Ralph was at his side. The dogs had ceased to pull and crouched down in their traces. A strange and wonderful thing had happened. In their absence their valley had been invaded, and the indications were those of human agency.

Nick pointed, and his outstretched forefinger moved slowly over a

footprint indicating the sharp, clean outline which the surface of the snow still retained. A moccasin-covered foot had trodden there; and the mark left was small, smaller than that of an ordinary man. And the two heads, almost touching, bent over it in silent scrutiny.

Presently Ralph raised his eyes and looked ahead. Step by step he traced the marks on up the hill in the direction of the dugout, and, at last, silent speculation gave place to tense, low-spoken words.

“Injun moccasins,” he said.

“Guess so, by the seamin’.”

“’Tain’t a buck neche, neither.”

“No.”

There was an impressive pause, and the silent land seemed weighted down as with an atmosphere of gloomy presage. Nick broke it, and his voice had in it a harsh ring. The fire of passion was once more alight in his eyes.

“It’s a squaw’s,” he added.

“Yes, sure; a squaw’s,” and Ralph swallowed a deep breath as though his surroundings stifled him.

A thrill of emotion moved both men. There had leapt within them, in one great, overwhelming tide, all the old reckless craze for the shadowy creature of Victor’s story. At the mere suggestion of a squaw’s presence in that valley their blood-tide surged through their veins like a torrent of fire, and their pulses were set beating like sledge-hammers. A squaw! A squaw! That was their cry. Why not the White Squaw?

Whilst Ralph gazed on ahead Nick still bent over the footprint. The delicate shape, the deep hollow of the ball of the foot, the round cup which marked the heel, and, between them, the narrow, shallow indentation which formed the high-arched instep. In fancy he built over the marks the tall, lithe, straight-limbed creature Victor had told them of. He saw the long flowing hair which fell in a shower upon her

shoulders; and the beautiful eyes blue as the summer sky. In a moment his tanned face was transformed and became radiant.

Ralph, the quiet and thoughtful, was no less moved. But he turned from his brother, hugging his own anticipations to himself, and concealing them behind a grim mask of impassivity. His eyes were bright with the same insistent idea, but he told himself that the thing was impossible. He told himself that She lived in the north, and not even the chase of the far-travelling moose could have brought her hither from her forest home. These things he said in his caution, but he did not listen to the voice of his doubt, and his heart beat in great bounding pulsations.

Suddenly Nick sprang from the ground, and short and sharp came his words.

“Let’s git on.”

“Ay,” replied Ralph, and he turned back to the sled.

And again the dogs laid foot to the ground; and again the voice of Nick roused the hollow echoes of the shimmering peaks; again the song of the sled-runners rose and fell in cadence brisk and sharp on the still, cold air. But all the world was changed to the men. The stillness was only the stillness which appeals to the physical senses. There was a sensation of life in the air; a feeling of living surroundings; a certain knowledge that they were no longer alone in their valley. A woman was present; *the* woman.

The widening break of the forest gave place to a broad sloping expanse of snow-land. It was the hill down which they had travelled many thousands of times. Above, more snow-laden forest, and above that the steel of the glacier which rose till its awful limits plunged into the grey world of cloud. The dugout was not yet in view; there was a scored and riven crag, black and barren, impervious to the soft caresses of velvety snow, to be passed ere the home which was theirs would be sighted. Besides, as yet neither of the men had turned their eyes from the trailing footprints to look ahead. Thus they came to

the higher ground.

Now the barren crag seemed to thrust itself out, an impassable barrier; a mute protest at further progress; a grim, silent warning that the home beyond was no longer for them, no longer the home they had always known. And the hard-breathing dogs toiled on, straining at their breast-harness, with bodies heaving forward, heads bent low, and quarters drooped to give them surer purchase. They, too, as though by instinct, followed the footprints. As the marks swung out to pass the jutting cliff the lead-dog followed their course; Nick, on the right of them, moved wide, and craned to obtain a first view of the hut. Suddenly he gave a great shout. The dogs dropped in their harness and crouched, snarling and snapping, their jaws clipping together with the sound of castanets, whilst their wiry manes rose upon their shoulders bristling with ferocity which had in it something of fear. Ralph reached his brother's side and peered beyond the cliff.

And as he looked his breath suddenly ceased, and one hand clutched his brother's arm with a force that bruised the softer flesh, and in silence the two men gaped at the vision which they beheld. There was what seemed an endless pause while the men and dogs alike focused their gaze upon the strange apparition.

A figure, calm, serene, stood before the door of the dugout, from which the logs had been removed. Like a sentry "at ease" the figure stood resting gracefully, leaning upon the muzzle of a long rifle. Fur crowned the head which was nobly poised, and a framing of flowing dark hair showed off to perfection the marble-like whiteness of the calm, beautiful face. The robes were characteristic of the Northern Indians; beads, buckskin and fur. A tunic reached to the knees, and below that appeared "chaps," which ended where woollen stockings surmounted moosehide moccasins.

A wild, picturesque figure was this creature of the mountain solitude; and, to the wondering eyes of the two men, something which filled them with superstitious awe and a primitive gladness that was almost

overpowering. The dogs alone seemed to resent the intrusion. There was no joy in their attitude which was one of angry protest.

Nick broke the silence.

"White–white," he murmured, without knowledge that he spoke aloud.

Ralph's face was working. His excitement, slow to rise, now overwhelmed him, and he answered in a similar tone.

"That hair," he muttered. "Dark, dark; an' them chaps wi' beads of Injun patte'n. An' the muzzle-loadin' weapin."

Nick took up the argument as his brother broke off.

"It's a squaw, too."

"Her eyes, he says, was blue," Ralph murmured, breathing hard.

"An' she was leanin' on a gun," Nick added softly.

"It's–"

"By Gar! It is!"

Nick turned to the dogs with the wild impetuosity of a man who knows not the meaning of patience. His fiery orders fairly hurled the brutes at their task, and the sled leapt forward. On, on, they sped, till they halted within a few yards of the silent figure.

The woman showed no signs of fear, a matter which both men set down to the fact that she was a queen among her own people. She still stood in the position in which she had watched their approach. There was not a quiver of the delicate eyelids, not a tremor of the perfect mouth. Proud, haughty, and masked by the impassivity of the Indian races, she awaited the coming of the strangers.

And as men and dogs halted there was an awkwardness. How should they address her? They consulted, and their whisperings were loud enough to reach her ears. They did not attempt to suppress their tones unduly. This woman, they knew, did not understand the tongue of the whites, and probably knew only the language of the Moosefoot people. Therefore they spoke unguardedly. They admitted to each other the woman's identity. Ralph was for speaking to her in Cree;

Nick for the language of signs. And while they talked the woman looked on. Had they been keenly observant they would have seen the shadow of an occasional smile curl the corners of her beautiful lips. As it was they saw only the superb form, and eyes so wondrously blue, shining like sapphires from an oval face framed with waves of black hair.

At last Ralph advanced toward her.

“You’re welcome to our shack,” he said, in Cree.

The woman shook her beautiful head, but smiled upon him; and the simple soul felt the blood rush from heart to head.

“Try signs,” said Nick impatiently. “How’s the White Squaw o’ the Moosefoots goin’ to savvee a low-down bat like Cree. I sed so ’fore.”

The blue eyes were turned on Nick with a deep inscrutable smile. Nick felt that life at her feet was the only life possible.

And Ralph resorted to signs, while Nick alternated his attention between his idolatrous, silent worship of the lovely woman and clubbing his dogs into quiescence. Their angry protests seemed to express something more abiding than mere displeasure at the intrusion of a stranger. They seemed to feel a strong instinctive antagonism toward this beautiful woman.

Ralph persisted with his signs. The woman read them easily and replied in her own sign-language, which was wonderful to behold. Ralph and Nick read it as though they were listening to a familiar tongue.

She told them that she was Aim-sa, which is the Moosefoot for “Blue-Sky”; and that she was the White Squaw, the queen of her people. She indicated that she was out on a “long trail” hunting, and that she had found herself in this valley, with a snow-storm coming on. She had seen the dugout and had sought its shelter, intending to remain there until the storm had passed. She made it clear to them that a bull moose and four cows had entered the valley. She had trailed them for

many days. She asked the brothers if, when the storm had passed, they would join her in the hunt.

And to all she said Ralph replied in his less perfect signs, prompted by Nick with blundering impetuosity; and, at the end of the parley, a perfect harmony prevailed. Two great rough men, with hearts as simple and trusting as those of infants, led this stranger into their home, and made it clear that the place was hers for so long as she chose to accept their hospitality.

A fire was kindled. A meal was cooked. The hut grew warm and comforting. The dogs outside yelped pitifully and often snuffed angrily at the sill of the door. And the White Squaw calmly accepted the throne of that silent world, which had so long known only the joint rule of the two brothers. She looked out upon her subjects with eyes which drove them wild with adoration, but which said nothing but that which she chose to convey. Nor did her features betray one single thought that might chance to be passing in the brain behind. She wore an impenetrable mask of reserve while she watched the effect of the womanly power she wielded.

And that night saw a change in the ordering of the trappers' household. The two men talked it over after their meal. Ralph broached the subject.

He waved his arm, the bowl of his pipe gripped in his horny hand, while its stem indicated the entire hut.

"Hers," he said. And his eyes were dragged from the object of his solicitude and turned upon Nick.

His brother nodded as he puffed at his pipe.

"The shed," Ralph went on. "The huskies must burrow in the snow."

Again Nick nodded.

"Wants sweepin' some," observed Ralph again.

"Yup. We'll fix it."

"Best git to it."

“Ay.”

And so the brothers moved out of their home, and went to live in the place which had been given over to the dogs. They would have done more, far more, in their love for the woman who had so strangely come into their midst. They felt that it was little enough that they must lie where the dogs were wont to herd. They needed little comfort, and she must have the best they could give. And so the brothers moved out of their home.

The snow fell that night; a silent, irresistible mountain snow-storm, without a breath of wind, in flakes as big as a tennis-ball. Down they ambled, seeming to loiter in indolent playfulness on the way. And up, up, mounted the earth’s white carpet, thicker and thicker, softer and softer. And at daylight the men confronted eight feet of snow, through which they had to dig their way. They cleared the dugout that their priceless treasure, the wondrous creature who had come to them, might see the light of day. And as they laboured the snow continued to fall; and at night. The next day, and the next, they cleared while the forest below was being slowly buried, and all the world about them seemed to be choked with the gentle horror.

But Ralph and his brother, Nick, feared nothing. They loved the labour; for was it not on behalf of the beautiful White Squaw?

CHAPTER VI.
THE WEIRD OF THE WILD

For five days the snow fell without ceasing. Then the weather cleared and the sun shone forth, and the temperature, which had risen while the ghostly snow filled the air, dropped with a rush many degrees below zero.

Again the call of the forest came to the two men, claiming them as it ever claims those who are bred to the craft of trap and fur; and for the first time in their lives, the call was hearkened to by unwilling ears, ears which sought to turn from the alluring cry, ears that craved only for the seductive tones of love. But habit was strong upon these woodsmen, and they obeyed the voice which had always ruled their lives, although with the skeleton of rebellion in their hearts.

The days passed, and March, the worst month of the mountain winter, was rapidly nearing; and with it a marked change came over the routine of the Westleys' home. Hitherto Ralph and Nick were accustomed to carry out their work singly, each scouring the woodlands and valleys in a direction which was his alone, each making his own bag of furs, which, in the end, would be turned over to the partnership; but Aim-sa joined them in their hunting, and, somehow, it came about that the men found it necessary to work together.

They no longer parted at daybreak to meet again when the stealing night shades fell. It became the custom for a party of three to set out from the hut, and the skilled trappers found themselves willingly deferring to a woman in the details of their craft, the craft of which they were acknowledged masters.

But this was not the only change that took place with the coming of the

White Squaw. For a woman of the wild, for a woman who had been bred in the mysterious depths of the northern forests, away from her fellow creatures, shut off from all associations of men, Aim-sa displayed a wondrous knowledge of those arts which women practise for the subjugation of the opposite sex. She set herself the task of administering to her companions' welfare in the manner which has been woman's from the first. She took to herself the bothersome duties with which no man, however self-reliant, loves to be burdened. She went further. She demanded and accepted the homage of each of the brothers, not impartially, but favouring first one and then the other, with the quiet enjoyment of a woman who looks on at the silent rivalry of two men who seek her smiles.

And as the days lengthened, and the winter crept on toward spring, the peace of the house was slowly but surely undermined. Eve had appeared in the Garden.

The calm that still remained was as the smooth surface of water about to boil. Beneath it was chaos which must soon break out into visible tumult. The canker of jealousy fastened itself like a secret growth upon the uncultured hearts of the men, sapping and undermining that which was best in their natures.

And Aim-sa looked on with eyes which smiled inscrutably; with silent tongue, and brain ever busy. In due course she showed signs of beginning to understand her comrades' language. She even essayed to speak it herself; and, as she stumbled prettily over the words, and placed them wrongly, she became more and more a source of delight, an object of adoration to the poor souls who had been so suddenly born to this new life. With keen appreciation she saw these things while she listened to their speech between themselves, and her great, deep eyes would wear many varying expressions, chief among which was the dark, abiding smile.

There could be no doubt that what she saw she interpreted aright. She was too clever in everything else to do otherwise. Nick,

impatient, headstrong, could never long conceal his feelings. His eyes would express displeasure the moment the quieter Ralph chanced to monopolize Aim-sa's attention. Every smile she bestowed upon the elder brother brought a frown to the younger man's brow. Every act or look which could be interpreted into an expression of regard for his brother fired his soul with feelings of aversion and anger till he was well-nigh distracted. Nor was Ralph any less disturbed. In his undemonstrative way he watched Nick, and suffered the acutest pangs of jealousy at what he believed was Aim-sa's marked preference. But the woman continued to stir the fire she had kindled with a childlike naiveté which was less of the wild than of the drawing-room.

And as day succeeded day, and week followed week, the companionship of these men became forced. The old tacit understanding was replaced by a feverish desire to talk; and this forced conversation only helped to widen the rift which was already gaping between them.

One night the friction almost resulted in a blaze.

Ralph was lying prone upon his back, buried to the neck in his "Arctic bag." He was smoking, as was his custom, while waiting for sleep to come. An oil lamp reeked upon the earthen floor and threw its bilious rays little further than the blankets spread out upon either side of it. For a long time Ralph had lain silently gazing up at the frosted rafters above him, while his brother sat cross-legged at work restringing his snow-shoes with strands of rawhide. Suddenly Ralph turned his face towards him in silent contemplation. He watched Nick's heavy hands with eyes that wore a troubled look. Then he abruptly broke the long silence.

"Victor don't know as she's here," he said.

Nick looked up, glanced round the room, shook his head, and bent over his work again.

"No," he answered shortly.

“Maybe he won’t jest laff.”

“No.”

Again came Nick’s monosyllabic reply.

“Guess we’d best let him know.”

There was a pause. Ralph waited for his brother to speak. As no answer came he went on.

“Who’s goin’ to tell him?”

Still there was no reply. The silence was broken only by the “ping” of the rawhide strands which Nick tested as he drew tight.

“We need some fixin’s fer her,” Ralph went on, a moment later. “Wimmin, I ’lows, has fancies. Now, maybe, Victor’s got a mighty fine show o’ print stuffs. A bit o’ Turkey red wouldn’t come amiss, I dessay. Likewise beads.”

“Maybe.”

“Why don’t you take the dogs an’ run in?”

Nick’s hands suddenly became motionless; his eyes were raised until they looked into the face of his brother. His seared, weather-beaten skin flushed a desperate hue, and his eyes were alight and shining angrily. His lips twitched with the force of the passion stirring within him, and for some seconds he held himself not daring to trust to speech.

When at last he answered it was in a tone of fiery abruptness.

“Guess not,” he said. And it was Ralph’s turn to hold back the anger which rose within him.

“Why?”

“Say, brother,” said Nick, with a biting distinctness, “quit right there. Ther’ ain’t no need fer another word.”

For a moment Ralph peered into the other’s face; but he remained silent. Then he turned over upon his pillow with a sound very like a muttered curse. And from that moment the gulf between them became

impassable. Aim-sa was a subject henceforth tabooed from their conversation. Each watched the other with distrust, and even hatred, full grown within him.

And soon there came a further disturbing element in that mountain home. It awoke all the dormant atmosphere of mystery, which, in the minds of the two men, surrounded the lovely Aim-sa. It awoke afresh the “Dread of the Wild” that had assailed them on their journey north.

It came in the early morning, when the world about them was cloaked in the grey shroud of daylight mists; when the silent forests above and below them were rendered even more ghostly and sepulchral by reason of the heavy vapour which depressed all on which it settled. Nick was standing, rifle in hand, preparing to sling it across his back. Ralph was stooping to adjust his snow-shoes. Aim-sa had been left within the hut.

A gentle breeze, like the icy breath of some frozen giant on the peak above the hut, came lazily down the hillside. It broke the fog into a turmoil of protest. The heavy vapour rolled in huge waves, sought to return to its settled calm, then slowly lifted from the flustered tree-tops. Another breath, a little stronger than the first, shot forcefully into the heart of the morning fog and scattered it mercilessly. Then the whole grey expanse solemnly lifted. Up it rose; nor did it pause until the lower hills were bared, and the wintry sun shone splendidly down upon the crystal earth.

And as the air cleared the keen eyes of Nick flashed out in a swift survey of the prospect. Suddenly his breathing was sharply indrawn. His rifle never reached his shoulder, but remained gripped in his hand. His eyes had become riveted upon a low hill far out across the valley. It looked as though it rose sheer out of the forest below, but the watching man knew full well that it was only a spur of the giant that backed it. It was the summit of this clear-cut hill, and what was visible upon it, that held his fascinated attention. Suddenly a half-whispered word escaped him and Ralph was beside him in a moment.

“Look!” And Nick’s arm was outstretched pointing.

And Ralph looked in time to see the ghostly form of the Hooded Man as it slowly passed from view over the hill.

“The Hood!” exclaimed Ralph, in awestruck tones.

“Ay.”

“What’s–what’s he doin’ here?” Ralph asked, more of himself than of his brother. Then he added: “He’s on our trail.”

There was a slight pause.

“It’s somethin’ on her account,” Nick said, at last, with uneasy conviction.

As if actuated by a common thought, both turned and looked back at the hut. Nor was their uneasiness lessened when they beheld Aim-sa standing directly behind them, gazing out across the woodland hollow with eyes distended with a great fear. So absorbed was she that she did not observe the men’s scrutiny, and only was her attention drawn to them when she heard Nick’s voice addressing her. Then her lids drooped in confusion and she hastily turned back to the house. But Nick was not to be denied.

“Ye’ve seen him,” he said sharply; “him wi’ the hood?” And he made a motion with his hand which described the stranger’s headgear.

Aim-sa nodded, and Nick went on.

“We seen him up north. On the trail to the Moosefoot.”

The woman again nodded. She quite understood now, and her eyes brightened suddenly as she turned their dazzling depths of blue upon her questioner. She understood these men as they little thought she understood them.

“It is the Spirit–the Great Spirit,” she said, in her broken speech. “The Spirit of–Moosefoot Indian. Him watches Aim-sa–Queen of Moosefoot. She–White Squaw.”

Ralph turned away uneasily. These mysterious allusions troubled him. Nick could not withdraw his fascinated gaze. Her strange eyes held

him captive.

They took her words without a doubt. They accepted all she said without question. They never doubted her identity with the White Squaw. Primitive superstition deeply moved them.

“You was scared when you see him just now?” said Ralph, questioningly.

Aim-sa nodded.

“He come to–take me,” she said, halting over the words. “The Moosefoot–they angry–Aim-sa stay away.”

“Hah!”

Nick thrust his rifle out towards her.

“Here take it. It shoots good. When ‘The Hood’ comes, shoot–savvee?”

Aim-sa took the gun and turned back to the hut. And the men passed out into the forest.

Aim-sa left the hut soon after the brothers had departed. For long she stood just beyond the door as though not sure of what she contemplated doing.

And as she stood her eyes travelled acutely over the silent valley. At last, however, she moved leisurely down the hill. Her easy gait lasted just so long as she was in the open; the moment she entered the forest her indifference vanished and she raced along in the dark shadow with all the speed she could summon. The silence, the heavy, depressing atmosphere, the labyrinth of trees so dark and confusing; these things were no deterrent to her. Her object was distinct in her mind and she gave heed to nothing else. She ran on over the snow with the silent movements of some ghostly spirit, and with a swiftness which told of the Indian blood in her veins. Her dilating eyes flashed about her with the searching gaze of one who expects to see something appear, while not knowing whence it will come. Her flowing hair trailed from under her cap with the speed of her going, and the

biting air stung her face into a brilliant glow. Her direction was plainly in her mind, for, though dodging her way through trees, she never deviated from a certain course; all her thoughts, all her attention, were centred upon the object of her quest.

Nor did she pause till she came to the low hill which stood on the far side of the valley. As she came to the edge of the forest which skirted its base she drew up and stood for a moment hesitating. Once she raised a hand to her mouth as though about to give voice to a prolonged mountain call, but she desisted, and, instead, set out to round the hill, always keeping to the shadow of the forest edge.

At length she stopped. Her hand went up to her mouth and her head was thrown back, and out upon the still air rang a cry so mournful that even the forest gloom was rendered more cheerless by its sound. High it rose, soaring upwards through the trees until the valley rang with its plaintive wail. As if recognizing the distressful howl of their kind, the cry came back to her from the deep-toned throats of prowling timber-wolves. The chorus rang in her ears from many directions as she listened, but the sound? had little effect. As they died down she still waited in an attitude of attention.

The moments slipped by. Presently she again sent the call hurtling through the trees. Again came the chorus; again she waited. And the sounds of the chorus were nearer at hand, and a crackling of undergrowth warned her of the presence of the savage creatures she had summoned. The deep blue eyes were alert and watchful, but she showed no signs of fear; nor did she move. Suddenly a less stealthy and more certain crackling of the bush made itself heard; and the roving eyes became fixed in one direction. Beneath the shadow of the laden boughs a tall grey figure appeared moving towards her. But this was not all, for several slinking, stealing forms were moving about amongst the barren tree-trunks; hungry-looking creatures these, with fierce burning eyes and small pricked ears, with ribs almost bursting through the coarse hides which covered their low, lank bodies.

But all the woman's attention was centred upon the form of the other– the hooded figure she had seen in the morning. He came with long, regular strides, a figure truly calculated to inspire awe. Even now, near as he was to her, there was no sign of his face to be seen. He

was clad in the folds of grey wolfskin, and a cowl-like hood utterly concealed his face, while leaving him free to see from within.

As the man came up Aim-sa plunged into voluble speech.

They talked together long and earnestly; their tones were of dictation on the part of the woman and subservience on the part of the man. Then the Spirit of the Moosefoot Indians moved away, and the White Squaw retraced her steps to the dugout.

A look of triumph was in Aim-sa's blue eyes as she returned through the forest. She gave no heed to the slinking forms that dogged her steps. She saw nothing of the forest about her; all her interest was in the dugout and those who lived there.

When she came to the house she received a shock. Nick had returned during her absence. He had come for the dog sled, and had since brought the vast carcass of a grizzly into camp. Now he was stripping the rich fur from the forest king's body. The five huskies, with shivering bodies and jowls dripping saliva, were squatting around upon their haunches waiting for the meal they hoped would soon be theirs.

The man, still kneeling over his prize, greeted Aim-sa without pausing in his work.

"Wher'?" he asked, sparing his words lest he should confuse her.

The unconcern of the query reassured her.

"The forest," replied Aim-sa easily, pointing away down the hill.

There was a long pause while the woodsman plied his knife with rough but perfect skill. The thick fur rolled under his hands. The snick, snick of his knife alternated with the sound of tearing as he pulled the pelt from the under-flesh. Aim-sa watched, interested, then, as Nick made no further remark, she went on. She pointed back at the forest.

"The wolves–they very thick. Many, many–an' hungry."

"They've left the open. Guess it's goin' to storm, sure," observed the man indifferently. He wrenched the fur loose from the fore paws.

“Yes–it storm–sure.” And Aim-sa gazed critically up at the sky. The usual storm sentries hung glittering upon either side of the sun, and the blue vault was particularly steely.

Nick rose from his gory task. He drew the fur away and spread it out on the roof of the dugout to freeze. Then he cut some fresh meat from the carcass, and afterwards dragged the remainder down the hill and left it for the dogs. The squabble began as soon as he returned to Aim-sa. A babel of fierce snarling and yapping proceeded as the ruthless beasts tore at the still warm flesh. And in less than a minute other voices came up from the woods, heralding the approach of some of the famished forest creatures. Nick gave no heed. The dogs must defend their own. Such is the law of the wild. He had Aim-sa to himself, and he knew not how long it would be before his brother returned.

And Aim-sa was in no way loth to linger by this great trapper’s side. It pleased her to talk in her halting fashion to him. He had more to say than his brother; he was a grand specimen of manhood. Besides, his temperament was wilder, more fierce, more like the world in which he lived.

She hearkened to the sounds of the snarling wolves and her blue eyes darkened with the latent savagery that was in her nature.

“The dogs–they fight. Hah!” she said. And a smile of delight was in her eyes.

“Let ’em fight,” said Nick, carelessly. Then he turned upon her with a look there was no mistaking. His whole attitude was expressive of passionate earnestness as he looked down into the blue worlds which confronted him.

She taunted him with a glance of intense meaning. And, in an instant, the fire in his soul blazed into an overwhelming conflagration.

“You’re that beautiful, Aim-sa,” he cried. Then he paused as though his feelings choked him. “Them blue eyes o’ yours goes right clear through me, I guess. Makes me mad. By Gar! you’re the finest crittur

in the world."

He looked as though he would devour the fair form which had raised such a storm within his simple heart. She returned his look with a fearlessness which still had some power to check his untutored passion. Her smile, too, was not wholly devoid of derision; but that was lost upon him.

"Aim-sa–beautiful. Ah! yes–yes, I know. You speak love to me. You speak love to White Squaw."

"Ay, love," cried Nick, the blood mounting with a rush to his strong face. "Guess you don't know love, my girl. Not yet. But mebbe you will. Say, Aim-sa, I'll teach it ye. I'll teach it ye real well, gal. You'll be my squaw, an' we'll light right out o' here. I've got half share in our pile, an' it ain't a little. Jest say right here as ye'll do it, an' I'll fix things, an' hitch up the dogs."

Nick paused in his eloquence. The squaw's eyes danced with delight, and he read the look to suit himself. Already he anticipated a favourable answer. But he was quickly undeceived. Aim-sa merely revelled in the passion she had aroused, like a mischievous child with a forbidden plaything. She enjoyed it for a moment, then her face suddenly became grave, and her eyelids drooped over the wonderful eyes which he thought had told him so much. And her answer came with a shake of the head.

"Aim-sa loves not. She must not. The Moosefoot–she is Queen."

"Curses on the Moosefoot, I say," cried Nick, with passionate impulse.

Aim-sa put up her hand.

"The man–'The Hood.' Fear the Spirit."

A chill shot down through Nick's heart as he listened. But his passion was only checked for the moment. The next and he seized the woman in his powerful arms and drew her to his breast, and kissed her not too unwilling lips. The kiss maddened him, and he held her tight, while

he sought her blindly, madly. He kissed her cheeks, her hair, her eyes, her lips, and the touch of her warm flesh scorched his very soul. Nor is it possible to say how long he would have held her had she not, by a subtle, writhing movement, slipped from within his enfolding arms. Her keen ears had caught a sound which did not come from the fighting dogs. It was the penetrating forest cry in the brooding mountain calm.

"Remember–'The Hood,'" Aim-sa warned him. And the next moment had vanished within the dugout.

Now Nick knew that he too had heard the cry, and he stood listening, while his passion surged through his veins and his heart beat in mighty pulsations. As he gazed over the forest waste, he expected to see the mysterious hooded figure.

But what he beheld brought an angry flush to his cheeks. He did not see "The Hood," but Ralph walking slowly up the hill.

And a harsh laugh which had no mirth in it broke from him. Then a frown settled darkly upon his brow. What, he asked himself, had Ralph returned for? He bore no burden of skins.

And when Ralph looked up and saw Nick whom he believed to be miles away, his heart grew bitter within him. He read the look on the other's face. He saw the anger, and a certain guiltiness of his own purpose made him interpret it aright. And in a flash he resolved upon a scheme which, but for what he saw, would never have presented itself to him.

And as the gleaming sun-dogs, drooping so heavily yet angrily in the sky, heralded the coming storm of elements, so did that meeting of the two brothers threaten the peace of the valley.

CHAPTER VII.
IN THE STORMING NIGHT

The love of these men for the fair creature of the wild had risen to fever-heat with the abruptness of tropical sunshine. It was no passing infatuation, but the deep-rooted, absorbing passion of strong simple men; a passion which dominated their every act and thought; a passion which years alone might mellow into calm affection, but which nothing could eradicate. It had come into their lives at a time when every faculty was at its ripest; henceforth everything would be changed. The wild, to them, was no longer the wild they had known; it was no longer theirs alone. Their life had gathered to itself a fresh meaning; a meaning drawn from association with Woman, and from which it could never return to the colourless existence of its original solitude.

With the return of Ralph to the camp the day progressed in sullen silence. Neither of the men would give way an inch; neither would return to the forest to complete his day's work, and even Aim-sa found their morose antagonism something to be feared. Each watched the other until it seemed impossible for the day to pass without the breaking of the gathering storm. But, however, the time wore on, and the long night closed down without anything happening to precipitate matters.

The evening was passed in the woman's company. Ralph sat silent, brooding. While Nick, with the memory of the wild moments during which he had held Aim-sa in his embrace fresh upon him, held a laboured conversation with her. To him there was a sense of triumph as he sat smoking his blackened pipe, listening to the halting phrases of the woman, and gazing deeply into her wonderful blue eyes. And in

the ecstasy of recollection he forgot Ralph and all but his love. There was no generosity in his heart; he had given himself up to the delights of his passion. He claimed the fair Aim-sa to himself, and was ready to uphold his claim so long as he had life.

All that long evening he heeded nothing of the dark expression of Ralph's face. The furtive glances from his brother's eyes were lost upon him, and even had he seen them their meaning would have had no terrors for him. With all the blind selfishness of a first love he centred his faculties upon obtaining Aim-sa's regard, and lived in the fool's paradise of a reckless lover.

And all the time Ralph watched, and planned. The bitterness of his heart ate into the uttermost part of his vitals, the canker mounted even to his brain. The deep fire of hatred was now blazing furiously, and each moment it gathered destructive force. All that was good in the man was slowly devoured, and only a shell of fierce anger remained.

But what Nick failed to observe Aim-sa saw as plainly as only a woman can see such things. Her bright eyes saw the fire she had kindled, and from sheer wantonness she fanned the flame with all the art of which she was mistress.

Slowly the hours passed. It was Nick who at last rose and gave the signal for departure. It was an unwritten law between these two that when one left Aim-sa's presence they both left it. Therefore Ralph followed suit, and they retired to their sleeping-apartment.

Outside the night was fine, but the threat of storm hung heavily in the air. The temperature had risen, a sure indication of the coming blizzard. Ralph was the last to leave the woman's presence, and, ere he closed the door, he looked back at the smiling face, so beautiful to him, so seductively fair in his eyes; and the memory of the picture he looked upon remained with him. He saw the dull-lit interior, with its rough woodsman's belongings; the plastered walls of logs, coarse and discoloured; the various utensils hanging suspended from five-inch spikes driven in the black veins of timber; the blazing stove and

crooked stovepipe; the box of tin dishes and pots; the sides of bacon hanging from the roof; the pile of sacks containing biscuit and dried fish, the latter for the dogs; the outspread blankets which formed the woman's bed; and in the midst of it all the dazzling presence of Aim-sa, fair as the twilight of a summer evening.

The door closed softly, and as it closed Aim-sa rose from her blankets. Her expression had changed, and while the men went to their humble couches she moved about with feverish haste, attentive to the least sound, but always hurried, and with a look of deep anxiety in her alert eyes.

No word was spoken as the men rolled into their blankets. The thick wall shut out all sound from within the hut. The night was intensely still and silent. Not even was there a single wolf-howl to awaken the echoes of the towering hills. It was as though all nature was at rest.

Nick was soon asleep. Not even the agitation of mind caused by a first love could keep him long awake when the hour for sleep came around. With Ralph it was different. His nature was intenser. His disposition was capable of greater disturbance than was that of the more impetuous Nick. He remained awake; awake and alert. He smoked in the darkness more from habit than enjoyment. Although he could see nothing his eyes constantly wandered in the direction of the man beside him, and he listened for the heavy breathing which should tell him of the slumber which would endure till the first streak of dawn shot athwart the sky. Soon it came; and Nick snored heavily.

Then, without sound, Ralph sat up in his blankets. He bent his head towards the sleeper, and, satisfied, rose softly to his feet. Opening the door he looked out. All was profoundly quiet and black. Not a star shone in the sky, nor was there a sign of the dancing northern lights. And while he stood he heard for the first time that night the cry of some distant forest creature; but the timber-wolves kept silent in the depths below the hut. He drew the door to behind him and moved out into the night.

Cold as it was he was consumed by a perfect fever of agitation. His thoughts were in a state of chaos, but the one dominant note which rang out with clarion-like distinctness was that which drew him towards Aim-sa's door. And thither he stole softly, silently, with the tiptoeing of a thief, and with the nervous quakings of a wrong-doer. His face was wrought with fear, with hope, with the eagerness of expectancy.

He passed from the deeper shadows in which the lean-to was bathed, and stood at the angle of the house. He paused, and a flurrying of the snow at his feet warned him that he had stepped close to the burrow of one of Nick's huskies. He moved quickly aside, and the movement brought him beyond the angle. Then he stood stock-still, held motionless as he saw that the door of the dugout was open and the light of the oil-lamp within was illuminating the beaten snow which fronted the house. He held his breath. Again and again he asked himself the meaning of the strange phenomenon.

From where he stood he could see only the light; the doorway was hidden by the storm-porch. But, as he strained his eyes in the direction and craned forward, he became aware of a shadow on the snow where the lamp threw its dull rays. Slowly he scanned the outline of it, and his mind was moved by speculation. The shadow was uncertain, and only that which was nearest the door was recognizable. Here there was no mistake; some one was standing in the opening, and that some one could only be Aim-sa.

He was filled with excitement and his heart beat tumultuously; a frenzy of delight seized upon him, and he stepped forward swiftly. A moment later he stood confronting her.

Just for one moment Aim-sa's face took on a look of dismay, but it passed before Ralph had time to read it. Then she smiled a glad welcome up at the keen eyes which peered down into her own, and her voice broke the silence in a gentle, suppressed tone.

"Quiet–quiet. The night. The storm is near. Aim-sa watches."

Ralph turned his face out upon the blackness of the valley, following the direction of the woman's gaze.

"Ay, storm," he said mechanically, and his heart pounded within his breast, and his breath came and went heavily. Then, in the pause which followed, he started and looked towards the lean-to as a sound came from that direction. He was half-fearful of his sleeping brother.

Aim-sa's eyes turned towards the rugged features before her, and her gaze was of an intensity such as Ralph could not support in silence. Words blundered unbidden to his lips, uncontrolled, and he spoke as a man who scarce knows what he is saying. His mind was in the throes of a fever, and his speech partook of the irrelevance of delirium.

"You must live with me," he said, his brows frowning with the intensity of his passion. "You must be my wife. The white man takes a squaw, an' he calls her 'wife,' savvee? Guess he ain't like the Injuns that has many squaws. He jest takes one. You'll be my squaw, an' we'll go away from here."

A smile was in the woman's blue eyes, for her memory went back to the words Nick had spoken to her that morning.

Ralph went on.

"Guess I love you that bad as makes me crazy. Ther' ain't nothin' to life wi'out you." His eyes lowered to the ground; then they looked beyond her, and he gazed upon the disordered condition of the room without observing it. "Nick don't need me here. He can have the shack an' everything, 'cep' my haf share o' the money. Guess we'll trail north an' pitch our camp on the Peace River. What say?"

Aim-sa's eyes were still smiling. Every word Nick had spoken was vivid in her memory. She looked as though she would laugh aloud, but she held herself in check, and the man took her smile for one of acquiescence and became bolder. He stretched out his hand and caught hers in his shaking grasp.

"The white man loves–Aim-sa," the woman said, softly, while she

yielded her two hands to him.

“Love? Ay, love. Say, ther’ ain’t nothin’ in the world so beautiful as you, Aim-sa, an’ that’s a fac’. I ain’t never seen nothin’ o’ wimmin before, ’cep’ my mother, but I guess now I’ve got you I can’t do wi’out you, you’re that soft an’ pictur’-like. Ye’ve jest got to say right here that you’re my squaw, an’ everything I’ve got is yours, on’y they things I leave behind to Nick.”

“Ah,” sighed the woman, “Nick–poor Nick. He loves–Aim-sa, too. Nick is great man.”

“Nick loves you? Did he get tellin’ ye so?”

There was a wild, passionate ring in Ralph’s question.

The squaw nodded, and the man’s expression suddenly changed. The passionate look merged into one of fiery anger, and his eyes burned with a low, dark fire. Aim-sa saw the sudden change, but she still smiled in her soft way.

“An’ you?”

The voice of the man was choking with suppressed passion. His whole body trembled with the chaos of feeling which moved him.

The woman shook her head.

“An’ what did ye say?” he went on, as she remained silent.

“Nick is great. No, Aim-sa not loves Nick.”

Ralph sighed with relief, and again the fiery blood swept through his veins. He stepped up close to her and she remained quite still. The blue eyes were raised to his face and Aim-sa’s lips parted in a smile. The effect was instantaneous. Ralph seized her in a forceful embrace, and held her to him whilst he gasped out the passionate torrent of his love amidst an avalanche of kisses. And they stood thus for long, until the man calmed and spoke with more practical meaning.

“An’ we go together?” he asked.

Aim-sa nodded.

“Now?”

The woman shook her head.

“No–sunrise. I wait here.”

Again they stood; he clasping her unresisting form, while the touch of her flowing hair intoxicated him, and the gentle rise and fall of her bosom drove all thought wild within him.

They stood for many minutes; till at last the still night was stirred by the rustling herald of the coming storm. The long-drawn-out sigh of the wind, so sad, so weird in the darkness of night would have passed unheeded by the man, but Aim-sa was alert, and she freed herself from his embrace.

“At sunrise,” she said. “Now–sleep.” And she made a sign as of laying her head upon a pillow.

Ralph stood irresolute. Suddenly Aim-sa started. Her whole bearing changed. A swift, startled gaze shot from beneath her long, curling lashes in the direction of the distant hills. A tiny glimmer of light had caught her attention and she stepped back on the instant and passed into the hut, closing the door softly but quickly behind her. And when she had disappeared Ralph stood as one dazed.

The significance of Aim-sa’s abrupt departure was lost upon him. For him there was nothing unusual in her movements. She had been there, he had held her in his arms, he had kissed her soft lips. He had tasted of love, and the mad passion had upset his thoughtful nature. His mind and his feelings were in a whirl and he thrilled with a delicious joy. His thoughts were so vivid that all sense of that which was about him, all caution, was obscured by them. At that moment there was but one thing that mattered to him,–Aim-sa’s love. All else was as nothing.

So it came that the faint light on the distant hills burned steadily; and he saw it not. So it came that a shadowy figure moved about at the forest edge below him; and he saw it not. So it came that the light breath from the mountain-top was repeated only more fiercely; and he

heeded it not. In those moments he was living within himself; his thoughts were his world, and those thoughts were of the woman he had kissed and held in his arms.

Nothing gave him warning of the things which were doing about him. He saw no tribulation in the sea upon which he had embarked. He loved; that was all he knew. Presently like a sleep-walker he turned and moved around towards the deeper shadow of the lean-to. Then, when he neared the door of the shed in which his brother was, he seemed to partially awake to his surroundings. He knew that he must regain his bed without disturbing Nick. With this awakening he pulled himself together. To-morrow at sunrise he and the squaw were to go away, and long he lay awake, thinking, thinking.

Now the shadow hovering at the forest edge became more distinct as it neared the house; it came slowly, stealing warily up the snow-clad hill. There was no scrunch of footsteps, the snow muffled all such sounds. It drew nearer, nearer, a tall, grey, ghostly shadow that seemed to float over the white carpet which was everywhere spread out upon the earth. And as it came the wind rose, gusty and patchy, and the hiss of rising snow sounded stingingly upon the night air, and often beat with the force of hail against the front of the dugout.

Within a few yards of the hut the figure came to a halt. Thus it stood, immovable, a grey sombre shadow in the darkness of night. Then, after a long pause, high above the voice of the rising wind the howl of the wolf rang out. It came like a cry of woe from a lost soul; deep-toned, it lifted upon the air, only to fall and die away lost in the shriek of the wind. Thrice came the cry. Then the door of the dugout opened and Aim-sa looked out into the relentless night.

The figure moved forward again. It drew near to the door, and, in the light, the grey swathing of fur became apparent, and the cavernous hood lapping about the head identified the Spirit of the Moosefoot Indians. Then followed a low murmur of voices. And again the woman moved back into the hut. The grey figure waited, and a moment later

Aim-sa came to him again. Shortly after the door closed and the Spirit moved silently away.

All was profoundly dark. The darkness of the night was a darkness that could be felt, for the merciless blizzard of the northern latitudes was raging at its full height. The snow-fog had risen and all sign of trail or footstep was swept from the icy carpet. It was a cruel night, and surely one fit for the perpetration of cruel deeds.

And so the night passed. The elements warring with the fury of wildcats, with the shrieking of fiends, with the roaring of artillery, with the merciless severity of the bitter north. And while the storm swept the valley the two brothers slept; even Ralph, although torn by such conflicting emotions, was lulled, and finally won to sleep by the raging elements whose voices he had listened to ever since his cradle days.

But even his slumbers were broken, and strange visions haunted his night hours. There was none of the peacefulness of his usual repose—the repose of a man who has performed his allotted daylight task. He tossed and twisted within his sleeping-bag. He talked disjointedly and flung his arms about; and, finally, while yet it was dark, he awoke.

Springing into a sitting posture, he peered about him in the darkness. Everything came back to his mind with a rush. He remembered his appointment at sunrise, and he wondered how long he had slept. Again he crept to the shed door. Again he looked out and finally passed out. Nick still slumbered heavily.

The fury of the elements was unabated and they buffeted him; but he looked around and saw the grey daylight illuminating the snow-fog, and he knew that though sunrise was near it was not yet. He passed around the hut, groping with his hands upon the building until he came to the door. Here he paused. He would awake Aim-sa that she might prepare for her flight with him. There was much to be done. He was about to knock but altered his mind and tried the latch. It yielded to his touch and the door swung back.

He did not pause to wonder, although he knew that it was Aim-sa's

custom to secure the door. He passed within, and in a hoarse whisper called out the name that was so dear to him. There came no answer and he stood still, his senses tense with excitement. He called again, again. Still there was no answer. Now he closed the door, which creaked over the snow covering the sill. He stood listening lest Nick should be moving on the other side of the wall, and to ascertain if Aim-sa had awakened and was fearful at the intrusion. But no sound except the rage of the storm came to him.

His impatience could no longer be restrained; he plunged his hand into the pocket of his buckskin shirt and drew out a box of matches. A moment later a light flashed out, and in one sweeping, comprehensive glance around him he realized the truth. The hut was empty. “Gone, gone,” he muttered, while, in rapid survey, his eyes glanced from one familiar object to another.

Everything was out of place, there were signs of disorder everywhere; and the woman was gone.

Suddenly the wind rushed upon the house with wild violence and set everything in the place a-clatter. He lit the lamp. Then he seemed to collect himself and went over and felt the stove. It was ice cold. The blankets were laid out upon the floor in the usual spread of the daytime. They had not been slept in.

Into his eyes there leapt a strange, wild look. The truth was forcing itself upon him, and his heart was racked with torment.

“She’s gone,” he muttered again, “an’,” as an afterthought, “it’s storming terrible. Wher’? Why?”

He stood again for awhile like a man utterly at a loss. Then he began to move, not quietly or with any display of stealth. He was no longer the self-contained trapper, but a man suddenly bereft of that which he holds most dear. He ran noisily from point to point, prying here, there, and everywhere for some sign which could tell him whither she had gone. But there was nothing to help him, nothing that could tell him that which he would know. She had gone, vanished, been spirited

away in the storm.

He was suddenly inspired. It was the realization of the condition of the night which put the thought into his head. With a bound he sprang back to the door and flung it open. To an extent the storm-porch was sheltered, and little drift-snow had blown in to cover the traces of footsteps. Down he dropped upon hands and knees. Instantly all his trailing instincts were bent upon his task. Yes, there were footprints, many, many. There were his own, large moccasins of home manufacture. There were Aim-sa's, clear, delicate, and small. And whose were those other two? He ran his finger over the outline as though to impress the shape more certainly upon his mind.

"Wide toe," he muttered, "long heel, an' high instep. Large, large, too. By G—, they're Injun!"

He gave out the last words in a shout which rang high above the noise of the storm; he sprang to his feet and dashed out around to the lean-to. At the door he met his brother. Nick had been roused by his brother's cry.

Seeing the expression of Ralph's face the larger man stood.

"By Gar!" he cried. Then he waited, fearing he knew not what.

"She's gone," shouted Ralph. "Gone, gone, can't ye hear?" he roared. "Gone, an' some darned neche's been around. She's gone, in the blizzard. Come!"

And he seized Nick by the arm and dragged him round to the door of the dugout.

CHAPTER VIII.
THE UNQUENCHABLE FIRE

An interminable week of restless inaction and torture followed Aimsa's disappearance. Seven long, weary days the blizzard raged and held the two brothers cooped within their little home. The brief, grey daylight dragged to its howling end, and the seemingly endless nights brought them little relief. The only inhabitants of the hut on the wild hillside that offered no complaint, and even seemed to welcome the change, were Nick's huskies. They displayed a better temper since the going of the White Squaw, although the change in their attitude was unheeded by their masters.

The antagonism of the men was no longer masked by sullen silence. It broke out into open hostility almost the moment their loss was discovered, and it took the form of bickering and mutual reprisal. Nick laid the charge of her departure at Ralph's door. Applying all the most unreasonable arguments in support of his belief. Ralph retaliated with a countercharge, declaring that Nick had caused her flight by thrusting his unwelcome attentions upon her. And every word they uttered on the subject added fuel to the fire of their hatred, and often they were driven to the verge of blows.

Nick had no reason in him; and, in his anger, Ralph was little better. But where a certain calmness came to the latter when away from his brother, Nick continued to fume with his mind ever set upon what he regarded as only *his* loss. Thus it came that Ralph saw ahead, hazily it is true, but he saw that the time had come when they must part. It was impossible for them to continue to shelter under the same roof, the roof which had covered them since the days of their earliest recollections.

But though he saw this necessity, he did not broach the subject, for, like his brother, he looked forward to the abatement of the storm so that he might set out in search of the lost one. Besides, he felt that until Aim-sa was found he could not part from Nick. Even in his hatred for his brother, even in his calmest moments, jealousy supervened. Were they to part, Nick might be the one to find her, and then–No, they must wait till the storm had passed, afterwards it would be time to act. Meanwhile, by tacit consent, they continued to live in the lean-to, reserving the dugout for the object of their love, against her return.

At length the weather cleared. The search began at once. Each day they set out for the forest and hills with hope buoying their hearts; and each night they returned with downcast looks, despair in their hearts, and with their brooding anger against each other a dark flame leaping within them.

Sometimes, in stolen moments, they visited the place Aim-sa had lived in. Every day Ralph would clean up the dugout and leave it ready for the White Squaw's occupation when she returned. Every article of furniture had its allotted place, the place which she had selected. With the utmost deliberation he would order everything, and never had their mountain home been so tenderly cared for. Then Nick would come. His brother's handiwork would drive him to a frenzy of anger, and he would reset the place to his own liking, at which Ralph's exasperation would break out in angry protest.

The metamorphosis of these men could not have been more complete. They hated themselves, they grew to hate the home which was theirs, the wild in which they lived. They set their traps and hunted because it was their habit to do so, but always with only secondary thought for their calling. The chief object of their lives was to find the woman who had taught them the meaning of love.

Winter was waning. The soft snow in the forest was melting rapidly. Every morning found their valley buried beneath a pall of white fog. The sun's power was rapidly increasing, and already a slush of snow-

water was upon the ice-bound river. The overpowering heights of the valley gleamed and sparkled in the cheery daylight; the clear mountain air drew everything nearer, and the stifling sense, inspired by the crush of towering hills, was exaggerated as the sun rose in the heavens and revealed the obscurer recesses of the stupendous world. And now, too, the forest grew dank and moist, and the steady dripping of the melting snow upon the branches became like a heavy rainfall within the gloomy depths.

One day Ralph returned home first. He was cooking the supper. The sun was dipping behind the western mountain-tops, and the red gold reflection swept in a rosy flush over the crystal summits. The winter sky had given place to the deeper hue of spring, and, in place of the heavy grey cloud-caps, fleecy puffs of white, little less dazzling than the snowy hills themselves, dotted the azure vault above. The forest was alive with the cries of the feathered world, as they sought their rest in their newly-built nests. It was not the bright chatter of gay song-birds such as belong to warmer climes, but the hoarse cries of water-fowl, and the harsh screams of the preying lords of wing and air. The grey eagle in his lofty eyrie; the gold-crested vulture-hawk; creatures that live the strenuous life of the silent lands, fowl that live by war. The air was very still; the prospect perfect with a wild rugged beauty.

The train dogs were lying about lazily, but their attitude was deceptive. Their fierce eyes were only partially closed, and they watched the cook at his work, waiting for their share in the meal.

Presently a sharp snarl broke from one of them, and he sprang to his feet and walked round his neighbour in a hectoring fashion. Ralph just glanced up from his work, his attitude expressing indifference. The second dog rose leisurely, and a silent argument over some old-time dispute proceeded in true husky fashion. They walked round and round each other, seeming almost to tiptoe in their efforts to browbeat. Their manes bristled and their fangs bared to the gums, but never a sound came from their deep-toned throats. And such is ever the way of the husky, unless stirred to the wildest fury. The other dogs

paid no heed; the smell which emanated from Ralph's cooking-pot held them. Those who wished to fight could do so; their indifference plainly said so.

Ralph went to the shed and returned with some fresh logs. As he reached the fire he paused. The disputing dogs had attracted his attention. A quick spring in and out, a slash of the bared fangs, and the shoulder of one dog was laid open. The other brutes were on their feet in an instant. The scent of blood had greater attraction for their wolfish senses than the smell of cooking food. They gathered round with licking lips. Ralph stepped back from the fire and raised aloft one of the logs he had brought. The next moment it was hurtling through the air. It took the combatants somewhere in the midst. They parted, with a howl of pain, and the spectators hurriedly returned to their contemplation of the fire. In a moment temporary peace was restored. Ralph stood to see that hostilities were definitely postponed, then he went on with his work.

Suddenly, up out of the valley came the sound of Nick's voice. It trolled harshly up the hillside, giving out strange echoes which confused the melody he essayed. The listening man recognized the words of "The Red River Valley," but the tune was obscured.

The unusual outburst held Ralph silent, wondering. Nick was not given to singing at any time, and the events of the last few days were not likely to inspire him. What had caused the change?

The voice sounded nearer. In spite of the tunelessness of the song, Ralph thought he detected a joyousness in the tone which was unusual. A shiver passed down his back, and his thoughts flew at once to Aim-sa.

Gazing down the hill he saw Nick emerge from the forest and face the slope at a swinging pace. His powerful limbs moved easily, with a springiness of stride that was not natural to a man accustomed to the labours of the "long trail." His face was no longer bathed in desponding gloom; his eyes were shining, and his strong features

had upon them an expression of triumph. He brought with him an atmosphere as fresh and joyous as the dawn of a mountain summer sky.

Over his shoulder were slung several moist pelts, newly taken from the carcasses of golden foxes, and in his hand he carried two large traps, which he was bringing home for repair. But these things were passed unheeded by his brother; it was the voice, and the look upon his face that unpleasantly fixed Ralph's attention. But a further astonishment came to the waiting man. Nick shouted a greeting as he came.

"A great day, Ralph," he cried. "Two o' the finest yeller-bellies I've seed. Most as big as timber-wolves."

Ralph nodded, but said no word. He knew without being told that it was not the pleasure of such a catch which had urged Nick to cordiality. He watched the coming of his brother with his quiet, steady eyes, and what he beheld beat his heart down, down, as though with the fall of a sledge-hammer.

As Nick's overtures met with no response, he said no more, but came and stood beside the spluttering fire, while his eyes searched the gloomy face of his brother. Then, with an impatient movement, he threw his traps down and removed the pelts from his shoulder. He passed over to the dugout and spread the reeking hides upon the roof, well out of reach of the dogs; then he returned in silence to the fire.

His coming had been the signal for a renewal of hostilities among the dogs, and now a sharp clip of teeth drew his attention. The two beasts Ralph had separated were at it again. Nick seized a pole and trounced them impartially till they scattered out of his reach.

A portentous silence followed. Nick was casting about in his mind for something agreeable to say. He felt good. So good that he did not want to tell Ralph what was in his mind. He wanted to be sociable, he wanted to break through the icy barrier which had risen between

them; he felt that he could afford to do so. But ideas were not forthcoming. He had but one thought in his brain, and when, at last, he spoke it was to blurt out the very thing he would withheld.

“I’ve seen her,” he said, in a voice tense with emotion.

And Ralph had known it from the moment he had heard his brother singing. He looked up from his cooking-pot, and his fork remained poised above the black iron lid. At last his answer came in a hoarse whisper.

“Her?”

“Yes, I spoke to her, I guess.”

“Spoke to her?”

And the whites of the elder man’s eyes had become bloodshot as he stood up from his crouching attitude over the fire.

His stolid face was unmoved, only his eyes gave expression to that which passed behind them. There was a dangerous look in their sunken depths which the depressed brows accentuated. He looked into his brother’s face, and, for awhile, the supper was forgotten.

“Yes, spoke to her,” said Nick, emphatically. “She ain’t gone from us. She ain’t left this valley. She’s scairt o’ the Moosefoots. That all-fired ‘Hood.’ She said as they were riled that she’d stopped in the white man’s lodge. Said they’d made med’cine an’ found out where she’d gone. Say, that ‘Hood’ is the very devil, I’m thinkin’. She’s scairt to death o’ him.”

But though Ralph listened to his brother’s words he seemed to pay little heed. The blow had fallen on him with stunning force. Nick had seen Aim-sa; he had been with her that day, perhaps all day. And at the thought he broke out in a sweat. Something seemed to rise up in his throat and choke him.

“You look that glad. Maybe you’ve had a good time.”

Ralph’s words came as though he were thinking aloud.

The devil stirred in Nick’s heart.

“Glad, man? Glad? Ay, I am that, surely. She said as she’d been on the watch fer me ever since the storm quit. She said as she wanted to hunt wi’ me.”

“You?”

“An’ why not? I ain’t lyin’, I guess. I ’lows she ain’t like to say they things fer passin’ time. She was allus easy an’ free wi’ me. Mebbe you’re kind o’ quiet. Wimmin mostly likes them as ken talk.”

Ralph’s eyes darkened. His set face became more rigid. Then suddenly a harsh laugh broke from his unmoving lips.

“Guess you’re crazed, Nick. That woman’s foolin’ ye.”

Then he swung about as the sound of a violent struggle came from among the dogs. It was the saving interruption. Another moment and the brooding hate of the two men would have broken loose. Nick turned, too. And he was just in time; for one of the huskies was down and the rest of the train were upon him, bent on tearing out the savage life. Nick clubbed them right and left, nor did he desist till the torn beast was upon his feet again, ready to face his antagonists with undiminished courage. The husky knows no other termination to a quarrel than the fight to the death.

It took Nick some minutes to restore peace among his dogs, and by the time this was accomplished his own feelings had calmed. Ralph, recognizing the danger of his mood, had gripped himself sternly, and returned to his cooking.

And so the crisis was passed and the disaster temporarily averted. But in their hearts both men knew that the savage wild, ingrained in their natures, would not always be so easily stifled. Unless they parted, a dire calamity must surely befall.

CHAPTER IX.
TO THE DEATH

The forest gloom is broken by gladdening beams of sunlight. They sketch a mazy fretwork pattern of light and shade on the dank underlay of rotting vegetation which the melting snow has laid bare. The air is weighted down with heavy, resinous odours, and an enervating warmth has descended to the depths of the lower forests. But Winter has not yet spread its wings for its last flight. Spring's approach has been heralded by its feathered trumpeters, garbed in their sober plumage. It is on its way, that is all. The transition of the seasons is at hand. Winter still resists, and the gentle legions of Spring have yet to fight out their annual battle. The forests are astir with wild, furred life; the fierce life which emphasizes the solitude of the mountain world. The pine-cones scrunch under the feet of the prowling beast as he moves solemnly upon his dread way; there is a swish of bush or a snapping of wood as some startled animal seeks cover; or a heavy crashing of branches, as the mighty-antlered moose, solemn-eyed, unheeding, thrusts himself through the undergrowth.

Ralph was bending over a large trap. It was still set although the bait had been removed. It had been set at the mouth of a narrow track where it opened out in a small, snow-covered clearing. The blood stains of the raw meat with which it had been baited were still moist, but the flesh itself had been taken. He turned from his inspection. There were footprints in the snow, evidently the tracks of a timber-wolf. His face expressed his disgust as he rebaited the trap. Wolves were the pest of his life. Their skins were almost worthless, and they were as cunning as any dog-fox. A trap had no terrors for them. He moved away to continue on his journey. Suddenly he drew up and

scanned the white carpet. His trailing instincts were keenly alert.

The snow was disturbed by other marks than those made by the wolf. In places the ground was laid bare, and broken pine-cones were displayed upon its surface as though some great weight had crushed them. Moose suggested itself. He looked keenly at the marks. No, the snow displayed no imprint of cloven hoofs. It looked as though it had been raked by a close-set harrow. To him there was much significance in what he saw. Only one creature could have left such a track. There was but one animal in that forest world that moved with shambling gait, and whose paws could rake the snow in such a manner. That animal was the grizzly, the monarch of the mountain forest.

The man looked further over the snow, and, in a few moments, had learned all he wished to know. There were two distinct trails, one approaching, the other departing. But there was a curious difference between them. The approach had evidently been at a slovenly, ambling pace. The raking of the trailing feet showed this. But the departing track displayed every sign of great haste. The snow had been flurried to an extent that had obliterated all semblance of footprints.

Ralph unslung his rifle. Ahead of him was the track, ahead of him also was a further break in the forest where the sun shone down with dazzling brilliancy. He passed on and looked up at the perfect sky. Then he took the direction of the track. It struck out for the northeast.

“I wonder if Nick’s lit on it,” he muttered. “It ’ud be his luck, anyway.”

He further examined the tracks, and the whiteness of the snow warned him they were quite fresh.

“Ain’t been made more’n an hour,” he added, in further soliloquy. “Guess, I’ll trail him.”

And he set off hot-foot through the forest.

The trail was well marked, and he followed it with ease. And as he

moved slowly on his mind had much leisure from his task. The direction the bear had taken was towards the country over which Nick was working. Also Ralph could not help recollecting that the northeast was the direction in which lay the Moosefoot camp. True there were many miles of wild country between him and the Indians, but the knowledge of the direction he was taking quickly turned his thoughts into other channels, and his quarry no longer solely occupied his mind. His eyes followed the trail, his thoughts went on miles ahead.

It was three days since Nick had first told Ralph of his meeting with Aim-sa. And ever since the latter had sought her himself, but his search had been in vain. And each of those three days Nick had returned to camp happy and smiling in a manner which maddened his brother. Now he thought of these things. He told himself, with warped reasoning, that Nick had gone behind his back, that he had taken undue advantage in his winning of Aim-sa's regard. He forgot, or admitted not, his own doings, his own secret meeting with her on the night of her flight from the dugout.

Such was his mood as he traversed the forest paths. Through dell and brake; through endless twilight maze of black tree-trunks; over moss-grown patches, and roots and stumps reeking with the growth of rank fungus. But his eyes never lost the indications of his quarry, and at intervals he paused listening for some sound which should tell him of the beast's proximity.

A frozen creek crossed his way. The surface was covered with the watery slush of melting snow, and great cracks ran in many directions through the ice.

He crossed it and the forest closed about him again. The beast he was trailing had paused here, had moved roundabout as though seeking the direction he required. Ralph followed the creature's movements, understanding with the acuteness of his forest breeding.

Suddenly he started and a half-stifled cry broke from him. He dashed forward to a point where the snow had drifted and was now disturbed.

He halted, and looked down. Other footprints mingled with those of the bear. They were small, and had been made by moccasin-shod feet. He had seen such footprints before. He knew the owner of the feet which had made these imprints. Aim-sa's were such as these–Aim-sa's!

His eyes took in every detail slowly, fondly. Where was she now? He must follow. Then he remembered. Something else was following, not him, but her. He straightened himself up, and a muttered exclamation broke from his lips. Now he understood. Away there, back in the distant woods, the bear must have scented the woman's presence and was tracking her down. She had gone on through the forest, unknowing of the danger that lurked behind her, which was hard upon her trail.

Forgetful of Nick, forgetful of all else, Ralph pursued the double trail. Danger threatened the woman he loved, for aught he knew had already overtaken her. To his credit be it said, that, as he raced over the sodden carpet of the forest, not one selfish thought possessed him. Aim-sa was in danger, and so he went headlong to the rescue. His quiet eyes were lit with a fiery determination such as one might have expected in the eyes of Nick, but not in those of Ralph. His soul was afire with anxiety. Aim-sa was an expert in forest-craft, but she was a woman. So he hasted.

The world about him might have been bathed in the blackness of night for all he heeded it; only the track of footsteps stood out to his gaze like a trail of fire. His speed was great; nor was he conscious how great. He no longer walked, but ran, and thought nothing of distance, nor the passing of time. The trail of pursuer and pursued still lit, red-hot, before him, and the cry of his heart still rang out–On! On!

It was noon when his speed slackened. Nor was it weariness that checked him. Once in the echoing wood he had heard the distant sound of breaking undergrowth. The prospect about him had changed. The forest had become a tangled maze of low-growing

shrub, dotted with giant growths of maple, spruce, and blue-gum. It was a wider, deeper hollow than any hitherto passed, and the air was warmer. It was the valley of a wide, swift-flowing river.

The declivity was abrupt, and the rush of the river, too swift to succumb to the grip of winter, sounded faintly up from below. Suddenly he halted listening, and the sound of breaking undergrowth came to him again and again; he waited for the cry of the human, but it did not come. With beating heart he hurried on, his mind was easier and his thoughts centred upon the killing of the grizzly. His rifle was ready to hand and he looked for a sight of the dark fur through the bush ahead.

Now his movements became almost Indian-like in their stealth. Bending low to avoid the rustling branches, he crept on, silently and swiftly. He no longer followed the tracks. He had turned off, meaning to come up with his quarry against the wind. At every opening in the bush he paused, his keen eyes alert for a sign of his prey. But the leafless branches of the scrub, faintly tinged with the signs of coming spring, alone confronted him; only that, and the noise of breaking brushwood ahead.

It quickly became plain to him that the bear was no longer advancing, but was moving about uncertainly; and as he realized this, his heart was gripped with a terrible fear. Had the brute come up with his prey? Had the tragedy been played out? He dashed forward, throwing all caution to the winds; but ere he had gone fifty yards he came to a halt, like one paralyzed.

His eyes, which had been peering ever ahead, had suddenly dropped to the ground. It seemed as though they could no longer face that which they looked upon. For a moment his face worked as might that of a man in great pain. Then its expression changed and a flush mounted to his brow; a flush of indescribable rage. Again his eyes were raised and a devilish look peered out from them.

An opening not two acres in extent lay before him. In its midst was a

blackened tree-trunk, limbless, riven; a forest giant blasted by some mountain storm. Nick was standing beside it; his gun rested against its blackened sides, and, upon a fallen bough, scarcely a yard away, Aim-sa was seated. They were in deep converse, and Ralph was near enough to hear the sound of their voices, but not to distinguish their words. As he strained his tingling ears to catch the tenor of their speech, he could hear the movements of the bear in the adjacent woods.

The two in the open seemed all unconscious of what was going on so near them. Nick was gazing upon the woman, his heart laid bare in his eyes. And Aim-sa was smiling up into his face with all the arch coquetry of her sex, with that simple, trusting look which, however guileful, must ever appeal to the strong man.

For awhile Ralph looked on. The exquisite torture of his heart racked him, but he did not turn away to shut out the sight. Rather it seemed as if he preferred to thus harass himself. It was the working of his own angry passion which held him, feeding itself, fostering, nursing itself, and goading him to fury.

Suddenly the sound of movement close at hand broke the spell which held him. He looked, and saw the bear less than twenty yards off.

He gripped his rifle, and his first thought was to slay. It was the hunter's instinct which rose within him. But something held him, and his weapon did not move from his side; somewhere in his heart a harsh voice whispered to him, and he listened to words of evil counsel. Then a revulsion of feeling swept over him, and he shook himself as though to get rid of something which clung about him and oppressed him. But the moment passed, leaving him undecided, his brain maddened with bitter thoughts.

The dark form in the bush beyond moved. There came no sound, and the waiting man wondered if his eyes deceived him. No cat could have moved more silently upon its prey. Not a twig creaked. It moved on stealthily, inexorably, till it paused at the edge of the opening.

Ralph's eyes turned upon the dead tree. Nick's back was turned, and Aim-sa was intent upon her companion. She seemed to be hanging upon his every word. And Ralph's heart grew harder within him. His hand held his rifle in a nervous clutch and his finger-nails scored the stock. A shout from him would avert disaster; a shot would arrest that terrible advance. But the shout remained unborn; the trigger still waited the compressing hand. And the unconscious brother stood with death stealing upon him from beyond the fringe of the woods.

Solemnly the great grizzly advanced. Once in the open he made no pause. The lumbering beast looked so clumsy that the inexperienced might have been forgiven a smile of ridicule. Its ears twitched backward and forward, its head lolled to its gait, and though its eyes shone with a baleful ferocity they seemed to gaze anywhere but at its intended victims.

Ralph stood watching, with lips compressed and jaws set, and a cruel frown darkening his brow. But his heart was beating in mighty pulsations, and somewhere within him a conflict was raging, in which Evil had attacked in overwhelming force, and Good was being beaten back.

Within ten yards of the tree the bear halted and reared itself upon its haunches. Thus for a moment it towered in terrible menace.

It was the last chance. Ralph's lips moved as though to shout, but only a low muttered curse came from them. Suddenly the air was split with a piercing scream. Aim-sa stood erect, one arm was outstretched pointing, the other rested against the tree as though she would steady herself. Her eyes were staring in terror at the huge brute as it came towards them.

Nick swung round. He was too late. There was no time to reach his rifle. His right hand plunged at his belt, and he drew a long hunting-knife from its sheath, and thrust himself, a shield, before Aim-sa.

The cry smote the savage heart of Ralph, smote it with the sear of white-hot iron. A wave of horror passed over him. It was not of his

brother he thought, but of the woman he loved. Nick's death would only be the forerunner of hers. In a flash his rifle sprang to his shoulder. A second passed while his keen eyes ran over the sights, the compressing hand was upon the trigger. A puff of smoke. A sharp report. The grizzly swung round with a lurch. He had not stopped, he merely changed the direction of his steps and came straight for the forest where Ralph stood.

But the magnificent brute only took a few strides. Ralph went out to meet him, but, ere he came up, the creature tottered. Then, reeling, it dropped upon all fours, only, the next instant, to roll over upon its side, dead.

Ralph gave one glance at the body of the great bear; the next moment its presence was forgotten. He passed on, and confronted those whom he had unwillingly rescued. The depression of his brows, and the glint of his eyes and merciless set of his jaws, all gave warning of a danger that dwarfed to insignificance that which had just passed.

"I 'lows I hadn't reckoned to find you wi' company," Ralph said, addressing his brother with a quietness that ill-concealed the storm underlying his words. "Mebbe I didn't calc'late to find you, anyway."

There was no mistaking the challenge in his look. Nick saw it. His impetuous temper rose in response. The bear was forgotten. Neither alluded to it. The two men faced each other with the concentrated jealous hatred of weeks' growth uppermost in their hearts.

"Wal, I guess y've found me. What then?"

Nick squared himself, and his expression was as relentless as that of the older man.

Ralph paid no heed to the taunting inquiry. He looked over at Aim-sa, who had shrunk away. Now she answered his look with one that was half-pleading, half-amused. She realized the feud which was between the men, but she did not understand the rugged, forceful natures which she had so stirred.

"Say, gal," Ralph said abruptly. "Ther's jest us two. Ye gave yourself to

me that night, maybe you've give yourself to him since. Which is it, him or me? Ye'll choose right here. Choose!"

Nick turned and looked at her with strained, anxious eyes. Ralph's face belied his outward calm.

"An' what if Aim-sa loves neither?" the woman asked, with a laugh in which there was no mirth, and some fear.

"Then she's lied."

Ralph's teeth shut with a snap.

Aim-sa looked from one to the other. She was beginning to understand, and with understanding came a great dread. She longed to flee, but knew that to do so would be impossible.

"Aim-sa loves both," she said at last.

There was a long, deathly silence. The brooding solitude of the wild was never more pronounced than at that moment.

Then Ralph looked into the face of his brother, and Nick returned his gaze.

"You hear?" said Ralph. "She is an Injun, I guess, an' don't know no better. Maybe we'd best settle it for her."

"That's so."

Ralph threw off his buckskin shirt. Nick removed his heavy clothing.

"Stand aside, woman," said Ralph. "Ye'll wait by, an' your man'll claim ye."

"Knives?" said Nick, through his clenched teeth.

"Knives."

And then again silence reigned.

CHAPTER X.
THE BATTLE IN THE WILD

The woman shrank back. The last trace of levity had vanished from her eyes. Their blue depths gazed out upon the strange scene with horror and dread. In that moment she understood the power she had wielded with these two men, and a thrill of regret shook her frame. She saw in the eyes of both the cruel purpose which was in their hearts. It was death for one of them. Even in that moment of suspense, she found herself speculating which of them it would be.

There was no sentiment in her thoughts. These two were nothing to her. She would regret the death of either as she would regret the death of any strong, healthy man; but that was all. Her horror was a natural revulsion at the prospect of seeing death dealt out in the ruthless manner that these men contemplated.

Just for one instant the desire to stay the combatants rose uppermost in her mind. She stepped forward again and raised a protesting hand.

“Are you brothers or wolves of the forest that you’d kill each other? If you fight for Aim-sa, she’ll have neither of you.”

Her words rang out clear and incisive. In her excitement she had forgotten the halting phrases of the White Squaw, and spoke fluently enough. Nick was ominously silent. Ralph answered her.

“Stand back, an’ remember ye’re the squaw of him as wins ye in fair fight.”

Then he cried out to his brother:

“Are ye ready?”

Nick made no audible reply. His face looked the words his lips did not frame. He was ready, and the passion in him was more than willing.

Once, before he closed with his opponent, he glanced round at Aimsa. It may have been that he sought one look of encouragement, one smile; it may have been. But the beautiful face he looked upon had no smile for either. It was dead white under its tanning, and the blue eyes were widely staring. Ralph did not take his eyes from his brother's face, and the fierce light in them was as the gleam in the eyes of the timber-wolf prowling at night around a camp-fire in the forest.

For a moment a heavy cloud spread itself over the face of the sun, and the grey daylight of winter again covered the mountains. Instantly the forest lost its look of spring, and the air returned to the chill of the darker months. The bald break in the forest looked more cheerless than a waste ground in a city, and those who stood about to fight for life became savage images that looked something less than human. Nick, larger than his brother, was a tower of thew and muscle. As he stood there, clad in a cotton shirt and trousers belted at the waist, he was the figure of a perfect man. His shaggy head was thrown back, but his handsome face was distorted by its expression of hate. Ralph was the smaller by inches, but his muscles were as fine-tempered steel. There was even more of the wild in his expression than in that of his brother. The ferocity in his face was wolfish, and not good to look upon.

Both had bared their hunting-blades, long knives at once vicious and coldly significant.

There was no further word. The men bent low and moved circling round each other. Their attitudes were much those of wrestlers seeking an advantageous "holt." By common consent they avoided the tree, keeping to the oozing soil of the open.

Ralph displayed the more activity. His lesser stature inclined to a quickness his brother did not possess. He sought to use art to draw the impetuosity of the other, and kept up a series of feints. But strangely enough Nick displayed a control which was surprising. He had a full appreciation of the life and death struggle. He had faced it

too often with the dumb adversaries of the forest. It was Ralph who became incautious. His fury could not long be held in check, and his cunning at the start of the fight soon gave place to a wild and slashing onslaught, while Nick fought on the defensive, reading in his brother's eyes the warning of every contemplated attack.

But Ralph's swift movements harassed Nick; they pressed him sorely, and often drove him to extremity in his defence. For long he kept distance, knowing that while the other was wasting strength his own was being carefully husbanded.

Ten minutes passed. Still they had not come together. Ralph charged in with upraised knife; the blow was warded, and he passed on only to swing round on the instant and repeat the attack from the opposite direction. But always Nick faced him, grim, determined, and with deadly purpose. Once the latter slipped; the footing was none too secure. Instantly Ralph hurled himself upon him and his blade scored his brother's arm, leaving a trail of blood from elbow to wrist. That one touch let loose Nick's pent-up fury and he allowed himself to be drawn.

The two came together with a terrific impact. Nick slipped again. This time he could not save himself. His feet shot from under him and he went down backwards. In his fall he seized Ralph's knife-arm at the wrist, and the same time aimed a slashing blow at his face. But Ralph's agility was as furious as it was full of force. In turn he caught Nick by the wrist, and, with a great wrench, sought to dislocate his shoulder.

As well try to tear a limb from the parent oak. Ralph's effort died out, and they lay upon the ground fighting to free their weapons. Now the life and death struggle had begun. It was a hideous battle, silent, ominous. But the horror of it lay, not in the deadly intent, the flashing steel, the grim silence. These men were brothers; brothers whose affection had stood them through years of solitary labours, trials, and privations, but which had changed to a monstrous hatred because a

woman had come into their lives.

As the moments swept by, the brothers rolled and writhed, with every faculty at terrible tension. Now Ralph was uppermost; now Nick sought to drive the downward blow. Now Ralph strained to twist his knife-arm free from the iron grip that held it; now Nick slashed vainly at the air, seeking to sever the sinewy limb that threatened above his face.

It required only the smallest slip, the briefest relaxation of the tense-drawn muscles on the part of either, and death awaited the unfortunate. For long neither yielded one iota, but the struggle was too fierce to last. Human strength has but narrow limits of endurance when put forth to its uttermost. Given no slip, no accident, there could be only one conclusion to the battle. Victory must inevitably be with the man of superior muscle. Neither fought with a fine skill; for, used as they both were to the knife, their antagonists of the forest only possessed Nature's weapons, which left the hunter with the balance of power.

Already the breathing of the combatants had become painfully heavy; but while Ralph struggled with all the fierceness of his passion, and put forth his whole strength, Nick reserved a latent force for the moment when opportunity arrived. And that moment was nearing.

Ralph was under and Nick's great weight held him down, for the sinuous struggles of the other had lost their vim. Suddenly, with a mighty effort, the younger man wrenched his knife-arm free, and a cry, hoarse, fierce, sounded deep in his throat. But his effort had cost him his hold upon his brother. There was a wicked gleam of steel as both men struck.

Ralph, striking upwards, was at a disadvantage. His blade, aimed at the neck and shoulder, struck Nick's cheek, laid the flesh open to the lower jaw, glanced, and buried itself in the muscle of the shoulder. Nick's blade smote with a fearful gash into the side of his brother's throat.

It was over.

Ralph lay quivering and silent upon the ground. Nick rose staggering and dazed.

He moved away like a man in a dream. His arms hung limply at his sides, and his eyes looked out across the wide woodland valley with an uncomprehending stare. His face was almost unrecognizable under the flow of blood from his wound. Once, as he stood, one hand went up mechanically to his face, then it dropped again without having accomplished its purpose. And all the while his vacant eyes stared out upon–nothing.

Presently he sat down. His actions were almost like collapse, and he remained where he sat, still, silent, like an image. The moments passed. The quiet was intense. A faint murmur of flowing waters came up from the river beyond.

Suddenly he moved. Then in a moment he seemed to break out into passionate life. The stony stare had gone from his eyes. Intelligence looked out; intelligence such as one might find in one whose mind is on the verge of losing its balance; a fearful, anxious, hunted intelligence, face to face with an unending horror.

He moved to where his brother was lying, and stood shaking in every limb; he had realized the work of his hands. He dashed the blood from his face. The vivid stain dyed his fingers and the touch of the warm tide only seemed to add to his terror. He went up to the still form and looked down. Then he backed away, slowly, step by step, but still unable to withdraw his fascinated gaze.

Suddenly a cry broke from his lips. It was bitter, heartrending. Then a quick word followed.

“Wher’s–”

His question remained uncompleted. His head turned swiftly, and he looked stupidly about him. The clearing was empty of all save himself and that other lying upon the ground at his feet, and, beyond, the carcass of the dead grizzly. A dreadful fear leapt to his brain; he

moved tottering. His action gained swiftness suddenly. He ran to the forest edge, and, with hungry eyes, gazed in beyond the sparse fringe of scrub. There was nothing there. He moved away to the right and ran in amongst the low-growing bush, only to reappear with more feverish haste, and eyes whose fiery glance seemed to shoot in every direction at once. On he went, round the edge of the entire clearing; in and out, like some madman running purposelessly in search of some phantasy of his brain. There was no one there but himself, and the two still forms upon the ground. Aim-sa was gone!

But he did not pause. His brain was in a tumult, there was no reasoning in it. He searched everywhere. Bush that could conceal nothing bigger than a beetle was examined; to his distorted fancy the lightning-stricken tree presented a hiding-place. Further he penetrated into the woods, but always only to return to his brother's side, distraught, weary from loss of blood.

Gone! Aim-sa was gone!

At last he stood, an awesome figure, bloodstained, dishevelled. He was at his brother's side as he had been a dozen times during his mad search. It was as though he returned to the dead for company. But now, at last, he moved away no more. He looked upon the pallid face and staring, sightless eyes, and the red pool in which the body weltered.

There was a long pause, and the quiet set his pulses beating and his ears drumming. Presently he turned away. But as by a magnet drawn, he turned quickly again and his eyes once more rested upon his brother's body. Then all in a moment a stifled cry broke from his lips, and, throwing himself upon his knees, he thrust his arms about the dead.

Suffering as he was, he raised the body and nursed the almost severed head. He muttered hoarsely, and his face was bent low till his own dripping wound shed its sluggish tide to mingle with the blood of the man he had slain.

Now, in his paroxysm of awful remorse, the woman was forgotten, and he only realized the dread horror he had committed. He had slain his brother! He was a murderer! For what?

At the thought he almost threw the body from him as he sprang to his feet.

“No, no! not murder,” he cried, in a choking voice. “It was fair fight.”

Then, still looking down, he drew his foot back as though to kick the stiffening clay. But the blow did not come, and, instead, he wrung his hands at his sides like a child in distress. Harsh sobs broke tearless from his lips; his breast heaved with inexpressible agony. Then he flung himself face downwards upon the sodden earth, and his fingers dug into the carpet of dead matter, clawing aimlessly.

The afternoon was well advanced when he moved again. He rose to his feet without any warning, and the change in him was staggering. Now a gaunt, grey-faced man looked out upon the world through eyes which burned with the light of fever. His movements were slow, deliberate. Only his eyes betrayed his condition, telling a tale of a strange new life born within him.

He moved off into the woods, striking down the slope towards the river. He was gone some time; and when he returned his face was cleaned, and a bandage was tied about it. The wound in his shoulder was not severe.

He came none too soon, for, as he neared the clearing, he heard a succession of deep-toned wolf-howls. As he broke the forest fringe, he saw two great timber-wolves steal swiftly back to the depths whence they had just emerged.

Nick cursed them under his breath. Then he went to his brother’s side. Here he paused, and, after a moment of mental struggle, stooped and lifted the corpse upon his unwounded shoulder. Then with his gruesome freight he plunged into the forest.

He held the body firmly but tenderly, and walked as rapidly as his burden permitted. He often talked to himself as he went, like a man in

deep thought and stirred by violent emotions. Sometimes he slowed his gait, and, at others, he almost ran. His thoughts influenced him strangely.

Once he set his burden down and rested. The forest was getting dark about him, but it suited his mood; it formed a background for his gloomy thoughts. And, while he rested, he fell to talking as though Ralph were living, and merely rested with him. He talked and answered himself, and, later, leaned over his dead, crooning like some woman over her child. The time passed. Again he rose, and once more shouldering the body, now stiff and cold, hastened on.

And as the evening shadows gathered, and the forest gloom deepened, there came the sound of movement about him. At intervals wolfish throats were opened and the dismal forest cries echoed and reëchoed in the hollow shadows.

His burden grew heavier. His mind suffered, and his nerves were tense as the wires of a musical instrument. Every jolt found an echoing note upon them, and each note so struck caused him exquisite pain. And now, too, the wolves grew bolder; the scent of blood was in the air and taunted their hungry bellies till they began to lose their fear of the man.

Nick stopped and looked about him. The evening shadows were fast closing in. In the gloom he saw eyes looking out upon him, eyes in pairs, like coals of fire surrounded by dark, lank, shadowy forms. One shadow stood out more distinctly than the others, and he unslung his rifle and fired pointblank at it. There was a howl of pain. Then followed several fierce yelps, and stealing forms crowded thick and fast upon the creature that had bitten the dust.

With a thrill of strange dread Nick shouldered his burden again and proceeded on his way. His steps were no longer steady, but hurried and uncertain. In his haste he frequently stumbled, but he was strong, and he had a haunting fear of what lay behind him, and so he put forth a great effort.

The twilight deepened; black shadows were everywhere about him. Hills rose before him, and valleys sank away at his feet. His fancy now saw the forest crowded with prying eyes. Every tree-trunk became a figure which stood pointing and whispering words of denunciation. And as he beheld this ghostly army of shadows his heart quailed, and the look in his eyes grew more and more fevered. He lurched on under the cold, clammy body without thought of his way, with nervous dews upon his forehead, and shaking limbs.

The wolves still followed. Their cries, vicious, eager, came to him, and he knew that the meal he had provided was devoured, and they hungered yet, and thirsted for the blood they scented upon the air. He sped on, staggering, and his mind grew dizzy. But he knew that he had entered his valley, and beyond lay the dugout which henceforth was his alone.

His intolerable burden had worn him down. He feared it as he feared the dark shadows of the woods, and the stealing forms which trailed behind him. He longed to throw that which he carried to the ground and run headlong to the shelter of his home. But something held him. It was as if his brother's corpse were endowed with life, a ghostly life, and that it clung with tenacious grip to the back of the living. And the thought grew in his aching brain that he was no longer free to do as he chose, but was being driven by the Thing he carried. At the river he bent to rid himself of the corpse. He purposed to rest ere he bore it up the last hill, but the stiff arms had somehow embraced his neck and clung to him. With a cry of terror he moved forward at a run. Hard on his heels came the loud-voiced throng of timber-wolves.

At last, ahead, he heard the yelping of his own dogs. The noise brought him a measure of relief, for the speeding shadows behind dropped back into the woods, and their voices faded away into the distance.

But the corpse clung, and its weight dragged him back; to his distorted fancy the arms held his neck as in a vise. He gasped

painfully as imagination told him that he was being choked. A cold sweat poured down his face and set him shivering, but, like one doomed to his task, he sped on.

Now the open stretched before him and beyond lay the dugout. He saw his dogs rushing to meet him; his five fierce huskies. They came welcoming; then they paused uncertainly and grouped together in a cluster, and their tone suddenly changed to the short-voiced yapping of fear. As he came on he called them by name, seeking solace in their company and in the sound of his own voice. But the only response the dogs made was to move uneasily. Their bushy tails drooped and hung between their legs and they turned back fearfully. Then they began to creep away, slinking in furtive apprehension; then finally they broke into a headlong flight, racing for home in a perfect madness of terror.

And so, with horror staring from his eyes, the man who had killed his brother came to his home again.

Inside the hut he released himself from the icy embrace of the dead man's arms, and laid the poor, cold clay upon the blankets which had been spread for the return of Aim-sa. While he stood brooding over the corpse a sound reached him from, behind. Turning he saw that he had left the door open, and in the opening he beheld the crowding forms of his dogs. They stood snarling fiercely, with bristling manes, their narrow-set eyes gleaming in the dusk like sparks of baleful light.

The sight set him shuddering. Then something seemed to stir within him. His heart felt like stone in his body. A coldness seemed to freeze his blood one minute, and the next in a rush came a wave of fiery passion which drove him to unthinking action. The veins in his head seemed to be bursting, and his brain felt as though gripped in a vise.

Out whipped his revolver, and six chambers were emptied at the figures which barred the doorway. A hubbub of howls followed, then, in a moment, all became quiet. Now the doorway stood clear; the creatures had vanished–all but two. And these lay where they had

fallen.

Suddenly a harsh laugh broke the stillness. But though the laugh was his, Nick's lips were unsmiling and his eyes gleamed furiously out into the night.

CHAPTER XI.
THE GATHERING OF THE FOREST LEGIONS

Nick kicked the bodies of the two dogs from the doorway. Then, by force of habit, he kindled a fire in the stove, though he had no thought or desire for warmth. His action was mechanical and unheeding. Then he sat down; and, as he sat, he heard the howling of the dogs as, in chorus, they mourned their dead companions.

As the noise continued the man's nerves vibrated with the hideous dole. It rose and fell, in mournful cadence, until he could stand it no longer. So he rose and reloaded his revolver. The action brought him relief. It did more: it brought him a feeling akin to joy. And he passed out into the night.

Forceful action alone could serve him. His dread, the torture of heart and brain, found relief in the thought of taking life. A lust for slaughter was upon him.

He closed the door behind him, and, from the storm porch, peered out beyond. The moon had just risen above the ghostly mountain peak, and its deep, yellow light shone down over the gleaming crests in long shafts of dull fire. Twenty yards away, the three huskies were squatting upon the ground facing each other, as might their blood relations, the timber-wolves. Their long, sharp muzzles were thrown up towards the starlit heavens, and their voices trolled drearily from their cavernous throats, thrilling the air and arousing the mountain echoes.

For a second there was a gleam of light in the darkness of the porch as the moon's rays caught the burnished metal of the man's revolver. Then three shots rang sharply out. Three hideous voices were

instantly hushed; three bodies rolled over, falling almost side by side. The labour of the trace would know the huskies no more.

But the man's passion was only rising. He reentered the hut, thrilled with a strange wild joy. A fierceness leapt within him as he seated himself beside the stove and gazed over at the still form of his brother. And up out of the forest came the yelp of famished wolf and starving coyote.

The hunched figure made no move.

Wild thoughts surged through his brain, thoughts which had no sequence, no continuity. He had not eaten the whole day, and though food was now to his hand he heeded it not. He was exhausted and utterly weary of body. But he sought no rest. He was living upon the vitality of his poor strained brain, sapping the tide of reason which flowed none too surely.

The time passed.

The cries of the wolves gathered force and drew nearer. The scent of blood was in the air. That night they were very bold. With muzzles thrown up they snuffed at the scent they loved, and came with licking lips and frothing jowls, fighting fiercely among themselves.

Nick stirred at last.

He rose and took his rifle. His cartridge-belt was still about his waist. Again he passed out into the night. In the shadow of the porch he stood again, and gazed upon the moonlit scene. Down the hill was the darkness of the forest, giving the appearance of an unfathomable pit. Above rose its sides, shimmering in the cold moonlight. Above the forest line the eternal snows glinted like burnished steel, for the yellow rays of the rising moon had given place to the silvery gleam of its maturity. The diamond-studded sky had nothing of darkness in it; a grey light, the sheen of the star myriads too minute to be visible to the naked eye, shone down upon the earth, and the still air had the sharp snap of the spring frost in it. Nick was oblivious to all but the forest cries and the crowd of stealing forms moving from the woodland

shelter, and circling upward, ever nearer and nearer towards the feast which lay spread out within sight of their cruel eyes.

Nearer they drew, lean, scraggy, but withal large beasts. And as they came they often paused to send their dismal song out upon the air. Then there was a scuffle, a wicked clipping of keen fangs. Instantly the crowd packed about a fallen comrade. Then later they would scatter and continue their advance in a sort of rude skirmishing order. The man's rifle was at his shoulder; a tongue of flame leapt from its muzzle, and its report rang out bitingly. The foremost wolf fell to the earth, and the ravenous horde behind leapt to the banquet thus provided.

Again and again the rifle spoke its sharp-voiced command, and death followed hard upon its word. At every shot a wolf went down, and the madness rose in the brain behind the eyes that looked out from the porch. Nick's craving for slaughter increased. He emptied his belt and obtained a fresh supply of ammunition, and continued to wage his fiendish warfare. And all the time wolves poured out from the woods until it seemed as if the whole race had gathered in one vast army to assail the little stronghold set high upon the hillside. It was as though Ralph's death had been the signal for the gathering of the forest creatures to avenge him.

And fierce and long the carnage continued. The fearsome pastime was one to thrill the most hardened with horror. The still night air was filled with a nauseating reek, whilst the echoes gave back the death-cries, mingling with the deep-toned bayings of ferocious joy. But never for one instant did the man relax his watchfulness. Never once did his rifle cease its biting greeting to the relentless scavengers of the forest. Short and sharp its words leapt forth, and every word meant death.

The moon passed its meridian and sank lower and lower towards the western peaks; and as it lost power the stars shone more brilliantly and the northern lights hovered in the sky, dancing their fantastic

measure slowly, solemnly. The tint of dawn stole gradually above the eastern horizon. The man was still at his post, his unsleeping eyes ever watchful. Longer intervals now elapsed between his deadly shots. The wolves recognized the coming of daylight, and became more chary of breaking cover. Besides, the banquet was nearly over and every guest was gorged.

Dawn grew apace. The silver of the eastern sky changed to gold, deeper and deeper, till the yellow merged into a roseate sheen which shone down upon the cloud mists, and tinged them with the hue of blood. Light was over the darkling forests, and as it brightened the voice of the forest legions died away in the distance, and the battleground was deserted of all but the author of the fearful carnage.

Nick waited in his shelter until the last cry had passed. Then he reluctantly turned back into the hut. He sought no rest. His fevered brain was in a tumult. For a long time he stood beside his brother's corpse, while his mind struggled to regain something of its lost balance. There came to him a hazy recollection of all that had gone before. It was as though he stood viewing the past from some incalculable distance. Events passed phantasmagorically before his memory, yet always their meaning seemed to tantalize and elude him.

And while he stood thus the woman leapt into the foreground of his mental picture. It was the tangible feature he needed upon which he could link the chain of recollection. Now everything became more clear. Now the meaning of his brother's dead body returned to him once more. He remembered all that had happened. His love for Aim-sa arose paramount out of the shadowed recesses of his deranged mind, and merged into that other passion which had gripped him the night long.

Nor was there pity nor penitence in his mood. Remorse had passed from him. Now there was no one to stand between him and his love. He was glad that Ralph was dead. Suddenly, as he stood looking down upon the still form, a harsh laugh broke from him and echoed

through the stillness of the room.

He moved away and replenished the stove; and then, returning, he wrapped his brother in the blankets on which he lay. Moving the blanket-wrapped body aside, he exposed the floor where the treasure had been buried. Suddenly he brushed his tangled hair aside from his forehead. A sigh, which was almost a gasp, escaped him. His lips moved, and he muttered audibly:

"Ay, she'll come to me agin, I guess, same as she's done before. Yes, an' it's all hers, 'cause it's all mine now. By Gar! ther's a deal ther'–a mighty deal. An' it's ours. Hers an' mine."

Again he passed a hand across his forehead, and his action was uncertain, as of a man who finds it difficult to think, and having thought fails to obtain reassurance. He passed out of the hut, and presently returned with a shovel and pick.

Now the hut resounded with the dull thud of the pick as it was driven deep into the hard-trodden earth. There was a feverish haste and unnecessary energy in the manner of his work. At first what he intended was not quite clear. He seemed to be digging at random. Then he laid his pick aside and plied the shovel, and gradually his purpose became plain. A long, narrow trench was cleared, and its outline was that of a grave. Again the pick was set to work, and again the shovel cleared the débris. The ground was hard with the years of tramping it had endured, and it took a long time to dig to a sufficient depth. But at last the grave was completed.

Nick seized the body in its blanket shroud and flung it into the hole. There was neither pause nor hesitancy in anything he did, only his eyes peered furtively about. As the first part of the burial was accomplished, a panic seized him and he shovelled the soil back as though his life depended on his speed. He packed the dry clay down with his feet; nor did he rest till the grave was filled to the top.

Then he paused and wiped the sweat from his brow. The tension of his nerves was slightly relaxed. He went outside the hut to drink in a

deep breath of the purer mountain air before he proceeded further. And while he stood leaning against the doorway he listened as though expecting the sound of some one approaching. He scanned the outlook carefully, but there was no sign of living creature about. The wolves had gone as surely as if their visit had been a ghostly hallucination which daylight had dispelled.

He returned to his labours with his spirit more easy and his brain less fevered. He thought of Aim-sa and that which he meant to bestow upon her.

Near by where he had buried his brother's body was the spot where the treasure had been placed for safety. Here he began to dig. The work was easy. The soil was light and loose, and gave beneath the sharp edge of the shovel. He cleared several shovelfuls out, and then stooped to rake for the chest with his fingers. He knew that it had been buried only a few inches below the surface. He raked long and diligently, but, wherever he tried it, the earth gave beneath the pressure of his strong fingers, nor yielded up any indication of the chest. He rose and resorted once more to the shovel, and a look of disquiet stole into his face. He opened a wider surface, thinking he had missed the spot. He dug deeper, but no chest appeared, and his look changed to one of absolute fear.

Again he raked, but without result. Again he dug, but now deeper and deeper. Still there was no chest, and as he widened the hole he found himself working upon the hard soil which had never before been disturbed. An awful fear gripped him. He sought out the spot where the soil was easy. He knew that this was where he had buried the chest. His actions became hurried and more and more energetic. He dug furiously, scattering the earth wildly in his alarm, and all the time conviction was forcing itself upon him, and he muttered as he worked.

But all his efforts were in vain, and, after an hour's fruitless search, he flung down the shovel with a bitter cry. Then he stood gazing blankly before him with eyes that seemed to scorch in his head. His face

twitched, and his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. Then his lips parted and he gasped rather than spoke.

“It’s gone!”

The veins at his temples beat visibly. In his ears was a sound as of rushing waters. He saw nothing. He scarcely knew where he was, only he was conscious of something in his head which was strained to the verge of breaking. When, at last, movement came to him, every nerve in his body seemed to draw up with a jolt, and a cry, like the roar of a maddened bull, burst from his quivering lips. He rushed headlong from the hut.

Out into the glittering daylight he went, heedless of his course, heedless of his surroundings. He rushed down the hill and plunged into the woods. On he went, without pause, without hesitation, blindly, madly. On, on, running, stumbling, slipping upon the sodden earth, tripping over projecting roots and rotting stumps.

His mind was a blank. He saw, but comprehended not; he felt, but the sense had no meaning. He heard with clarion-like distinctness, but that which he heard sang upon his ear-drums and penetrated no further. His way was the way of the blindfold, his staring eyes beheld nothing real; he saw the name of Aim-sa blazing in letters of fire before him, and a hazy picture of her lovely face. All recollection of his loss had suddenly passed from him, utterly blotted out of his thought as though he had never known it. He knew not that he had ever had a brother whose death had been the work of his own hand. The hut behind him might never have existed, the forest about him might have been the open prairie, the sodden ground a carpet of fine texture, the snow-covered clearings dusty plains; he knew nothing, nothing. He moved, ran, walked; he was a living organism without a governing power of mind.

Noon came. The silent forest looked down upon his frenzied progress. The trees nodded gently in the breeze, whispering solemnly to each other in their pitying tones. Owls watched him with staring,

unmeaning eyes; deer fled as he came rushing into the calm of their sylvan retreats. A grizzly stood erect as he passed, meditating a protest at the strange disturbance, but remained staring in amazement as the wild human figure went by, oblivious and unheeding.

The afternoon saw him still struggling, but now wearily, and in a state of collapse. His headlong course had taken the inevitable turn. He had swung round in a great circle, and was heading again for the hillside where the dugout stood. Now he often fell as he went, for his feet lagged and caught in every unevenness of the ground. Once he lay where he fell, and remained so long motionless that it seemed as if he would rise no more. But as the afternoon waned and the evening shadows gathered, there came the wild cries of the wolves from somewhere close behind. Though he felt no fear of them, he staggered to his feet and dragged wearily on towards the hut. It was the forest instinct obeyed mechanically.

He came to the hut; he passed the door. Again it was habit that guided him. He kept on, and went round to the door of the lean-to. It stood wide open and he plunged within, and fell headlong upon his blankets. Nor did he stir again; only there came the sound of his stertorous breathing to indicate that he slept.

Black night closed down. The forest cries awoke and their chorus rang out as the moon mounted in the heavens. The wolfish legions hovered at the edge of the woods and snuffed hungrily at the air. But the scent of blood had passed, and they came not too near.

Nick's slumber of exhaustion was haunted by painful, incoherent dreams. With the curious freakishness of a disordered mind, he was beset by a vision of the dark, ferret face of Victor Gagnon. The trader seemed to be hovering threateningly over his rude couch, and, behind him, less distinct, but always recognizable, was the fair Aim-sa. The whole night the sleeper was depressed by some dreadful threat which centred about the vision of these two, and when at length he awoke it

was with the effect of his dreams hard upon him.

The fair fresh daylight was streaming in through the open door. Nick roused himself. He turned uneasily, shivering with the cold, for he had slept where he had fallen. Suddenly he sat up. Then with a leap he was on his feet and wide-awake, and the name of Victor Gagnon fell from his lips. A frenzied, unreasoning desire to take the trader's life possessed him.

His body was refreshed and the blank of memory had passed from him. A gleam of reason shot athwart the racked brain. It was only for an instant, then it was gone again. But that instant sufficed. He remembered that Gagnon knew of the treasure, the only person except himself who knew of it. Victor had robbed him. A wild laughter shook him. Ay, that was it. Victor was the thief; he should die. After that–Aim-sa.

His untutored brain had broken under the strain of recent events. Horror had driven him to the verge of the abyss in the depths of which lurked insanity; his final loss had plunged him headlong down. He was mad!

CHAPTER XII.
WHERE THE LAWS OF MIGHT ALONE PREVAIL

Two men occupied the back room of Victor Gagnon's store. The proprietor, small, alert, with eye and brain working swiftly, and an expression on his dark face indicating the angry nature of his thoughts. He was sitting with his feet on the stove rail and his hands spread out to the warmth. The other man was beside the parchment-covered window. He was immensely tall, and was clad in grey wolfskin from head to foot. His broad shoulders were broadened by the fur covering till he looked a giant. He had just thrown back a cavernous hood from his head, and it now hung down his back. His fur cap was removed, thus displaying a coarse mane of long black hair, and a face as sombre and strong as the world to which he belonged.

The room was untidy. The bed stood at one end, and the tumbled blankets upon it looked as though they had not been straightened for weeks. A small table supported the remains of a frugal meal and the floor about it was littered with food and crumbs. Everywhere were signs of half-breed slovenliness.

For some moments silence had reigned. The North, that Land of Silence, makes men sparing of words, and even women only talk when it is necessary. Just now, there was that between these two men which held every thought to the main issue.

Victor's attention was for the moment upon a rough-hewn chest which was standing on the floor at the big man's feet.

"An' why didn't she come right along with you?"

"Mebbe cos she's smarter nor any o' us; mebbe cos I jest didn't want

her to. There's somethin' 'tween you an' me, Victor, that needs some parley."

The big man spoke quite calmly, but his very calmness was portentous.

"Smarter?" said Victor contemptuously, ignoring the latter part of the other's remark.

"That's what I said," went on the giant, in dispassionate tones. "Davia reckoned as it wa'n't jest safe to light right out lest them fellers found they'd been robbed o' their wad. She's stayin' around to put 'em off'n the trail. They're dead sweet on her an' ain't likely to 'spect who's got the stuff while she's around."

Victor nodded approvingly. His face was less angry. He knew Davia would serve him well. A silence fell again. The stove roared under the forced draught of the damper. Then the big man spoke as though he had not broken off.

"But that ain't on'y the reason, I guess. I wanted her to stay. You an' me are goin' to talk, Victor Gagnon."

The trader glanced angrily at the man with the hood.

"See here, Jean Leblaude, you allus had a crank in yer head, an' I don't cotton to cranks anyhow."

"But you'll cotton to this," replied Jean drily.

"Eh?"

"It's nigh on to three year since you an' sister Davi' took on together," he went on, ignoring the interruption, and speaking with great feeling. "Guess you said as you'd marry her when you was independent o' the company. It was allus the company. Didn't want no married traders on their books. An' you hadn't no cash pappy. That's how you sed. Mebbe it's different now. Wal? When are you goin' to make her a de– your wife?"

There was a look in Jean's eyes that brooked no denial or evasion. He had driven straight to the point, nor was there any likelihood of his

drawing back.

“You’re pretty rough,” said Victor, with an unpleasant laugh. He was inwardly raging, but, like all men of no great moral strength, feared the direct challenge of the other.

“We ain’t polished folk hereabouts,” retorted Jean. “We’ve played the dirty game o’ the White Squaw for you’ clear out. Davi’s most as dead sick of it as me, but wher’ she went into it fer a frolic an’ to please you, I had my notions, I guess. I come clear away down from Peace River nigh on two summers ago jest fer to see that you acted squar’ by that misguided girl. An’ that’s why I done all your dirty work in this White Squaw racket. Now we’ve got the boodle you’re goin’ to hitch up wi’ Davi’, or–”

“Or–what?” broke in Victor contemptuously.

“Or not one blazin’ cent o’ the stuff in this chest’ll you touch.”

Victor sprang from his seat and his eyes shone furiously.

“You–you–” But his fury was baffled by the solemn, determined stare of the other. A moment more and he dropped back in his seat.

Then the great Jean lowered his eyes to the hewn chest upon the floor. The lid had been forced open and the bags of gold dust, so carefully arranged by the Westleys, were displayed within. Presently he looked back at the angry figure bending towards the stove.

“Guess I’ll git blankets out o’ your store,” he said.

Victor remained rapt in moody silence.

“Ther’ ain’t room fer two to sleep comfort’ble in that bed o’ yourn,” he added significantly, as the other showed no inclination to speak.

At last Victor looked up and the dark half-breed blood slowly mounted and flushed his narrow face.

“You’re goin’ to stop here–wher’ the stuff is?”

“I guess.”

The trader looked long into the cavernous moose-eyes of the Hooded

Man while he choked down the rage which consumed him. He knew that he was a prisoner in his own store. Resistance would be utterly useless against such a man as Jean Leblaude.

In his scheme for obtaining wealth Victor had omitted to take into consideration one of the great factors of a life of wrong-doing. A man may not engage in crime with those whom he has wronged.

Victor had sought to obtain good service, forgetting the manner in which he had treated the sister of Jean. The ways of the half-breed are loose in the matter of morals. Davia, he knew, loved him. She was a strong, passionate woman, therefore he had not bothered about Jean. That Jean could possibly have scruples or feelings, had never entered his head. Davia had given her love, then what business of her brother's was the manner in which he, Victor, chose to accept it? This is how he argued when he fully realized the position in which he had thrust himself. But his argument went no further.

Jean was a man strong and purposeful. He had waited long for such an opportunity, and he was not the one to forego his advantage without enforcing his will. If Victor wanted his share of the proceeds of the robbery he must fulfil the promise, which, in a passionate moment, he had bestowed. Davia was as clay in his hands. Jean was different. He was possessed of all the cunning of the half-breed nature, but, looked at from a half-breed point of view, he was a good man, an honest man. A half-breed will shoot an enemy down in his tracks, while yet he is a good father and husband, or a dutiful son. He is a man of much badness and some good. Jean was a little above the average. Possibly it was because his affections were centred upon but one creature in the world, his sister Davia, that he felt strongly in her cause. He knew that, at last, he held Victor in a powerful grip, and he did not intend to relax it.

Jean was as good as his word and took up his abode in Victor's store. Nor would he permit the removal of the treasure under any pretext. This brother of Davia's understood the trader; he did not

watch him; it was the chest that contained the money that occupied his vigilance.

Victor was resourceful and imaginative, but the stolid purpose of the other defied his best schemes. He meant to get away with the money, but the bulldog watchfulness of Jean gave him no opportunity. He was held prisoner by his greed, and it seemed as if, in the end, he would be forced to bend to the other's will.

And no word came from Davia. No word that could cause alarm, or tell them of the dire tragedy being enacted in the mountains. And the two men, one for ever scheming and the other watching, passed their time in moody silence.

It was the third day after the foregoing events had taken place, and midday. Victor was in the store standing in the doorway gazing out across the mighty foothills which stretched far as the eyes could reach to the east. He was thinking, casting about in his mind for a means of getting away with the money. Jean was at his post in the inner room.

It was an unbeautiful time of the year. The passing of winter in snow regions is like the moulting season of fowls, or the season when the furred world sheds its coat. The dazzling whiteness of the earth is superseded by a dirty drab-grey. The snow lasts long, but its hue is utterly changed. And now Victor was looking out upon a scene that was wholly dispiriting to the mind used to the brilliancy of the northern winter.

The trader's thoughts were moving along out over the stretch of country before him, for in that southeastern direction lay the town of Edmonton, which was his goal. It would be less than a fortnight before the melting snow would practically inundate the land, therefore what he had to do must be done at once. And still no feasible scheme presented itself.

He moved impatiently and a muttered curse escaped him. He asked himself the question again and again while his keen, restless eyes moved eagerly over the scene before him. He took a chew of tobacco

and rolled it about in his mouth with the nervous movement of a man beset. He could hear Jean moving heavily about the room behind him, and he wondered what he was doing. But he did not turn to see.

Once let him get upon the trail with the “stuff,” and Jean and his sister could go hang. They would never get him, he told himself. He had not lived in these latitudes for five and twenty years for nothing. But he ever came back to the pitiful admission that he was not yet on the trail, nor had he got the treasure. And time was passing.

Suddenly his eyes settled themselves upon a distant spot beyond the creek. Something had caught his attention, and that something was moving. The sounds of Jean’s lumbering movements continued. Victor no longer heeded them. His attention was fixed upon that movement on the distant slope.

And gradually his brow lightened and something akin to a smile spread over his features. Then he moved back to his counter, and, procuring a small calendar, glanced hastily at the date. His look of satisfaction deepened, and his smile became one of triumph. Surely the devil was with him. Here, in the blackest moment of his despair, was the means he had sought. Yonder moving object was the laden dog-train coming up from Edmonton, with his half-yearly supplies. Now he would see whose wits were the sharpest, his or those of the pig-headed Jean, the man who had dared to dictate to Victor Gagnon. The trader laughed silently.

Gagnon’s plan had come to him in a flash. The moment he had recognized that the company’s dog-train was approaching he had realized the timeliness of its coming. It would be at his door within an hour and a half.

Jean’s voice calling him broke in upon his meditations. He was about to pass the summons by unheeded. Then he altered his mind. Better not force his gaoler to seek him. His eyes might see what he had seen, and his suspicions might be aroused if he thought that he, Victor, had seen the dog-train coming and had said nothing. So he

turned and obeyed the call with every appearance of reluctance.

Jean eyed his prisoner coldly as he drew up beside him.

“Wal, I’ve waited fer you to say as ye’ll marry Davi’, an’ ye ain’t had the savvee to wag yer tongue right, I’m goin’ to quit. The snow’s goin’ fast. They dogs o’ mine is gettin saft fer want o’ work. I’m goin’ to light right out o’ here, Victor, an’ the boodle’s goin’ wi’ me.”

Jean was the picture of strong, unimaginative purpose. But Victor had that in his mind which made him bold.

“Ye’ve held me prisoner, Jean. Ye’ve played the skunk. Guess you ain’t goin’ now. Neither is my share o’ the contents o’ that chest. Savvee? If ye think o’ moving that wad we’re goin’ to scrap. I ain’t no coyote.”

Jean thought for awhile. His lean face displayed no emotion. His giant figure dwarfed the trader almost to nothing, but he seemed to weigh the situation well before he committed himself.

At last he grunted, which was his way of announcing that his decision was taken.

“I’ll have they dogs hitched this afternoon,” he said slowly, and with meaning.

“An’ I’ll set right here by the door,” said Gagnon. “Guess the door’ll let you pass, but it ain’t big enough fer the chest to git through.”

Victor sat himself down as he said and deliberately pulled out a large revolver. This he laid across his lap. And then the two men eyed each other. Jean was in no way taken aback. In fact nothing seemed to put him out of his deliberate manner. He allowed the challenge to pass and went out. But he returned almost immediately and thrust his head in through the doorway.

“Ther’ won’t be no need fer scrappin’ yet awhile,” he said. “I ’lows I’ve changed my way o’ thinkin’. The company’s dog-train is comin’ up the valley, I guess. When they’ve gone, we’ll see.”

And Victor smiled to himself when the giant had once more departed.

Then he put his pistol away.

"Wal, that's settled," he said to himself. "The boodle stops right here. Now we'll see, Jean Leblaude, who's runnin' this layout. Ther's whiskey aboard that train. Mebbe you ain't like to fergit that. You'll taste sure. As ye jest sed, 'we'll see.'"

The trader knew his man. The great Jean had all the half-breed's weaknesses as well as a more than usual supply of their better qualities. Sober he was more than dangerous, now that he had shown his real intentions, for he was a man not likely to be turned from his purpose. But Victor knew his fondness for drink, and herein lay the kernel of his plan. With him it was a case of now or never. He must throw everything to the winds for that money, or be burdened with a wife he did not want, and a brother-in-law he wanted less, with only a third of that which his greedy heart thirsted for. No, he would measure swords with Jean, and though his blade was less stout than that of the stolid giant he relied upon its superior keenness and lightness. He meant to win.

The company's dog-train came up. Two sleds, each hauled by ten great huskies. They were laden down with merchandise: groceries, blankets, implements, medicines and a supply of spirits, for medicinal purposes only. Just the usual freight which comes to every trader in the wild. Such stuff as trappers and Indians need and are willing to take in part payment for their furs. But Victor only cared for the supply of spirits just then. He paid unusual attention, however, to the condition of the dogs.

The train was escorted by two half-breeds, one driving each sled. These were experienced hands, servants who had grown old in the service of the company. Men whose responsibility began when they hit the trail, and ceased when they arrived at their destination.

Pierre was a grizzled veteran, and his was the charge of the journey. Ambrose was his assistant. Victor understood these men, and made no delay in displaying his hospitality when the work of unloading was

completed. A ten-gallon keg of Hudson's Bay Rum was part of the consignment, and this was tapped at once by the wily trader.

The four men were gathered in the back room of the store when Victor turned on the tap and the thick brown stream gurgled forth from the cask. He poured out a tot for each of the train drivers. Then he stood uncertainly and looked over at Jean. The latter had seated himself over against the stove and appeared to take little interest in what was going on. Victor stood with one foot tapping the floor impatiently. He had been quick to notice that Jean's great eyes had stolen in the direction of the little oaken keg. At last he threw the tin beaker aside as if in disgust. He played his part consummately.

"'Tain't no go, boys. I'm not drinkin'. Thet's what. Look at him," he cried, pointing at Jean. "We've had words, I guess. Him an' me, an' he's that riled as he don't notion suppin' good thick rum wi' us. Wal, I guess it'll keep, what you boys can't do in. Ther's the pannikin, ther's the keg. Jest help yourselves, lads, when you fancy. I ain't tastin' with bad blood runnin' in this shack."

"What, no drink?" cried old Pierre, his face beaming with oily geniality. "Dis no lak ole time, Victor. What's de fuss? Mebbe I tink right. Squaw, Vic, squaw."

The old boy chuckled heartily at his pleasantry. He was a French-Canadian half-breed and spoke with a strong foreign accent. Ambrose joined in the laugh.

"Ho, Jean, man," cried the latter. "No bad blood, I'm guessin'. Ther's good thick rum, lad, an' I mind you're a'mighty partial most gener'ly."

Victor had started the ball rolling, and he knew that neither Pierre nor Ambrose were likely to let it rest until they had had all the rum they wanted. Everything had been made snug for the night so they only had their own pleasure to consider. As Ambrose's challenge fell upon his ears Jean looked up. His eyes were very bright and they rested longingly upon the keg on their way to the driver's face. He shook his head, but there was not much decision in the movement.

Pierre seeing the action stepped up to him and shook a warning finger in his face.

“Hey, you, Jean-le-gros, pig-head. We come lak Hell, four hundred mile to see you. We bring you drink, everyting. You not say ‘How.’ We not welcome. Bah, I spit! In my Quebec we lak our frien’s to come. We treat. All is theirs. Bah, I spit again.”

Jean looked slightly abashed. Then Ambrose chimed in.

“Out of the durned way, froggy,” he said, swinging Pierre aside by the shoulder, “you don’t understand our ways, I guess. Ther’ ain’t no slobberin’ wi’ white folk. Here you, Vic, hold out yer hand, man, and shake wi’ Jean. We’re goin’ to hev a time to-night, or I’ll quit the road for ever.”

Victor shrugged. Then he picked up a pannikin and filled it with rum. He held it out in his left hand towards Jean while he offered his right in token of friendship. Jean eyed the outstretched hand. Then he looked at the rum, and the insidious odour filled his nostrils. The temptation was too great, as Victor knew it would be, for him. He thrust one great hand into the trader’s and the two men shook; then he took the drink and gulped it down.

The armistice was declared, and Victor, in imagination, already saw the treasure his.

Now the pannikin passed round merrily. The room reeked with the pungent odour of the spirit and all was apparently harmonious. Victor resigned his post as dispenser of liquor to Ambrose, and began his series of stock entertainments. He drank as little as possible himself, though he could not openly shirk his drink, and he always kept one eye upon Jean to see that he was well supplied; and so the time slipped by.

After the first taste Jean became a different man; he laughed and jested in his slow, coarse fashion, and, with him, all seemed good-fellowship. Pierre and Ambrose soon began to get drunk and Victor’s voice, as he sang, was mostly drowned by the rolling tones of these

hoary-headed old sinners as they droned out the choruses of his songs.

Now, as the merriment waxed, Victor was able to shirk his drink deliberately. Jean seemed insatiable, and soon his great body swayed in a most drunken fashion, and he clung to his seat as if fearing to trust his legs. He joined in every chorus and never lost an opportunity of addressing Victor in terms of deepest friendliness. And in every pause in the noise he seized upon the chance to burst out into some wild ditty of his own. Victor watched with cat-like vigilance, and what he saw pleased him mightily. Jean was drunk. And he would see to it that before he had done the giant would be hopelessly so.

Evening came on. Ambrose was the first to collapse. The others laughed and left him to his deep dreamless slumber upon the floor. Victor was wearied of it all, but he knew he must see the game out. Jean's eyelids were drooping heavily, and he, too, seemed on the verge of collapse. Only old Pierre, hardened to the ways of his life, flagged not. Suddenly the Frenchman saw Jean's head droop forward. In a moment he was on his unsteady legs and filling a pannikin to the brim. He laughed as he drew Victor's attention, and the latter nodded approval. Then he put it to the giant's lips. The big man supped a little of it, then, his head falling further forward, he upset the pannikin, and the contents poured upon the earthen floor. At the same time, as though utterly helpless, he rolled off his seat and fell to the ground, snoring heavily. Pierre shouted his delight. Only Victor and he were left. They knew how to take their liquor, the old hands. His pride of achievement was great. He would see Victor under the table, too, he told himself. He stood over the trader while the latter drank a bumper. Then he, himself, drank to the dregs. It was the last straw. He swayed and lurched to the outer door. There he stood for a moment, then the cold night air did for him what the rum had been powerless to do. Without warning he fell in a heap upon the doorstep as unconscious as though he had been struck dead.

Victor alone kept his head.

The trader rose from his seat and stretched himself. Then, stealthily, he went the round of the prostrate men. He shook Ambrose, but could not wake him. Jean he stood over for awhile and silently watched the stern face. There was not a shade of consciousness in its expression. He bent down and touched him. Still no movement. He shook him gently, then more roughly. He was like a log. Victor grinned with a fiendish leer.

"Guess he's fixed," he muttered.

Then he went out into the store and came to the door where old Pierre had fallen. The Frenchman was no better than the others.

"Good! By Gar, Jean, my friend, I've done you," he said to himself, as, reassured, he went back to the inner room. He was none too steady himself, but he had all his wits about him. The chest was near the bed. He picked it up and opened it. The treasure was there safe enough. He closed the lid and took it up in his arms, and passed out of the store. Nor did he look back. He was anxious to be gone.

It was the chance of his lifetime, he told himself, as he hastened to deposit the chest in the sled. Now he set about obtaining his blankets and provisions. His journey would be an arduous one, and nobody knew better than he the barrenness of that Northwestern land while the icy grip of winter still clings. A large quantity of the food stuffs which had only arrived that day was returned to the sled, and some of the new blankets. Then he shipped a rifle and ammunition.

Now was the trader to be seen in his true light. Here was emergency, when all veneer fell from him as the green coat of summer falls from the trees at the first breath of winter. His haste was not the swift movements of a man whose nerve is steady. He knew that he had at least twelve hours before any one of the three men were likely to awaken from their drunken stupor. And yet he feared. Nor did he know what he feared. And his nerves made him savage as he handled the dogs. They were living creatures and could feel, so he wantonly belted them with a club lest they should hesitate to obey their

new master. The great wolfish creatures had more courage than he had; they took the unjust treatment without open complaint, as is the way of the husky, tacitly resenting it and eying with fierce, contemptuous eyes the cowardly wretch who so treated them. They slunk slowly and with down-drooped tails and bristling manes into their places in the traces, and stood ready for the word to pull. Victor surveyed them with little satisfaction, for now that all was ready to march he was beset with moral apprehensions.

He could not throw off his dread. It may have been that he feared that bleak four hundred mile journey. It may have been the loneliness which he contemplated. It may have been that he recollected the time when those whom he had robbed had saved him from the storm, away back there in the heart of the mountains. He shivered, and started at every night-sound that broke the stillness.

The lead dog lay down in the sloppy snow. Victor flew into a passion, and, running forward, dealt the poor brute a kick that would have been sufficient to break an ordinary dog's ribs. With a wicked snarl the beast rose solemnly to its feet. Suddenly its wolf-ears pricked and it stared out keenly ahead. The man looked too. It seemed to him that he had heard the sound of some one walking. He gazed long and earnestly out into the darkness, but all seemed quite still. He looked at the dog again. Its ears were still pricked, but they were twitching uncertainly, as though not sure of the direction whence the sound had come.

Victor cursed the brute and moved back to the sled. The word "Mush" was hovering on his lips. Suddenly his eyes chanced upon the slumbering form of old Pierre lying in a heap where he had fallen in the doorway. It is impossible to say what made him pause to give a second thought to those he was leaving behind. He had known Pierre for years, and had always been as friendly as his selfish, cruel nature would permit. Perhaps some such feeling now made him hesitate. It might even have been his knowledge of the wild that made him view the helpless figure with some concern. The vagaries of human nature

are remarkable. Something held him, then he turned quickly from the sled, and stepping up to the old man's side, stooped, and putting his arms about him, dragged him bodily into the store. Pierre did not rouse but remained quite still where Victor left him. Then the trader went out again. His back was turned as he reached to close the door. It would not quite shut and he pulled it hard. Then, as it still resisted his efforts, he turned away. As he turned he reeled back with a great cry.

Something large and dark faced him. And, even in the darkness, he could make out a shining ring of metal close in front of his face.

Victor's horror-stricken cry was the only sound that came. In the twinkling of an eye the metal ring disappeared. Victor felt two bony hands seize him by the throat. The next instant he was hurled to the ground, and a knee was upon his chest. A weight compressed his lungs and he could scarcely breathe. Then he felt the revolver belt dragged from about his waist and his long sheath-knife withdrawn from its sheath. Then, and not till then, the pressure on his chest relaxed, and the hand that had gripped his throat released its hold. The next moment he was lifted to his feet as though he were a mere puppet, and the voice of Jean Leblaude broke harshly upon his ears.

"Guess your bluff wa'n't wuth a cent, Victor Gagnon. I see'd this comin' the minit you pass'd me the drink. I 'lows ye ken mostly tell a skunk by the stink. I rec'nized you awhiles back. Guess you ain't lightin' out o' here this night. Come right along."

The trader had no choice. Jean had him foul, gripping him with a clutch that was vise-like. The giant's great strength was irresistible when put forth in the deadly earnestness of passion, and just now he could hardly hold his hand from breaking the neck which was so slight beneath his sinewy fingers.

Just for one instant Victor made a faint struggle. As well attempt to resist Doom. Jean shook him like a rat and thrust him before him in the direction of the woods behind the store.

"You'll pay fer this," the trader said, between his teeth.

But Jean gave no heed to his impotent rage. He pushed him along in silence, nor did he pause till the secret huts were reached. He opened the door of one and dragged his captive in. There was no light within. But this seemed no embarrassment to the purposeful man. He strode straight over to one corner of the room and took a long, plaited lariat from the wall. In three minutes Victor was trussed and laid upon the ground bound up like a mummy.

Now Jean lighted a lamp and looked down at his victim; there was not the faintest sign of drink about him, and as Victor noticed this he cursed himself bitterly.

There was an impressive silence. Then Jean's words came slowly. He expressed no emotion, no passion; just the purpose of a strong man who moves relentlessly on to his desired end.

Gagnon realized to the full the calamity which had befallen him.

"Ye'll wait right here till Davi' gits back. She's goin' to git her ears full o' you, I guess. Say, she was sweet on you–mighty sweet. But she's that sensible as it don't worry any. Say, you ain't goin' to marry that gal; ye never meant to. You're a skunk, an' I'd as lief choke the life out o' ye as not. But I'm goin' to pay ye sorer than that. Savvee? Ye'll bide here till Davi' comes. I'll jest fix this wedge in your mouth till I've cleared them drivers out o' the store. I don't fancy to hear your lungs exercisin' when I'm busy."

With easy deftness Jean gagged his prisoner. Then he glanced round the windowless shack to see if there was any weapon or other thing about that could possibly assist the trader to free himself. Having assured himself that all was safe he put out the light and passed out, securing the door behind him.

CHAPTER XIII.
OUT ON THE NORTHLAND TRAIL

Noon, the following day, saw the dog-train depart on its homeward journey. The way of it was curious and said much for the simplicity of these “old hands” of the northland trail. They were giants of learning in all pertaining to their calling; infants in everything that had to do with the world of men.

Thus Jean Leblaude’s task was one of no great difficulty. It was necessary that he should throw dust in their eyes. And such a dust storm he raised about their simple heads that they struck the trail utterly blinded to the events of the previous night.

While they yet slumbered Jean had freed the dogs from their traces, and unloaded the sled which bore the treasure-chest. He had restored everything to its proper place; and so he awaited the coming of the morning. He did not sleep; he watched, ready for every emergency.

When, at last, the two men stirred he was at hand. Rolling Pierre over he shook him violently till the old man sat up, staring about him in a daze. A beaker of rum was thrust against his parched lips, and he drank greedily. The generous spirit warmed the Frenchman’s chilled body and roused him. Then Jean performed the same merciful operation upon Ambrose, and the two unrepentant sinners were on their legs again, with racking heads, and feeling very ill.

But Jean cared nothing for their sufferings; he wanted to be rid of them. He gave them no chance to question him; not that they had any desire to do so, in fact it was doubtful if they fully realized anything that

was happening. And he launched into his carefully considered story.

"Victor's gone up to the hills 'way back ther'," he said. "Ther's been a herd o' moose come down, from the moose-yard, further north, an' he's after their pelts. Say, he left word fer you to git right on loadin' the furs, an' when ye hit the trail ye're to take three bottles o' the Rye, an' some o' the rum. He says he ain't like to be back fer nigh on three days."

And while he was speaking the two men supped their coffee, and, as they moistened their parched and burning throats, they nodded assent to all Jean had to say. At that moment Victor, or any one else, might go hang. All they thought of was the awful thirst that assailed them.

Breakfast over, the work of loading the sleds proceeded with the utmost dispatch. Thus it was that at noon, without question, without the smallest suspicion of the night's doings, they set out for the weary "long trail."

Jean saw them go. He stood at the door of the store and watched them until they disappeared behind the rising ground of the great Divide. Then his solemn eyes turned away indifferently, and he gazed out into the hazy distance. His gaunt face showed nothing of what was passing in the brain behind it. He rarely displayed emotion of any sort. The Indian blood in his veins preponderated, and much of the stoical calm of the Redskin was his. Now he could wait, undisturbed, for the return of Davia. He felt that he had mastered the situation. He could not make Victor marry the sister he had wronged, but at least he could pay off the wrong in his own way, and to his entire satisfaction. Two years he had waited for the adjustment of these matters. He was glad that he had exercised patience. He might have slain Victor a hundred times over, but he had refrained, vainly hoping to see his sister righted. Besides, he knew that Davia had loved Victor, and women are peculiar. Who might say but that she would have fled from the murderer of her lover? Jean felt well satisfied on the whole. So he

stood thinking and waiting with a calm mind.

But the tragedy was working itself out in a manner little suspected, little expected, by him. This he was soon to learn.

The grey spring snow spread itself out on every hand, only was the wood-lined hill, which stretched away to the right and left of him, and behind the hut, bare of the wintry pall. The sky was brilliant in contrast with the greyness of the world beneath it, and the sun shone high in the blue vault. Everywhere was the deadly calm of the Silent North. The presence of any moving forest beast in that brooding picture, however distant, must surely have caught the eye. There was not a living thing to be seen. These woful wastes have much to do with the rugged nature of those who dwell in the north.

Suddenly the whole prospect seemed to be electrified with a thrill of life. The change came with a swift movement of the man's quiet eyes. Nothing had really altered in the picture, nothing had appeared, and yet that swift flash of the eyes had brought a suggestion of something which broke up the solitude as though it had never been.

Awhile, and his attention became fixed upon the long line of woods to the right. Then his ears caught a slight but distinct sound. He stood away from the doorway, and, shading his eyes from the sunlight, looked keenly along the dark shadow of the woods. No wolf or fox could have keener instinct than had this man. A sound of breaking brush, but so slight that it probably would have passed unheeded by any other, had told him that some one approached through these woods.

He waited.

Suddenly there was movement in the shadow. The next moment a figure stepped out into the open. A figure, dressed in beaded buckskin and blanket clothing. It was Davia.

She came in haste, yet wearily. She looked slight and drooping in her mannish garments, while the pallor of her drawn face was intense. She came up to where Jean stood and would have fallen but for his

support. Her journey had been rapid and long, and she was utterly weary of body.

“Quick, let’s git inside,” she cried, in a choking voice. Then she added hysterically: “He’s on the trail.”

Without a word Jean led her into the house, and she flung herself into a seat. A little whiskey put new life into her and the colour came back to her face. She was strong, a woman bred to hardship and toil.

Jean waited; then he put a question with characteristic abruptness.

“Who’s on the trail?”

“Who? Nick Westley. He’s comin’ for blood! Victor’s blood!” Then Davia sprang to her feet with a look of wild alarm upon her beautiful face. “He’s killed his brother!” she added. “He’s mad–ravin’ mad.”

The man did not move a muscle. Only his eyes darkened as he heard the announcement.

“Mad,” he said, thoughtfully. “An’ he’s comin’ fer Victor. Wal?”

Davia sat up. Her brother’s calmness had a soothing effect upon her.

“Listen, an’ I’ll tell you.”

And she told the story of the mountain tragedy, and the manner in which she watched the madman’s subsequent actions until he set out for the store. And the story lost none of its intense horror in her telling.

Jean listened unemotionally and with a judicial air. Only his eyes shoved that he was in any way moved.

When she had finished he asked her, “An’ when’ll he git here?”

“Can’t say,” came the swift reply. “Maybe to-night; maybe in an hour; maybe right now. He’s big an’ strong, an’–an’ he’s mad, I know it.” And a shudder of apprehension passed over her frame.

“Fer Victor? Sure?” Jean asked again presently, like a man weighing up a difficult problem.

“Sure. He don’t know you, nor me, at this layout. Ther’s only Victor. I guess I don’t know how he figgered it, he’s that crazy, but it’s Victor

he's layin' fer, sure. Say, I saw him sling his gun an' his 'six.' An' his belt was heavy with ammunition. I reckon ther's jest one thing fer us to do when a crazy man gits around with a gun. It's time to light out. Wher's Victor?" And her eyes fell upon the treasure-chest.

"Him an' me's changed places. He's back ther'." Jean jerked a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the huts in the wood.

Davia was on her feet in an instant and her eyes sparkled angrily.

"What d'ye mean, Jean?"

The man shrugged. But his words came full of anger.

"He didn't mean marryin' ye."

"Well?" The blue eyes fairly blazed.

"The boodle," with a glance in the direction of the treasure. "He was fer jumpin' the lot."

"Hah! An'–?"

And Jean told his story. And after that a silence fell.

"It's cursed–it's blood-money!" Davia's voice was hoarse with emotion as she said the words.

Jean started.

"We're goin' to git," he said slowly. And he looked into the woman's eyes as though he would read her very soul.

"An' Victor?" said Davia harshly.

"Come, we'll go to him."

At the door Davia was seized with an overwhelming terror. She gripped Jean's arm forcefully while she peered along the woodland fringe. The man listened.

"Let's git on quick," Davia whispered. And her mouth was dry with her terror.

They found Victor as Jean had left him. The prisoner looked up when the door opened. His eyes brightened at the sight of the woman.

No word was spoken for some moments. In that silence a drama was swiftly working itself out. Victor was calculating his chances. Davia was thinking in a loving woman's unreasoning fashion. And Jean was watching both. At last the giant stooped and removed the gag from his captive's mouth. The questioning eyes of Victor Gagnon looked from one to the other and finally rested upon Davia.

"Wal?" he said.

And Davia turned to Jean.

"Loose him!" she said imperiously.

And Jean knew that trouble had come for his plans. He shook his head. The glance of Victor's eyes as they turned upon Jean was like the edge of a super-sharpened knife. The trader knew that a crisis had arrived. Which was the stronger of these two, the brother or the sister? He waited.

"What are you goin' to do with him?" Davia asked.

She could scarcely withhold the anger which had risen within her.

But Jean did not answer; he was listening to a strange sound which came to him through the open door. Suddenly he stooped again and began to readjust the rope that held his prisoner. He secured hands and feet together in a manner from which Victor was not likely to free himself easily; and yet from which it was possible for him to get loose. Davia followed his movements keenly. At last the giant rose; his task was completed.

"Now," he said, addressing them both. "Say your says–quick."

"You ain't leavin' him here," said the woman, looking squarely into her brother's eyes.

"That's so."

A strange light leapt into Davia's eyes. Jean saw it and went on with a frown.

"I'm easy, dead easy; but I guess I've had enough. He'll shift fer himself. If he'd 'a' acted straight ther'd 'a' been no call fer me to step

in. He didn't. He ain't settin' you right, Davi'; he can't even act the thief decent. He'd 'a' robbed you an' me, an' left you what you are. Wal, my way goes."

Then he turned to Victor and briefly told him Davia's story of the mountain tragedy. As he came to the climax the last vestige of the trader's insolence vanished. Nick was on his way to the store armed and–mad. Panic seized upon the listener. His bravado had ever been but the veneer of the surface. His condition returned to the subversive terror which had assailed him when he was caught in the mountain blizzard.

"Now, see you here, Victor," Jean concluded coldly, yet watching the effect he had produced. "Ye owe us a deal more'n ye ken pay easy, but I'm fixin' the reckonin' my way. We're goin', an' the boodle goes wi' us. Savvee?" Davia watched her brother acutely. Nor could she help noticing that the great man was listening while he spoke. "I 'lows you'll git free o' this rope. I mean ye to–after awhiles. Ye'll keep y'r monkey tricks till after we're clear o' here. Then ye'll do best to go dead easy. Fer that crank's comin' right along, an', I 'lows, if I was you I'd as lief lie here and rot, an' feed the gophers wi' my carcass as run up agin him. I tell ye, pard, ther's a cuss hangin' around wher' Nick Westley goes, an' I don't reckon it's like to work itself out easy by a big sight."

Jean finished up with profound emphasis. Then he turned about and faced his sister.

"Now, gal, we're goin'."

"Not while Victor's left here."

Jean stood quite still for a moment. Then his rage suddenly broke forth.

"Not while that skunk's left?" he cried, pointing scornfully at the prostrate man. "Ye'd stop here fer him as has shamed ye; him as 'ud run from ye this minit if he had the chance; him as 'ud rob ye too; him as thinks as much to ye as a coyote. Slut y' are, but y' are my sister,

an' I say ye shall go wi' me."

He made a step towards her. Then he brought up to a halt as the long blade of a knife gleamed before his eyes. But he only hesitated a second. His great hand went out, and he caught the woman's wrist as she was about to strike. The next instant he had wrenched the weapon from her grasp and held her.

Now he thrust her out of the hut and secured the door. He believed that what he had done was only right.

As they passed out into the bright spring daylight again a change seemed to come over Davia. Her terror of Nick Westley returned as she noted the alert attitude of her brother. She listened too, and held her breath to intensify her hearing. But Jean did not relax his hold upon her till they were once more within the store. Then he set her to assist in the preparations for their flight. When all was ready, and they stood outside the house while Jean secured the door, Davia made a final appeal.

"Let me stop, Jean," she cried, while a sob broke from her. "I love him. He's mine."

"God's curse on ye, no!" came the swift response, and the man's eyes blazed.

Suddenly a long-drawn cry rose upon the air. It reached a great pitch and died lingeringly away. It was near by and told its tale. And the woman shuddered involuntarily. It was the wolf cry of the mountains; the cry of the human. And, as if in answer, came a chorus from wolfish throats. The last moment had come.

Davia caught Jean's arm as though seeking protection.

"I will go," she cried, and the man took her answer to be a final submission.

The stillness of the day had passed. Life thrilled the air although no life was visible. Davia's fear was written in her face, Jean's expression was inscrutable; only was it sure that he listened.

But Jean was not without the superstitious dread which madness inspires. And as they raced, he bearing the burden of the treasure-chest, for the wood-covered banks of the creek, he was stirred to horror by the familiar sounds that pursued him. It was their coming, at that time, in daylight; and in answer to the human cry that had first broken up the silence of the hills. How came it that the legions of the forest were marching in the wake of that other upon the valley of Little Choyeuse Creek?

Jean halted when they stood upon the rotten ice of the creek. Now he released his sister, and they stood facing each other well screened from view from the store.

The sullen peace of the valley had merged into the deep-toned, continuous howl of hoarse throats. A terrible threat was in the sound. Jean unslung his rifle and looked to his pistol.

“Ther’s six in this gun,” he said deliberately. “Five of ’em is fer them beasties, if ne’sary. The other’s fer you if you git playin’ tricks. Mebbe ye’ll thank me later fer what I’m doin’. It don’t cut no figger anyway.”

Then he prodded the ice with his iron-shod staff.

Davia watched him while she listened to the din of the forest world. At length the staff had beaten its way to the water below.

“What are ye doin’?” she asked, quite suddenly.

And Jean’s retort was a repetition of her own words.

“It’s cursed–it’s blood-money!”

She took his meaning, and her cupidity cried out in revolt. But her protest was useless.

“You’re not goin’–” she began.

“It goes,” cried Jean fiercely, “wher’ he ain’t like to touch it, ’less Hell gits him. Father Lefleur, at the mission, says as gold’s Hell’s pavin’, an’ mebbe this’ll git back wher’ it come.” And with vengeful force he threw back the lid of the chest.

Davia’s eyes expressed more than any words could have told. She

stood silently by, a mute but eloquent protest, while Jean took the bags of gold dust one by one from the chest, and poured their contents into the water below. When the last bag was emptied he took the packet of bills and fingered them gently. Even his purpose seemed to be shaken by the seductive feel of the familiar paper. Suddenly he thrust them into the hole, and his staff thrust viciously at them as he pushed them under the ice where they would quickly rot. It was done.

"Mebbe the water'll wash the blood off'n it," he exclaimed. "Mebbe."

Davia's eyes looked derisively upon the giant figure as he straightened himself up. She could not understand.

But her look changed to one of horror a moment later, as above the cries of the forest rose the inhuman note of the madman. Both recognized it, and the dreadful tone gripped their hearts. Jean leant forward, and seizing the woman by the arm dragged her off the ice to the cover of the bush.

With hurried strides they made their way through the leafless branches, until they stood where, themselves well under cover, they had a view of the store.

CHAPTER XIV.
WHO SHALL FATHOM THE DEPTHS OF A WOMAN'S LOVE?

The dull woods look black in the bright sunlight; and beyond, and above, the crystal of the eternal snow gleams with appalling whiteness. No touch of spring can grey those barren, everlasting fields, where foot of man has never trod, and no warmth can penetrate to the rock-bound earth beneath.

All the world seems to be reaching to the sky vault above. Everything is vast; only is the work of human hands puny.

Thus the old log storehouse of Victor Gagnon, now shut up like a deserted fort of older days, without its stockade, is less than a terrier's kennel set at the door of a giant's castle. And yet it breaks up the solitude so that something of the savage magnificence is gone. The forest cries echo and reëcho, and, to human ears, the savage din is full of portentous meaning, but it is lost beyond the confines of the valley; and the silent guardians of the peaks above sleep on undisturbed.

A mighty flock of water-fowl speeding their way, droop downwards, with craning necks, at the unusual sounds, to watch the stealing creatures moving at the edge of the woods. The fox, hungering as he always hungers, foremost, lest other scavengers, like himself, shall steal the prize he seeks; a troupe of broad-antlered deer racing headlong down the valley; shaggy wolves, grey or red, lurking within the shadow, as though fearing the open daylight, or perhaps him

whose voice has summoned them; these things they see, but their meaning is lost to the feathered wanderers, as they wing their way onward.

The cry of the human floats over the tree-tops and beats itself out upon the solemn hillsides. It has in it a deep-toned note of invitation to the fierce denizens of the forest. A note which they cannot resist; and they answer it, and come from hill and valley, gathering, gathering, with hungry bellies and frothing jowls.

Driving his way through close-growing bush comes the unkempt figure of a man. A familiar figure, but so changed as to be hardly recognizable. His clothes are rent and scored by the horny branches. His feet crush noisily over the pine-cones in moccasins that have rotted from his feet with the journey over melting snow and sodden vegetation. There is a quivering fire burning in his eyes, an uncertain light, like the sun's reflections upon rippling water. He looks neither this way nor that, yet his eyes seem to be flashing in all directions at once. The bloody scar upon his cheek is dreadful to look upon, for it has scarce begun to heal, and the cold has got into it. He is armed, as Davia had said, this strange horrific figure, and at intervals his head is thrown back to give tongue to his wolfish cry. It almost seems as if the Spirit of the Forest has claimed him.

He journeys on through the twilit gloom. The horror of the life gathered about him is no more grim than is the condition of his witless brain. Over hills and through brakes; in valleys and along winding tracks made by the forest lords; now pushing his way through close-growing scrub, now passing like a fierce shadow among the bare, primeval tree-trunks, he moves forward. His goal is ahead, and one instinct, one desire, urges him onward. He knows nought of his surroundings, he sees nought. His chaotic brain is aware only of its mad purpose.

Suddenly the bush parts. There stands the store of Victor Gagnon in the bright light of day. Swift to the door he speeds, but pauses as he finds it locked. The pause is brief. A shot from his pistol shatters the

lock, the door flies open at his touch, and he passes within. Then follows a cry that has in it the tone of a baffled creature robbed of its prey; it is like the night cry of the puma that shrinks at the blaze of the camp-fire; it is fierce, terrible. The house is empty.

But the cunning of the madman does not desert him. He sets out to search, peering here, there, and everywhere. As the moments pass, and no living thing is to be seen within, his anger rises like a fierce summer storm. He stands in the centre of the store which is filled with a disordered array of stuffs. His eyes light upon the wooden trap which opens upon the cellar where Victor stores his skins. Once more the fire flares up in his dreadful eyes. An oil-lamp is upon a shelf. He dashes towards it, and soon its dull, yellow flame sheds its feeble rays about. He stoops and prises up the heavy square of wood. Below sees the top rungs of a rough ladder. His poor brain is incapable of argument and with a fierce joy he clambers down into the dank, earthy atmosphere of the cellar.

All is silent again except for the shuffling of his almost bare feet upon the uneven ladder. The last rung is gone, and he drops heavily to the ground. Then, for awhile, silence reigns.

During that silence there comes a figure stealing round the angle at the back of the building. It is a slight, dark figure, and it moves with extreme caution. There is a look on the narrow face which is one of superstitious horror. It is Victor Gagnon escaped from his prison, and he advances haltingly, for he has seen the approach of his uncanny visitor, and he knows not what to do. His inclination is to flee, yet is he held fascinated. He advances no further than the front angle of the building, where he stands shaking with nervous apprehension.

Suddenly he hears a cry that is half-stifled by distance, for it comes from the depths of the cellar within. Then follows a metallic clatter of something falling, which, in turn, is followed again by a cry that is betwixt a fierce exclamation of joy and a harsh laugh. A foreboding wrings the heart of the half-breed trader.

Now he listens with every sense aiding him, and a strange sound comes to his ears. It is a sound like the rushing of water or the sighing of the wind through the skeleton branches of forest-trees. It grows louder, and, in its midst, he hears the stumbling of feet within the house. Something, he knows not what, makes him look about him fearfully, but he remains at his post. He dare not move.

At last he thrusts his head forward and peers round the corner so that he has a full view of the door. Then he learns the meaning of the sound he has heard. Great clouds of smoke are belching through the opening, and are rolling heavily away upon the chill, scented air. His jaws come together, his breath catches, and a look that is the expression of a mind distracted leaps into his eyes. He knows that his store is on fire. He does not leave his lurking-place, for he knows that there is no means of staying the devouring flames. Besides, the man must still be within. Yes, he is certainly still within the building, for he can hear him.

The cries of the wild come up from the forest but Victor no longer heeds them. The hiss and crackle of the burning house permeate his brain. His eyes watch the smoke with a dreadful fascination. He cannot think, he can only watch, and he is gripped by a more overwhelming terror than ever.

Suddenly a fringe of flame pursues the smoke from the door. It leaps, and rushes up the woodwork of the thatch above and shoots along to the pitch of the roof. The rapidity of the mighty tongues is appalling. Still the man is within the building, for Victor can hear his voice as he talks and laughs at the result of his handiwork.

The madman's voice rises high above the roar of the flames. The fire seems to have driven him to the wildest pitch of insensate excitement, and Victor begins to wonder what the end will be.

A moment later he hears distant words come from the burning house. They come in a shout that is like the roar of some wild beast, and they sound high above every other sound. There is in them the passionate

ring of one who abandons all to one overpowering desire.

“Aim-sa! Aim-sa! Wait, I’m comin’.”

There is an instant’s silence which the sound of the hungry flames devours. Then, through the blazing doorway, the great form of Nick Westley rushes headlong, shouting as he comes.

“Aim-sa! Aim-sa!”

The cry echoes and reëchoes, giving fresh spirit to the baying of the wolves that wait in the cover of the woodland. On rushes the man heedless of the excoriating roughnesses of the ground beneath his bare and battered feet. He gazes with staring eyes upon the woods as though he sees the vision of the woman that has inspired his cry. On, he speeds towards the beasts whose chorus welcomes him; on, to the dark woods in which he plunges from view.

Jean Leblaude, standing within cover of the woods which lined the creek, was lost to all sight and sound other than the strange scene enacted at the store. Once or twice he had spoken, but it was more to himself than to Davia, for he was engrossed by what he beheld.

But now, as he saw the man rush with frantic haste and disappear within the woods, he thought of the wealth of skins within the burning house. He was a trapper, and, to his thinking, the loss was irreparable. He loved the rich furs of the North as any woman loves her household goods. As for the store, that was little to him except that Victor was now punished even beyond his, Jean’s, hopes. He knew that the trader was ruined. For the rest it would be as it always was in the wild. The valley would simply go back to its primordial condition.

But he watched Victor curiously. He saw him stand out before the wreck of his store, and a world of despair and dejection was in his attitude. A mighty bitterness was in the great Jean’s heart for the man he gazed upon, and a sense of triumphant joy flashed through him at the sight.

“See,” he said, without turning from his contemplation, and pointing with one arm outstretched. “He’s paid, an’ paid bad. The teachin’s come to him. Maybe he’s learned.”

There was no reply, and he went on.

“Maybe he’s wishin’ he’d treated you right, Davi’. Maybe he’d gi’ something to marry you now. Maybe. Wal, he’s had his chance an’ throw’d it.” There was an impressive pause. Presently Jean spoke again. “Guess we’ll be gittin’ on soon. The mission’s a good place fer wimmin as hasn’t done well in the world, I reckon. An’ the Peace River’s nigh to a garden. I ’lows Father Lefleur’s a straight man, an’ll set you on the right trail, Davi’. Yes, I guess we’ll be gettin’ on.”

Still there was no answer.

Suddenly the giant swung round and looked at the spot where Davia had been standing. She had vanished.

And Jean, solemn-eyed as any moose, stared stupidly at the place where her feet had rested. He stood long without moving, and slowly thought straightened itself out in his uncouth brain. He began to understand. The complexity of a woman’s character had been an unknown quantity to him. But he was no further from understanding them than any other man. Now an inner consciousness told him that the punishment of Victor had been the undoing of his schemes. Davia had seen the trader bereft of all, homeless, penniless; and she had gone to him.

He turned back at last and looked towards the store; it was almost burnt out now. But he heeded it not, for he saw two figures in deep converse, close by, in the open, and one of them was a woman. As he watched he saw Davia pass a large pistol to the man; and then he knew that her love for her faithless lover was greater than any other passion that moved her. He knew that that weapon had been given for defence against himself.

That evening the setting sun shone down upon a solitary camp-fire on the Northland trail, and beside it sat a large man crouching for

warmth. He was smoking; and as he smoked he thought much. All the days he had lived he had never known a woman's love. He muttered as he kicked the sticks of his fire together, and spat into the blaze as it leapt up.

"Maybe it's a fine thing. Maybe they're queer critturs. Mostly saft an' gentle an'–um–I wonder–"

The sun sank abruptly, and the brief twilight gave place to a night that was little less than day. The northern lights danced their mystic measure in the starlit vault to the piping of the Spirit of the North. The hush of the Silent Land was only broken by the cries which came up from the dark valleys and darker forests. And the lonely giant, Jean Leblaude, slept the light slumber of the journeyer in the wild; the slumber that sees and hears when danger is abroad, and yet rests the body. He dreamed not, though all his schemes had gone awry, for he was weary.

CHAPTER XV.
THE TRAGEDY OF THE WILD

“Aim-sa! Aim-sa! I come!”

The cry rings against the mountainsides, shuddering and failing; then it is lost in the vastness, like the sound of a pebble pitched into rushing waters. The woodland chorus takes it up in its own wolfish tongue, and it plunges forth again, magnified by the din of a thousand echoes.

High up to the lair of the mountain lion it rises; where the mighty crags, throne-like, o’ershadow the lesser woods; where the royal beast, lording it over an inferior world, stealthily prowls and lashes its angry tail at the impudence of such a disturbance in its vast domain. Its basilisk stare looks out from its furtive, drooping head, and its commands ring out in a roar of magnificent displeasure.

Even to loftier heights still the cry goes up; and the mighty grey eagle ruffles its angry feathers, shakes out its vast wings, and screams invective in answer to this loud-voiced boast of wingless creatures. Then, in proud disdain, it launches itself out upon the air, and with a mighty swoop downwards, screaming defiance as its outstretched pinions brush the sleek coat of the mountain lion, it passes on over the creaking tree-tops to learn the real cause of the hubbub.

Down the valley, away to the east, the timid deer gather, snuffing at the breeze, fearful, protesting, yet fascinated. The caribou pauses in his headlong race to listen; only, a moment later, to speed on the faster.

“Aim-sa! Aim-sa! Wait, I come!”

The cry is more muffled. The dark canopy of forest deadens it, till the sound is like a voice crying out from the depths of the earth. For the

man is travelling with the fierce directness of one who is lured on by the haunting vision of that which is his whole desire. The riven mountains have no meaning for him. He looks straight out, nor tree-trunk, nor bush, nor jutting rock bars his vision; there beyond, ever beyond, is that which alone he seeks. It moves as he moves; beckoning, calling, smiling. But always, like a will-o'-the-wisp, it eludes him, and draws forth the cry from his throat. The sweet, mocking face; the profound blue eyes, sparkling with laughter or brooding in perfect seriousness; the parted lips about the glistening teeth so luscious in their suggestion; the dark flowing hair, like a soft curtain of wondrous texture falling in delicate folds upon rounded shoulders–these things he sees. Always ahead the vision speeds, always beyond. The man's efforts avail nothing.

The wolves upon his trail lope slowly over the forest bed of oozing vegetation; with careless stride, but with relentless intent, the creatures openly seek their prey. For blood is upon the air, and they come with the patter of thousands of feet, singing their dolorous chorus with all the deep meaning of the savage primordial beast. But the man heeds them not. He is deaf to their raucous song as he is blind to the mighty encompassing hills. What cares he if the earth links up with the blue heavens above him? What cares he for the everlasting silence of those heights, or the mute Spirits which repose upon the icy beds of the all-time glaciers? He is beyond the knowledge of Storm or Calm. He knows nought of the meaning of the awesome voice of Nature. The vision is all to him, and he gazes upon it with hungry, dreadful eyes. His heart is starving; his mind is empty of all but the pangs of his all-mastering desire. If need be he will pursue to the ends of the earth. He has been to the depths of hell for her; he has felt the withering blast of satanic fires. There is nought for him but possession; possession of the woman he seeks.

To his distraught fancy, his cries receive answer, and he stumbles blindly on. Meanwhile the wolves draw ever nearer and nearer, as their courage rises in response to the voice of their famished bellies.

So the strange pursuit goes on, on; over hills and through valleys, now scaling barren, snow-clad rocks, now clambering drearily down jagged rifts of earth; over Nature's untrodden trails, or along beaten paths made by the passage of forest beasts. Through clearing and brake, and over the rotting ice which fills the bed of the mountain torrent. On, on into Nature's dim recesses, where only the forest creatures lord it, and the feet of man have never been set.

At length the forests disappear and the magnificent heights rear their snowy crests thousands of feet skywards. The valleys are left, and behind him and below the forests form but a dark shadow of little meaning. The greatness is about him; the magnitude of the higher mountain world. As he faces the unfathomed heights he again treads the snow, for the warm embrace of Spring has not yet enfolded the higher lands, and the gracious influence of the woods is no longer to be felt.

He pauses, breathing hard, and the expression of his wounded face is not pleasant. The flesh is blue, and the eyes are as fierce as the crouching puma's. He looks about him as one in a daze. The baying of the wolves comes up from below. They still dog him, for the blood trail holds them fast. A ledge stretches away, winding upwards; a mass of tumbled rocks foot one towering, solitary pine, and beyond is blank snow.

For the moment he is lost, his vision has deserted him. It may be that weariness has overcome the power of his illusion, for he stares vacantly about. He looks back, and the breadth of what he sees conveys no meaning. The woods, with the sound of life coming up to him in deadly monotony of tone; the hills, beyond, rising till the sun, like a ball of deep red fire, seems to rest upon their now lurid glacial fields, but is powerless to break their icy bondage; these things he sees but heeds not. Beyond, far into the hazy distance, stretch hills in their hundreds; incalculable, remote, all bearing the ruddy tint of sunset; a ghostly array, chaotic, overwhelming to the brain of man. But the scene has no significance to him. His eyes are the eyes of a man

dead to all but the illusion of a disordered brain. He sees as one partially blinded by the sun.

Suddenly he starts. A sound such as he craves has come to him again. He wheels to the right, whither the ledge winds round the crag. He peers out; again he sees, and with a cry he rushes on. A moving figure is upon the road; a smiling figure, a beckoning figure.

Up rises the way, a toilsome path and rugged; slippery and biting to the unshod feet. He feels no pain; there is the figure. He presses on; and the hungry legions move out from the forest below and follow boldly upon his trail.

He rounds the bend. The call trembles down the mountainside, and its music is strangely soothing and sweet to his ears. Quite abruptly a broad plateau spreads out before him. It is edged on one side by a sheer drop to unimaginable depths, on the other the uprising crags overhang in horrible menace. The plateau is strewn with bleaching bones, and from beneath the overhanging rocks comes a fetid stench. Now the figure is lost again, and the dreadful straining eyes search vainly for the fair face and beckoning hand. His heart labours and great pain is in his chest. For he is high up in the mountain air, and every breath is an effort.

Nor does he see the crouching object to his right, lying low to the ground, with muscles quivering and eyes shooting green fire upon him. There is no movement in the savage body but the furious, noiseless lashing of the tail, and the bristling of the hair at its shoulders. But suddenly a strange thing happens. The creature shrinks back, and draws slowly away. Its awful eyes are averted as though in a fear it is powerless to contend with. Its anger is lost in an arrant cowardice, and the beast slinks within a low-mouthed cavern. What is it that has power to put fear into the heart of the monarch of the mountainside, unless it is the madness which peers out of the man's dreadful eyes.

And the man moves on unconscious of any lurking danger. As he

passes, the spell of his presence passes also. A roar comes from the depths of the cavern, and is answered by the wolves as they crowd up to the edge of the plateau. But though their reply is bold they hesitate to advance further. For they know who dwells where the broken, bleaching bones lie, and fear is in their hearts. They snuff at the air with muzzles up-thrown, and their mangy coats bristle with sullen anger. The crowd increases, the courage of the coward begins to rise within them. A fierce argument arises, and the debate takes the form of a vicious clipping of huge fangs. A mighty roar interrupts them, seeming to quell their warlike spirit. For a moment silence reigns.

Then as if by chance, one great dog-wolf is driven out upon the battleground. He is a leader, high of shoulder, broad of chest, with jaws like the iron fangs of a trap, and limbs that are so lean that the muscles stand out upon them like knots of rope. And his action is a signal to the crowd of savage poltroons behind. With one accord they send their fierce battle-cry out upon the still air, and leap, like the rush of an avalanche, to the lair of the mountain lion. Out from his shelter springs the royal beast, and close upon his heels comes his mate. Side by side they stand, ready for the battle though the odds be a million to one against them.

Their sleek bodies are a-quiver with rage, their tails whip the earth in their fury, while their eyes, like coals of green fire, shine with a malevolence such as no words can describe.

Again the wolves hesitate. Their outstretched tails droop and are pressed between their legs; their backs are hunched, and they turn their long, narrow heads from the green glitter of the two pairs of terrible eyes. But the pause is brief, and the noise has died only for a second. One wolf moves a step forward, hunger overpowering his fears. As before, it is a signal. The whole pack leap to the fray; struggling, howling, fighting as they come ripping at comrade and foe alike. The battle is swift; so swift that it is almost impossible to realize that it is over. The pack, leaping and baying, pass on, following the blood trail of the man, leaving more bones upon the plateau, more

blood upon the trodden snow; and the royal dwellers of that little plain have vanished as though they had never been.

The path has taken a downward slope and the man looks ahead for the fair face, hungrily, feverishly. Again it has vanished. His heart cries out bitterly, and his despairing voice echoes through the barren hills.

As he advances the path declines lower and lower, till out of the shadowy depths the tree-tops seem climbing to meet him. The air he breathes is denser now, and respiration is easier. As the path declines its mountainous sides rise higher and higher until overhead only a narrow streak of sky is revealed, like a soft-toned ribbon set in a background of some dun-coloured material. Ahead is a barrier of snow and ice, while below him, down in the depths of the gorge, the earth is clear of the wintry pall and frowns up in gloomy contrast. The sparse vegetation, too, has changed its appearance. Here towers the silent, portentous pine, but of a type vaster than can be seen in any other corner of the earth. The man hastens on with all the speed his weary limbs will permit, stumbling as he goes, for the frost of the high altitudes has entered his bones, and he cannot now feel the touch of the broken earth. But his yearning heart is ceaseless in its despairing cry. Where–where is She? The trees come up higher and higher and the gloom closes in upon him as he reaches the barrier.

Now he pauses under a mighty archway. Below, it is black with age and full of crowding shadows; the superstructure alone is hung with snowy frost curtains, and these help to emphasize the forbidding nature of the dark, narrow under-world. Down, down he goes, as though he were journeying to the very bowels of the earth, heedless of the place, heedless of all but the phantom he seeks. Again his surroundings have changed. The barrenness is emphasized by skeleton-like trees of such size as no man has ever seen before. High up aloft there is foliage upon them, but so meagre, so torn and wasted as to suggest a wreck of magnificent life. These gigantic trunks are few in number, but so huge that the greatest elm would appear a sapling beside them, and yet their wondrous size would not

be properly estimated. They are the primordial pines, survivors from an unknown period. They shelter nothing but barrenness, and stand out alone like solemn sentries, the watchmen for all time of the earth's most dim and secret recesses, where storms cannot reach, and scarcely the forest beasts dare penetrate.

Again the poor benighted brain finds relief. Down beside these monsters his eyes are gladdened once more with the fleeting vision. He sees the figure moving ahead, but slowly now; no longer is she the gay laughing creature he has hitherto followed, she moves wearily, as though exhausted by the journey she has taken. His heart thrills with hope and joy, for now he knows that he is overtaking her. Her face is hidden from him, and even her fair form has taken on something of the hue of her dark surroundings.

"Aim-sa! Aim-sa!" he cries aloud. And again "Aim-sa!"

The gorge rings solemnly with the hoarse echoes, and the place is filled with discordant sounds which come back to his straining ears mingling with the cries of the wolves that still follow on his trail.

The figure pauses, looks round, then continues her slow-paced movement; but she does not answer. Still he sees her, she is there. And now he knows that he must come up with her. He toils on.

He talks to himself, muttering as he goes; and a train of incoherent thought passes through his brain. He tells himself that the journey is over. She has brought him to the home which shall be theirs. The heart of the wild, where the mountains rise sheer to the sky above; where no man comes, where a dark peace reigns, and has ever reigned. Where snow is not, and summer and winter are alike. It is the fitting home for a tortured spirit.

The figure no longer moves now, but turns and faces him. The sweet familiar features seem to bend toward him out of the deep shadows and the grim surroundings. He shakes back his shaggy hair; he holds himself proudly erect as he approaches the woman he loves. He summons all his failing strength. His knees forget their weariness, his

torn feet are unconscious of their injuries. The haunting cry of the wolves comes down to him from behind, but he heeds only the beckoning phantom.

Every trailing stride lessens the distance between them.

He sees her stoop as though to adjust her moccasin. She moves again, but she does not stand erect. A half-articulate cry breaks from him. She is coming to him. Now he sees that her head is bowed as though in deep humility. A cry breaks from him, then all is silent. Suddenly she lifts her head and her tall figure stands erect, gazing upon him with sombre, steady eyes, eyes which seem to have caught something of the dull hue of that awesome gorge. His heart leaps with joy. How tall she is; what a superb form. She moves toward him, her body swaying gracefully to the rhythm of her gait. Her arms are stretched out appealingly; and he sees that she is clad in the rich furs of the North, clad as though for a journey. He tells himself, with a thrill of mad desire, that she is ready for their journey, the journey of life they will travel together.

Now the wolf cries come louder and more fierce. If he is deaf to them the woman is not. Her head turns sharply and a fierce light leaps into her eyes. The change is lost upon the man. He stretches out his arms and staggers towards her. They come together, and he feels the soft touch of her fur robes upon his face and hands. Her arms close about him and her warm breath fans his fevered cheek, as he is drawn, willingly, closer and closer to her bosom.

But what is this? The embrace draws tight, tighter and yet tighter; he becomes rigid in her arms, he cannot breathe, and life seems to be going from him. He feels his ribs cracking under the pressure; he cannot cry out; he cannot struggle. Now comes the sound of something ripping, of flesh being torn by ruthless claws. A quiver of nerves, a sigh, and the man is still.

Down the path of that woful gorge in a headlong rush comes the wolf-pack. A great figure with lolling body looks up. Its broad head and

short muzzle are poised alertly. So it stands, and under its merciless fore paws is the mangled corpse of Nick Westley. It is a monstrous grizzly, monstrous even for its kind. It turns from its victim with shambling but swiftly moving gait, growling and snarling with terrible ferocity as it goes, but never hesitating. This shaggy monarch is no coward, but he is cunning as any fox, and, unlike the mountain lion, knows the limitation of his powers. He knows that even his gigantic strength could not long make stand against the oncoming horde. What he leaves behind will check the fanged legions while he makes good his escape.

The pack pours like a hideous flood over the spot where the last act of Nick Westley's tragedy has been played out. A brief but fiendish tumult, and little remains to tell of the sorry drama. The impassive mountains, unmoved spectators, give no sign. The stupendous reticence of the wilderness, like the fall of a mighty curtain, closes over the scene, taking the story into its inviolable keeping.

THE END

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